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Special Issue Introduction

Dynamics, Stability & Tradition

The Role of the Religions of Iranian Speakers in Central and Eastern Asia

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ABSTRACT Various religions were transmitted through the Silk Roads, a famous system of trade routes. For this transmission, the Iranian speakers played a vital role. They travelled on the Silk Roads, migrating and establishing colonies alongside their trade networks and leading to the geographical expansion of their activity fields. Because of their vast activities, some Iranian languages are counted as a lingua franca, or the shared language for communication, on the Silk Roads. The Iranian speakers adhered to Buddhism, Christianity (Church of the East), Islam, Manichaeism, or Zoroastrianism. Some kept the religious practices of their homeland in these newly established colonies, while others converted to the local dominant religions. At times, their religious activities resulted in dynamic changes for themselves and their exchange partners whilst, at other times, they led to the establishment of new traditions which became stabilised within their settled communities.

KEYWORDS Iranian speakers, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Central Asia, East Asia, Sogdians

From ancient times, leading trade routes ran through Central Asia that are now often collectively referred to as the "Silk Roads." The people who transported merchandise along these routes adhered to various religions, spoke many different languages, and came from various cultural backgrounds. Thus, these Silk Roads were also routes for the transmission and transformation of religions, languages, and cultures. Over the centuries, although numerous people with a variety of different affiliations contributed to these active exchanges through the Silk Roads, the Iranian speakers' activities deserve special attention. [1]

By the fourth century at the latest, Iranian-speaking Sogdians, whose homeland, Sogdiana, is located in today's Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, had already reached the Dunhuang (敦煌) area, an oasis located at the eastern fringe of the Tarim Basin in Eastern Central Asia (present-day [2]

Gansu 甘肅 Province, in the northwest of the People's Republic of China).[1] They established numerous colonies along the Silk Roads in Central and East Asia through their trade activities and established networks covering this vast area. Numerous Sogdians also settled in the core region of China, and some even served as civil and military officials to the rulers of local dynasties.[2] Because of their well-connected trade networks in Central and East Asia and their wide range of activities, it is most likely that the Sogdian language (Iranian) became a lingua franca for communication between various peoples on the Silk Roads. This is especially so because Sogdians were not the only Iranian speakers who acted as traders and cultural intermediaries, for other Iranian speakers, such as the Bactrians, also actively participated in trade and settled in Central and East Asia, equally serving local rulers as officials as well.[3]

[3] The Iranian speakers' activities based on the networks in Central and East Asia and the relevance of their language for communication were ideal for transmitting religions. Throughout history, the Iranian speakers were documented as followers of different religions. Together with the Iranian-originated religions (Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism), Buddhism, the Church of the East (a branch of Christianity which was widespread in eastern Central Asia and China), and Islam were also spread among Iranian speakers.[4] It was, of course, not the case that these religions were all accepted in the society of Iranian speakers at the same time and to an equal degree. As Iranian religions, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism were widespread already in Iranian speakers' homelands in West Asia, and some of their adherents remained true to their original beliefs even after they migrated to Central and East Asia.[5]

[4] Whereas Sogdians probably came in contact with Buddhism in East Asia under the influence of Chinese people, another group of Iranian language speakers, the Khotanese, became supporters of Buddhism in their homeland in the oasis of Khotan in eastern Central Asia.[6] Concerning the transmission of Christianity and detailed activities of local Christians in Central

1 The so-called "Ancient letters" were found near Dunhuang, documenting Sogdians' activities in the region during this period. They were written in the Sogdian language and Sogdian script. For information on these letters, including previous studies, see, e.g., de la Vaissière (2005, 43–70).

2 For the Sogdians and their activities in Central and East Asia, see, e.g., de la Vaissière (2005). In recent years there has been quite a bit of new research on the Sogdians and their colonies in China, mainly due to the discovery of Sogdian epitaphs in China (see Moribe 2010; Rong 2014; Iwami 2016; Fukushima 2017; Huber 2020).

3 For Bactrians in China, see, e.g., Fukushima (2017, 225–59).

4 Traces of Iranian speakers following these religions are documented in written sources and art objects found in Central and East Asia (see, e.g., Reck 2006, 2016, 2018; Wertmann 2015; Yoshida 2019). The Iranian-speaking Muslims are a well-discussed topic in the research on the Mongolian Empire (see, e.g., various contributions in Biran, Brack, and Fiaschetti 2020).

5 Religious contacts occurred in many different fields which impacted each other. Considering changes caused by these contacts, the intra- and inter-religious relationships have to be taken into consideration. Thus, even the group of Iranian speakers who remained true to their original belief was not untouched by changes and the impacts of others. For a detailed theoretical and methodological discussion on this topic, see Krech (2012).

6 For the introduction of Buddhism to the Sogdians, see, e.g., Compareti (2008); Tremblay (2007, 89–97); Yoshida (2020, 194, 200–201). Khotanese Buddhism and its culture were discussed on the basis of various materials when Erika Forte (Kyoto), Christoph Anderl (Ghent), and Carmen Meinert (Bochum) organized a workshop at CERES in Bochum in 2014: "Dynamics in the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe". Some of the participants dealt with topics connected to Khotanese Buddhism and the results were published as *BuddhistRoad Paper* 6.1. *Special Issue: Ancient Central Asian Networks* (https://omp.ub.rub.de/index.php/BuddhistRoad/catalog/category/Transfer, accessed on July 15, 2022). For Buddhism and the other Iranian speakers, see, e.g., Tremblay (2007, 80–88). Furthermore, Tocharians established their Buddhist culture in the oases Kuča and Karashar (Chin. Yanqi 焉耆) on the northern section of the Silk Roads in eastern Central Asia. Their language does not belong to the Iranian group, but is counted as an Indo-European language, the group to which Iranian languages also belong. With regard to Tocharian Buddhism, Tocharian inscriptions collected in the caves of Kuča and the reconstruction of mural paintings in the caves of Kızıl have been published recently (see Zhao 2020, 2021).

Asia, there are still many unsolved issues. However, Sogdian Christian texts from the Turfan area show that the Christian community was particularly active in places like Astana, Kočo, Bulayık, Kurutka, or Toyok.[7] Compared with the Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Buddhists, and Christians, the activities of Iranian-speaking Muslims in Central and East Asia are primarily reported much later on in the Mongolian period (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), although the Islamisation of Iranian speakers in Western Asia had already begun in the seventh century.[8] In the case of Muslims, it is worth mentioning that they reached East Asia through Central Asia using the maritime section of the Silk Roads.[9]

[5] After leaving their homeland, some Iranian speakers practised their original religious rituals and customs in their new environments, while others began to adopt the local religions. It is well-documented that Iranian-speaking communities partly continued previously well-established practices and customs, among which were their burial customs; e.g., the burial objects found in Sogdian tombs in China provide evidence that Sogdians kept their Zoroastrian belief and burial rituals.[10] The Khotanese Iranian speakers in eastern Central Asia cultivated the Buddhist culture in their kingdom over the centuries, establishing their status with such success in the Buddhist world that their king and kingdom even appear in some Buddhist narratives (e.g. Rong 1987, 1988). They thereby participated in a major way in the transmission of Buddhism. As mentioned above, however, some Sogdians became Buddhists because of the impact of their new neighbours in East Asia, mainly the Chinese. In contrast, for the Turkic speaking Uyghurs, these Sogdians facilitated the Uyghur rulers' decision to introduce Manichaeism in their nomadic empire.[11]

[6] The few examples mentioned above demonstrate the historical impact made by contacts with Iranian speakers, who often played a vital role in the transmission of various religions in Central and East Asia. Despite their importance, however, the details of their religious activities remain unclear. A major reason for this difficulty is the extremely fragmentary condition of the sources. Many Iranian languages, which played a relevant role in the communication between peoples from various regions, now belong to the vanished languages, and the sources that document the activities of their speakers were found only by chance in Central and East Asia. Because of this material condition, the number of specialists in the field is very small so that they cannot easily meet with others to discuss their research.

[7] Furthermore, for most of the materials, only the first step in research, namely cataloging and preparing text editions, has been completed so far, so that they are now ready for the second step, their evaluation from the point of view of religious studies. The workshop "Dynamics, Stability & Tradition: The Role of the Religions of Iranian Speakers in Central and Eastern Asia," hosted by the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) of Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB),

7 The Sogdian Christian texts in the Berlin Turfan Collection were catalogued by Christiane Reck, and some of them are edited by Nicholas Sims-Williams (see Reck 2018; Sims-Williams 1996, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019; Pittard and Sims-Williams 2013). Erica C. D. Hunter also worked intensively on the Christian materials written in Syriac from Turfan (see, e.g., Hunter 2013; Hunter and Coakley 2017).

8 For the Islamization of Iranian speakers, see, e.g., Grenet and de la Vaissière (2002).

9 The maritime networks are one of the research topics recently dealt with from various aspects, as Schottenhammer's edited volumes show (see Schottenhammer 2019b; esp. Wade 2019; see also, e.g., Chaffee 2018).

10 For one of these examples from the tomb of An Jia (fl. sixth century, 安伽), see, e.g., Wertmann (2015, 54–65).

11 The official introduction of Manichaeism to the Uyghur nomadic empire was dated to 762/763 with the conversion of the third Uyghur ruler. It has been suggested that one of the reasons for this ruler's decision was to foster a close relationship with Sogdians, whose trade network covered the whole of Eurasia and promised a tremendous financial advantage. For a summary of this topic, including previous research, see, e.g., Kasai (2020, 65).

Germany, in March 2019, was organized by myself with the cooperation of Carmen Meinert as a platform for specialists to discuss the religious activities of these Iranian speakers and their exchanges in various places.[12] This special issue resulted from this workshop, in which participants examined written sources and art objects in order to gain a better understanding of the religious activities of Iranian speakers in the region. It became clear from these investigations that the interactions between Iranian speakers and others on the Silk Roads had a profound impact on both parties, with cultural influences moving in both directions.

[8] Iris Colditz focuses on Buddhist and Indian elements in Manichaean onomastics in her article "Buddhist and Indian Elements in the Onomastics of the Iranian Manichaean Texts" (2020). She collected name elements in the Iranian Manichaean texts from the Turfan region and analysed their origin. It has already been pointed out that Manichaeism absorbed some Indian-originated religious ideas and concepts. Besides the names with Iranian origin, Colditz indicates four categories for names that contain non-Iranian elements, whether these names be partly or entirely non-Iranian. Although the number of non-Iranian and hybrid Iranian/non-Iranian names is small, certain terms exhibiting a close relationship with Buddhism or with the Indian tradition are clearly visible in these names, demonstrating that Iranian-speaking Manichaeans had exchanges with Indian religious traditions and cultures, mainly Buddhism and/or Jainism.

[9] Pavel Lurje's contribution "Buddhist Indian Loanwords in Sogdian and the Development of Sogdian Buddhism" (2021) also deals with terms of Indian origin in Sogdian, but in this case not in Manichaean but Buddhist texts. He collected almost 300 Indian loanwords and analysed their origin. According to his study, around eighty percent were borrowed from Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, although in some cases it is difficult to recognise their Sanskrit origin. Another twenty percent have Prakrit as their original or are intermediated by other languages such as Parthian, Tocharian or Chinese. The detailed analysis by Lurje shows how vowels and consonants in the original languages were rendered with vowels and consonants in Sogdian. The words discussed in his paper are listed as an index. Lurje also deals with the topic of Buddhism in Sogdiana and Sogdian colonies, as additional remarks to his paper. Whether Sogdians had already converted to Buddhism in Sogdiana is still an unsolved question, despite intensive discussions over some decades. Lurje examined a newly discovered wooden panel from Panjakent and sealings from Kafir-kala (near Samarkand) hitherto presented as "Buddhist." He concludes that the wooden panel indeed shows the worship of Buddha, while the sealings probably represent a Turkic noble lady.

[10] Christiane Reck, research staff of the Academy project "Union Catalogue of the Oriental Manuscripts" in Göttingen, provides an excellent overview of the Sogdian materials preserved in the Berlin Turfan Collection. Her paper "The Sogdians and their Religions in Turfan: Evidence in the Catalogue of the Middle Iranian Fragments in Sogdian Script of the Berlin Turfan Collection" (2021) discusses various religions introduced among the Sogdians, based on the

12 The workshop was held on March 14-15, 2019, with the support of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) "Dynamics in the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe." The workshop was, in addition, visited by the members of the ERC-funded project "Dynamics in Buddhist Networks in Eastern Central Asia 6th to 14th Centuries (Hereafter: BuddhistRoad)," housed in CERES, enabling them to obtain a more profound understanding of the religious situation in Central Asia (see https://buddhistroad.ceres.rub.de/en/). Because of this opportunity, further intensive discussions in the ERC project BuddhistRoad were promoted. Thus, the workshop produced a complementary effect with that project. Some of the topics connected with Iranian speakers will be published in the project's conference proceedings (see Kasai and Sørensen 2022; Doney et al. forthcoming).

materials in Sogdian excavated from Central Asia. She also exemplifies the difficulty in identifying religious affiliation visible in those texts which are in extremely fragmentary condition.

[11] Chen Ruixuan deals with the introduction of Buddhism in Khotan and the shifting of the Buddhist tradition to the Mahāyāna in his contribution "Lurching Towards a Canon. Mahāyāna Sūtras in Khotanese Garb" (2021). He underlines the text-centeredness of the Mahāyāna community in Khotan and points out that Buddhist texts circulating in Khotan in the fifth and sixth centuries were of Sanskrit (or Middle Indic) origin. Therefore there was a gap between the Sanskrit language of the authoritative texts and the Khotanese (eastern Middle Iranian) of the faith community. With the *Book of Zambasta*, which adopted some cantos from various Mahāyāna sūtras, he discusses the possibilities of the existence of an independent Khotanese canon and shows how Khotanese Buddhists dealt with the language gap.

[12] The topic of Erica C. D. Hunter's contribution "Turfan. Connecting with Seleucia-Ctesiphon" (2021) is the Christian, more precisely: Church of the East, community in Turfan. She notices that a Syriac liturgy text found in Turfan and dating between 771 and 884 CE, which is the most complete text found so far, contains the commemoration of Mart Shir, a Sassanid queen, and the prayer of Bar Sauma, the bishop of Nisibis. While Mart Shir became the evangelist of Merv, Bar Sauma cultivated good relations with rulers and other influential persons in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Hunter's study concludes that this liturgical text preserves memories of the relationship between Merv, a distant outpost of the Church of the East, and its capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

[13] With Max Deeg's contribution "The 'Brilliant Teaching': Iranian Christians in Tang China and Their Identity" (2020), the focus moves to China. In Tang (618–907, 唐) China, the Christian community, mainly consisting of Iranians, called their religion Jingjiao (景教) "Brilliant Teaching." Two relevant sources for that community are "Stele Inscription of the Brilliant Teaching's Spread to the Middle Kingdom" and the so-called Christian *dhāraṇī* pillar. While the former was found in Xi'an (西安) in 1625, the latter was only discovered in 2006 in Luoyang. The stele from Xi'an can be dated to the year 781 during the Tang Dynasty; It mentions the place named Daqin (大秦) "Palestine/Syria or Byzantium" as the birthplace of Jesus Christ, and also as the homeland of the Christian priest who came to the capital of the Tang Empire as a missionary. Remarkably, the non-Chinese names attested in both the stele and the pillar contain Iranian elements, so it seems as if the community and its members bore multiple identities. Deeg, however, points out that in sources from the Tang period the place name Bosi (波斯) "Persia" is replaced by Daqin, so that the latter's definition shifts to Persian/Iranian territory. As the reason for this replacement, he indicates the fall of the Sassanian Empire, the decreasing importance of mentioning Bosi, and also the increasingly sceptical attitude towards Iranians in China after the rebellion of An Lushan (703–757, 安祿山), the famous Sogdian general.

[14] Masaki Mukai's contribution "Persian Speakers in Fujian under Mongol Rule: An Analysis of the 'Culture of Tolerance' " (2022) leads our focus to the southeast coast of China in the Mongolian period and discusses a religious donation by the famous Persian speaking family Pu (浦), who migrated to the region where they became active as sea trading Muslim merchants. Mukai deals with the fact that members of this family financially supported the restoration of a local Daoist-Buddhist shrine and points out the coexistence of various people in religious harmony in this region in the Mongolian period.

[15] Previous research on the materials which inform us about the activities of Iranian speakers mainly concentrated on philological and linguistic aspects. Building upon the valuable results

of that pioneering research, the evaluation of the material from the aspect of religious studies has only just begun. This special issue is a welcome first step in opening up this important new field to further enquiry.

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