

Forms of Mobility in the Southern Tarim Basin in the 7th to 10th Centuries

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The written records excavated from sites in the southern Tarim Basin in modern Xinjiang, China, bear witness to a wide range of actors moving for an equally varied range of reasons. Envoys and emissaries moved between the kingdoms and empires, bearing gifts and news between the royal courts. Buddhist monks traversed the same routes on journeys of pilgrimage, while merchants of many different backgrounds carried their commodities between the different oases. Yet all these forms of regional and interregional mobility formed but the tip of an iceberg, with local forms of mobility across rather short distances accounting for the majority of movement. Here we see officials moving tax around the kingdoms, local farmers heading to the court with their grievances, and slaves being bought and sold, to name but a few forms of local movement. This contribution seeks to explore this great variety of mobility seen in the unusually rich written sources from the southern Tarim Basin. The study will mainly focus on the Khotanese documents from sites that were once part of the kingdom of Khotan, especially Domoko and Mazar Tagh, as well as from Dunhuang in the eastern Tarim Basin. These will be supplemented by documents in other languages from these same sites. On this basis, the contribution will explore the various forms of mobility in the Southern Tarim Basin in the 7th-10th centuries CE and focus on the question of how and why people travelled. In order to do this, it will investigate four reasons for movement: administrative, commercial, religious, and diplomatic. It will furthermore discuss how these types of mobility should be understood in relation to each other, arguing that regional and transregional movement necessarily depended upon more local forms of mobility.

Keywords: Inner Asian history, the Silk Road, the kingdom of Khotan, southern Tarim Basin, Dunhuang manuscripts

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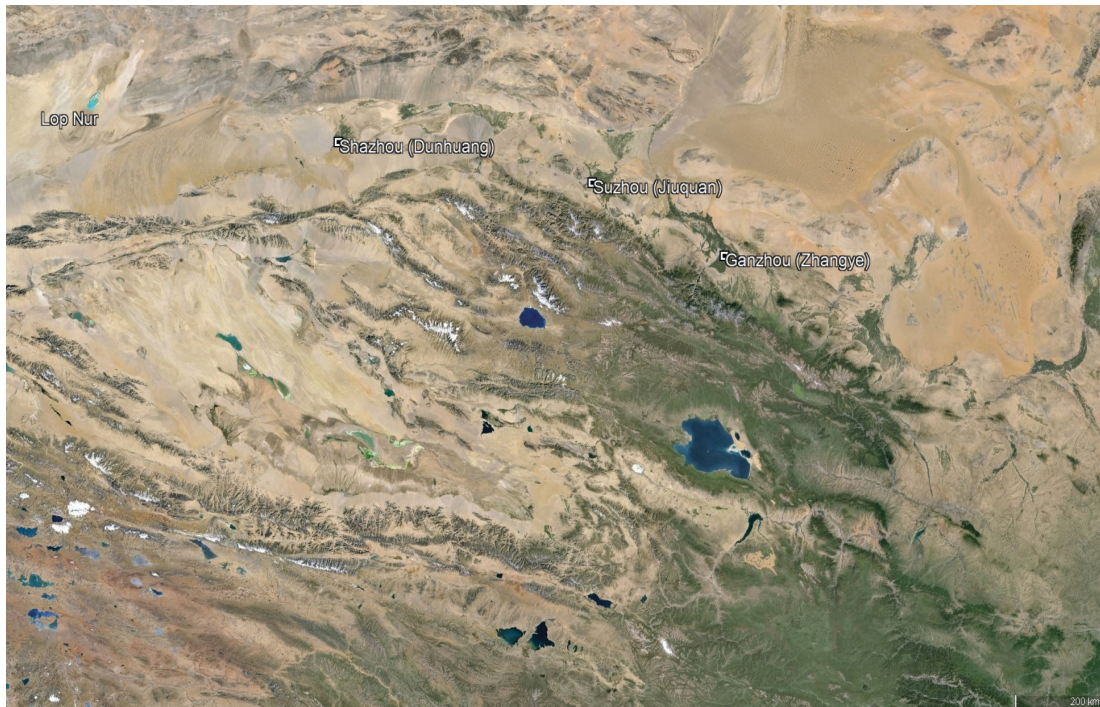


Fig. 1: The world of IOL Khot S.13 (T. Høisæter, 2024)

»Wherever there is no detailed knowledge(?) of the road, there is no road even for a single man!«¹

This was the warning from Begrek Attēmā of Ṣacū, the Khotanese name for Shazhou (沙州) or modern Dunhuang (敦煌), to Chikā Gūlai and Dūṃ Saṃgalakām. Chikā Gūlai and Saṃgalakām were resident in Kamācū, that is Ganzhou (甘州) or modern Zhangye (張掖), but had travelled west to escort a group of seven Khotanese princes on a pilgrimage to China. Things had, however, not gone according to plan.

In fact, the trouble had started as soon as the two escorts met with the princes at a place to the west of Shazhou called Radānahā. There they found that the servants of the seven princes had fled. Even worse, no one had fed and cared for the princes' pack-animals, leaving them emaciated, and some had apparently run away or died. Heading east, things quickly got worse, for the routes were not safe and they soon got into the company of a group of Cimūḍas, a people living southwest of Dunhuang near Lake Lop Nur.² The Cimūḍas did admittedly get them to Shazhou alive, though acting partly as escorts and partly as robbers, they extorted a heavy toll from the group. Chikā Gūlai and Saṃgalakām tried to pay them off with some of the merchandise they were carrying, but the Cimūḍas later took the rest of their cargo. The same fate befell three other merchants that were travelling with them, two of whom were Turkish speakers (one called *Ttāttāhā*, i.e. Tartar) and one a Sogdian (*Sūlī*).

1 Khotanese document IOL Khot S. 13 (Ch. 00269), translated by Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 513.

2 Hamilton, *Le pays*.

The Cimūḍas also took most of their remaining pack animals, leaving the princes and their escorts without the means to continue east, and they even stole the diplomatic gifts carried by the princes. Worse still, upon arriving in Shazhou, the group learned that war had broken out amongst various factions of the Uighur kingdom that controlled Ganzhou. Armies were on the move between Shazhou and Ganzhou as the region was ravaged by warfare and famine. With unsafe roads, no more gifts or diplomatic letters, no pack animals to speak of, food running out and no local guides to take them onwards, the seven princes and their escorts were stuck. As the seven princes themselves described their predicament, »How can we have to enter a fire (from which) we can not bring ourselves back!«³

This vivid account of the hardships faced by Chikā Gūlai, Saṃgalakāṃ and the seven princes is known to us through a long letter, written primarily by Chikā Gūlai and Saṃgalakāṃ. The letter IOL Khot S.13 or Ch.00269, was found in 1907 by Sir Aurel Stein in the »Thousand Buddha Caves« (千佛洞), also known as the Mogao caves (莫高窟), near Dunhuang. The letter had been stitched together with other paper sheets and then reused for writing a Buddhist religious text, written on the reverse, and had survived in the stores of the Buddhist community at Mogao. A precise dating for the document has proven difficult, but most proposals place it in the decades around 900 CE. The letter has primarily garnered attention from scholars as an important source on the political history of the Gansu region in the tumultuous late 9th century.⁴ Yet it is also an excellent illustration of the variety encountered when discussing mobility through the southern and eastern Tarim Basin in this period.⁵ IOL Khot S.13 describes mobility over a variety of distances, from the very long to the local, and shows the variety of actors who travelled and the many different reasons for why they moved, all of which this paper will attempt to explore.

When speaking of movement in the southern and eastern Tarim Basin in the 7th to 10th centuries, one cannot avoid the Silk Roads, generally envisioned as a network of connections stretching across much of Eurasia in this period. Movement is naturally central to any work on the Silk Roads, though the traditional Silk Road narrative has had a tendency to focus primarily on movement over long distances and has tended to identify empires as the primary drivers of such movements.⁶ One very influential concept has, for example, been the idea of »tributary trade«, first properly developed by Ying-shih Yü in his 1967 book,⁷ which suggests that the practice of receiving tribute and returning lavish counter-gifts by Chinese empires was a primary driver of movement and exchange. Much attention has also been paid to merchants operating over long distances, and in particular, the activities of Sogdian merchants are often seen as central to the early medieval Silk Road.⁸

In recent years, however, a number of scholarly works have shifted their focus away from empires and have concentrated on the important issue of how movement through these regions was actually conducted.

3 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 508-514.

4 For an overview of the debate about the dating and content of the letter, see Kumamoto, *Two Khotanese Fragments*, 101-103.

5 For an introduction to this special issue and a discussion of the applicability of the early medieval label, see Paziienza and Bavuso, *Occupational identity and motility*.

6 For some recent examples, see Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*; Rong, *The Silk Road and Cultural Exchanges*, Preface.

7 Yü, *Trade and Expansion*.

8 For an authoritative treatment, see De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*.

This is timely, for as shown by journeys such as that undertaken by the seven princes of IOL Khot S.13 above, travellers faced many challenges. They had to find ways to fend off robbers, negotiate in different languages and different monetary systems, and most importantly, they had to find a way through the very hostile local terrain.⁹ A particularly important contribution to this trend is the recent book »The King's Road« by Xin Wen from 2023. In it, Wen explores diplomatic networks along the Silk Roads centred on Dunhuang from c.850 to 1000 CE, showing convincingly how the movement of diplomats was interwoven with a range of other activities, especially economic and religious matters. The study relies primarily on locally produced sources found at Dunhuang, as opposed to the histories produced by imperial powers, in what he calls a bottom-up approach. The result is what he terms a »Traveller-Centred Definition of the ›Silk Road‹«, which pays more attention to the act of moving and the journey itself, as opposed to the results of such movement.¹⁰

This article aims to follow the lead of Wen's book and to explore movement and mobility in the southern Tarim Basin between the 7th and the 10th century from a bottom-up and travel-centred perspective. Unlike Wen's book, however, which takes diplomatic networks as its starting point, this contribution seeks to provide a broader overview of the different types of movement and mobility seen in sources from the southern Tarim Basin. In particular this contribution seeks to highlight the crucial interrelationship between short-distance and medium-distance movement on the one hand, connecting villages and towns within a region or kingdom, and long-distance movement on the other.¹¹ The contribution does not address a specific profession or professional identity as such. Rather it will focus on reasons for moving and attempts to highlight the great variety of actors moving through the southern Tarim Basin and the complex interplay between their professional identities, as glimpsed in IOL Khot S.13. Though many different groups moved and many different forms of movement are evident, the following will focus on four reasons for moving: administrative, commercial, religious, and diplomatic. Before discussing these four forms of movement, however, a brief introduction to the geography and political history of the southern Tarim Basin is in order.

A Sketch of the Political History of the Southern Tarim Basin

The Tarim Basin and its surrounding highlands lies at the very heart of the Asian landmass, hemmed in on three sides by the most formidable mountain ranges on earth, namely the Tianshan, the Pamir, and the Karakorum/Himalaya ranges. The Tarim is mostly dominated by the Taklamakan Desert and is confronted in the east by other stretches of desert and wastelands in the form of the Lop and Gobi. As the name suggests, the Tarim Basin is itself a large endorheic drainage basin, meaning that water from the surrounding mountains drains into the basin, where it is trapped and eventually evaporates. Thus, while largely a dry landscape, the mountains and deserts are cut through by numerous rivers, which pull large amounts of fertile silt along with them, creating rich oasis environments along their courses and especially in their terminal deltas.

9 One of the best examples of such an approach on a systematic and large scale is the Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies series in three volumes, edited by Sitta von Reden, though it focuses on the period between 300 BCE to 300 CE. For the early medieval period, see in particular Arakawa, Silk Road trade and traders.

10 Wen, *Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*, 288-295.

11 See Pazienza and Bavuso, Occupational identity and motility, 10-11.

The Tarim Basin is thus a region characterised by vast stretches of inhospitable terrain interspersed with fertile oases strung along the feet of the mountain ranges. This geography, in combination with its central position on the Asian landmass, is key to understanding movement and mobility in the region throughout history, as well as its patterns of human habitation.

Since prehistoric times, most human habitation in the region has centred on the fertile oases, and the southern Tarim Basin has been populated by oasis towns since at least the latter half of the first millennium BCE.¹² From these oasis towns grew small polities, encompassing little more than the oasis town and its immediate hinterland, as encountered in the first historical texts written about the region in China. But by the first centuries CE, these smaller polities had all been consolidated, leaving only two polities in the southern Tarim Basin by the 3rd century CE, namely the kingdom of Kroraina in the east and the kingdom of Khotan in the west. By then, both kingdoms had become predominantly Buddhist, with a vibrant cultural production inspired by Gandharan and Central Asian motifs, and both played a central role in the eastwards spread of Buddhism towards China. Both kingdoms also appear to have been relatively stable politically in the period corresponding to Late Antiquity, until the sudden collapse and disappearance of the Krorainan polity sometime in the 5th or 6th century, leaving Khotan as the only large kingdom in the southern Tarim Basin.¹³

Since the rise of the Xiongnu Empire on the Mongolian steppes in the 3rd century BCE, the polities of the Tarim Basin had frequently been at the centre of clashes between imperial powers, primarily empires based in the northern steppes, Mongolia, and China.¹⁴ This was especially true for the period under consideration here, as a number of imperial powers fought to control the Tarim Basin between the 7th and the 9th century CE. In the early 7th century, the whole Tarim Basin was dominated by the Western Turkic Khaganate, with Khotan existing as a vassal kingdom, but the Tarim Basin soon became the primary battleground between the Western Turkic Khaganate and the expanding Tang Empire of China. By 648 the kingdom of Khotan had submitted to the Tang and in 657 the Tang Empire established »The Protectorate General to Pacify the West« (安西大都護府) to control the Tarim Basin and its environs. Four permanent garrisons were also established, one of which was located at Khotan. Except for a period of incursions by the Tibetan Empire between 670 and 692, which included an occupation of Khotan, the Tarim Basin remained under the Tang Empire's control until the mid-8th century. In 755, however, the An Lushan rebellion broke out in Northern China, nearly toppling the Tang dynasty and drawing its resources away from the frontiers. The ensuing power vacuum led to a new period of imperial competition in the Tarim Basin, primarily between the Tibetan Empire in the south and the Uighur Empire which had come to replace the Western Turkic Khaganate on the northern steppe.¹⁵ The southern Tarim Basin soon came under the dominion of the Tibetan Empire, which took control of much of Gansu by the 760s and the southern Tarim Basin by the end of the 8th century.

12 The oldest documented oasis town in the region is Djoumboulak Koum along the Keriya River from the mid-1st millennium BCE. See Debaine-Francfort *et al.*, *The Taklimakan Oases*, 193-199.

13 Høisæter, *At the Crossroad*, 114-120; Kumamoto, *Khotan: History in the pre-Islamic period*, sec. i.

14 Kumamoto, *Khotan: History in the pre-Islamic period*, sec. i.

15 For more on the Uighur Empire, see Brose, *Medieval Uyghurs*, 2-5.

The Tibetan Empire itself soon started to disintegrate after the assassination of King Glang Darma in 842, but Tibetan military control appears to have lingered for several more decades in the southern Tarim Basin.¹⁶

However, throughout these periods of domination by foreign imperial powers, the kingdom of Khotan continued to exist and the population continued to be controlled primarily by the kingdom's civil bureaucracy who cooperated with the various hegemon.¹⁷ This continuity is also evident in the fact that the Khotanese royal line managed to survive its frequently changing overlords until Khotan regained its independence by the late 9th century.¹⁸ In the 10th century, the kingdom of Khotan appears to have been one of the primary powers in the Tarim Basin and had a close political relationship with both the Chinese ruling families of Shazhou in Gansu and also the Uighur rulers that had established a kingdom in Ganzhou around 880, after the collapse of the Uighur Empire. This did not last, however, for though Khotan retained its independence throughout the 10th century, it was conquered by the Muslim Qarakhanids in the first decade of the 11th century, an event which fundamentally changed both the political and cultural landscape of the southern Tarim Basin.¹⁹

Sources on Movement in the Southern Tarim Basin

Our sources about the history of Khotan and the southern Tarim Basin in the period from the 7th to the 10th century fall primarily, but not exclusively, into three categories: Chinese dynastic histories, locally produced documents found in the Tarim Basin and archaeology. Of these, it is especially the documents found in the Tarim Basin itself that are of interest to the study of movement and mobility. The arid environment of much of the Tarim Basin is ideally suited for preserving archaeological materials, including very fragile materials such as textiles or paper. From the late 19th century, European explorers started collecting written documents from sites in the Tarim Basin, including from several sites in the southern Tarim Basin and especially from nearby Dunhuang (Shazhou in the 7th to 10th centuries) in Gansu. From the mid-20th century, Chinese and international archaeological teams have added many more finds, with new documents appearing regularly.

The documents from the southern Tarim Basin and Dunhuang range in period from the first centuries CE at the earliest to about the 10th century. The manuscripts relevant to the 7th-10th centuries were written in a remarkably wide variety of languages, including Khotanese, Chinese, Tibetan, Sogdian, Sanskrit, and various Turkic languages, and appear on an equally wide variety of materials, including various wooden tablets, textiles such as silk and frequently, paper.²⁰ This article will mainly draw on evidence from the Khotanese material, supplementing with sources in other languages where relevant.

16 Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, 211-121; Kumamoto, *Khotan: History in the pre-Islamic period*, sec. ii; Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, lxxv.

17 Arakawa, *Silk Road trade and traders*, 45; Zhang, *Secular Khotanese documents*.

18 For an overview of Khotanese kings in this period, see Zhang, *Kings of Khotan during the Tang Dynasty*.

19 Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, 226-228; Kumamoto, *Khotan: History in the pre-Islamic period*, sec. ii.

20 As an example, see the overview of the material from Dunhuang (Shazhou), the richest of the find sites covered in this paper, in Doumy, *Dunhuang texts*.

The Khotanese materials can broadly be divided into two groups based on the area in which they were found, namely the finds from various sites that were once part of the kingdom of Khotan itself and the rather large collection of Khotanese documents found in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang. The first of these, the documents from Khotan itself, are primarily written in Old and Middle Khotanese, and the majority of these documents seem to date from the 8th and 9th centuries, though some likely date from as early as the 5th century.²¹ The exact find sites of the documents from the kingdom itself are in many cases not known, as a large number of them were excavated by local »treasure hunters«. In a seminal work from 2006, however, Yutaka Yoshida grouped the documents into five archives based on their content and context, a system further refined by a number of scholars, most recently by Zhan Zhang, who ended up with six archives.²² Some of these archives can be closely linked to specific individuals and sites, meaning that a large number of documents now have identified contexts. The documents from Dunhuang, meanwhile, were primarily written in Late Khotanese and largely date to the late 9th and 10th centuries. The two groups also differ somewhat in content, as most of the documents from Khotan are administrative documents, while the material from Dunhuang contains mostly Buddhist texts, literary pieces and letters. These differences between the two groups of documents are important to keep in mind, as both show a clear bias towards certain types of movement.

This variety of find sites and genres makes the Khotanese documents from the southern Tarim Basin a heterogeneous collection, providing information on a wide range of topics, activities, and social contexts, though often in a very fragmented manner. Its breath and eclectic nature makes the collection ideal, however, for studying the variety of reasons for moving and the various distances covered in the early medieval period. In the following, I have selected a number of secular Khotanese documents that illustrate particularly well the four types of movement considered here, namely administrative, commercial, religious, and diplomatic movement.

21 For the division of the Khotanese language and documents into stages, see Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, lxvi-ii-lxxv. For recent work on the oldest Khotanese documents, see Maggi, *History of the Khotanese orthography*.

22 Yoshida, *Notes on the Khotanese Documents*. For a brief overview of the archives and the history of this work, see Zhang, *Secular Khotanese documents*. See also, Zhang, *Between China and Tibet*.

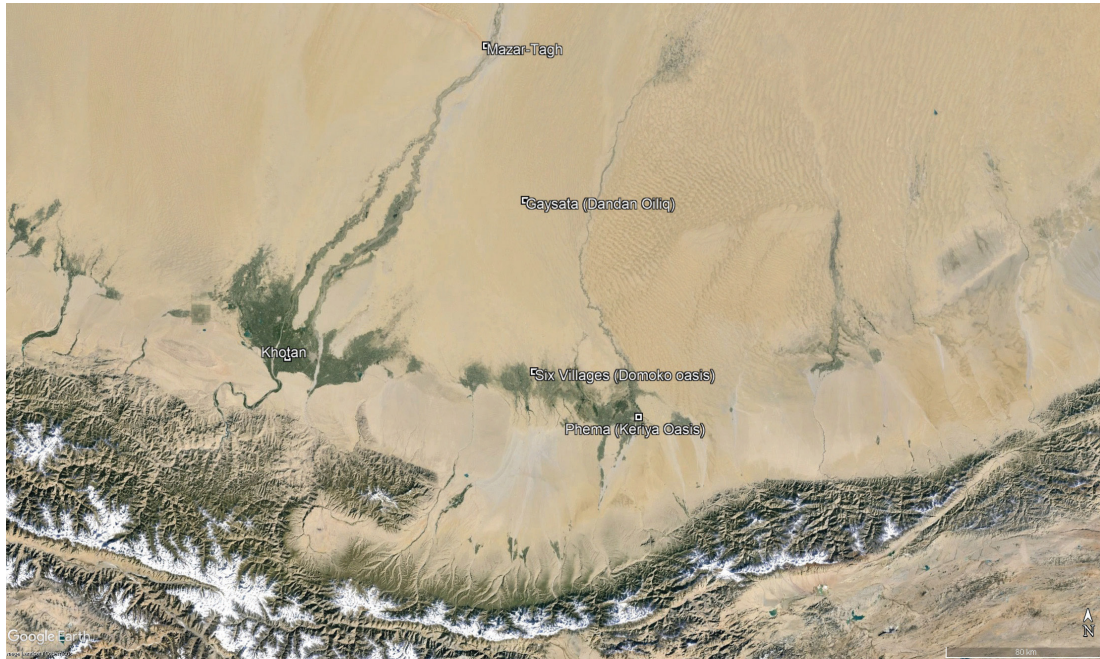


Fig. 2: Sites in the Kingdom of Khotan (T. Høisæter, 2024)

Administrative Movement

Of all the forms of movement described in the Khotanese sources, the movement of people and goods at the behest of the Khotanese state or its overlords is by far the most common. When looking at the documentary, that is non-literary, part of the British Library collection found at sites in the kingdom of Khotan itself, for example, such movement occurs in 23 different documents.²³ This is far more frequent than mentions of diplomatic travels, which occur in three documents,²⁴ or merchants travelling, which occur only in two documents in the BL collection.²⁵ The documents detailing such movement largely take the form of command documents or administrative memoranda, stating that such-and-such official was responsible for moving a certain amount of goods or people, or that such-and-such person has gone somewhere.

23 Or.6394/2, Or.6400/1.1, Or.6400/1.3, Or.6401/2.2, Or.11252/3, Or.11252/17, Or.11252/21, Or.11344/8, Or.11344/9, Or.11344/11, Or.11344/12, Or.12637/16.1a, Or.12637/21.1a, IOL Khot 1/1, IOL Khot 27/10, IOL Khot 54/3, IOL Khot Wood.2, IOL Khot Wood.29, IOL Khot Wood.33, IOL Khot Wood.36, IOL Khot Wood.58, OIOC Photo 392/57 T.O.20, and OIOC Photo 392/57 T.O.34.

24 Or.8212/186, IOL Khot 138/1, and IOL Khot 200/4. More frequently in the documents from Dunhuang, primarily produced by diplomatic travellers, for example IOL Khot S.6.1-13, IOL Khot S.13.23-108, IOL Khot S.13.109-120, IOL Khot S.18, IOL Khot S.21a and IOL Khot S.22.

25 Only mentioned in Or.8212/186, and Or.12637/23.

The document Or.11344/8 from the British Library collection is an instructive example in this regard. It is a small paper document originating from one of the Six Villages (*kṣā 'auvā*), the name used in the Khotanese sources for the administrative unit covering the settlements in the Domoko oasis, and likely dates to the beginning of the 9th century.²⁶ In Skjervø's translation it reads:

Or.11344/8 A:

The following nine men have gone on inspection: Naṃdaka, Ṣanīraka, Virgām, (the 2nd) Ṣanīraka, Suhena, Kharajsajsa, Suhadāysa, Īrvadatta, Suradatta. Two men are carriers of letters: Vasade, Altām. U Mulaka the inspector in Birgaṃdara is in Tibet. Ysiviḍta has gone to the Inner Fort for the disposal of cloths.

In Cira (there are) 3 grain-carriers: Suhadatta, Pu'ysdaka, Ysāḍadatta. Five men, messengers, are staying in (their?) houses. Two men have gone to Cira: Aniruda and Svar-rjām.

Three men belonging to the *ṣau* Viṣṇadatta are (still) owed: Surade, Sudatta, Saṃganaṃda.

Five men belonging to his Lordship the Young King are (still) owed: Aśnadatta, Kharrjām, Tcaṃjsai, Hvurihvāda, Saṃgaka.

Five men (are) *defectors(?): Suramarṣa', Vidarrjām, Haskadarma, Puṇadatta, Sumatt-.

24 men belonging to the gracious Lord are sesame-sowers and wheat-sowers.

Or.11344/8 B:

Kucalai owes 2 *kūsas* 5 *ṣaṃgas* of barley. Instead of that he delivered millet.

And this (is) the millet in Phema. The *hatcaṃ* which they brought to the Kaṃdva in Phema to us/them *is to be [brought?] back to Phema: 11 *kūsas* 3 *ṣaṃgas*.

15 *kūsas* 8 *ṣaṃgas* of wheat—that is to be delivered in Cira.²⁷

As can be seen, one side of the document (A) contains a list of people and their whereabouts, while the other (B) contains an order concerning the movement of grain. The text on the two sides seems not to be connected, but rather represents a case of reuse. Both texts detail several individuals moving, though largely in small groups, over short distances in the local landscape and for very local purposes. Two men have, for example, gone to Cira, one of the other Six Villages in the same oasis area, where a consignment of grain was also to be delivered. One man had gone to the Inner Fort (*haṃdira prū*), which likely meant the capital in the neighbouring oasis of Khotan, to deliver or possibly sell cloth (both described on side A). On side B, meanwhile, we read that millet was delivered to Phema. Phema likely represents the next large oasis to the east of the Domoko, situated along the Keriya River, called Khema in the Krorainan documents. Alternatively, Phema could represent a location to the northwest of Domoko, as argued by Zhang.²⁸

26 The document is part of Archive 3, dated by Zhang to between 798-802 CE. Zhang, *Secular Khotanese documents*, 60.

27 Skjervø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 111-112.

28 Zhang, *Secular Khotanese documents*, 63.

In either case, the movement described is over a relatively short distance, crossing at most from one oasis area to a neighbouring one. Only one of the movements described in the document was over longer distances, this being the journey of Mulaka from Birgaṃdara, another of the Six Villages, to Tibet. Where exactly is meant by Tibet (*ttāgutti*) is unclear. It could represent a long journey into the Tibetan heartlands, though it could equally well represent a much shorter journey into the mountains immediately south of Domoko.²⁹ On the whole, document Or.11344/8 gives a good impression of what everyday mobility in the kingdom of Khotan was like. Movement was largely local, and deliveries made largely on a small scale, often without the aid of animals, as the mention of grain-carriers shows. Even if mostly small in scale and confined to the local region, such movement must have been rather frequent and likely repeated, however, judging from documents such as Or.11344/8.

The majority of this administratively mandated movement was related to the movement of tax and labourers between the different oasis towns of the kingdom. This largely explains the frequency with which it appears in the sources, which themselves were largely the product of Khotanese bureaucracy, as this was essential to the running of the Khotanese state. It also explains why the Khotanese state spent much effort on establishing and maintaining a functioning system of infrastructure connecting its oases, a topic frequently mentioned in the surviving documents.

The best surviving example of this is document Or.11344/3, originally two separate paper documents that had been glued together and were reused to write a third text.³⁰ One of the original texts (B) was a letter of command, which reads as follows in Skjærvø's translation:

Or.11344/3 B:

The *spāta* Sudārrjuṃ orders thus: To the *pharṣa* Sāṃdara.
 And now men They said to me thus: In Pa' the road back has thus become *muttūṃ*.
 And so he [sent?] them to Birgaṃdara. ... the road is full of holes(?). What matter is there that the men are wasting days on working there? And he came on a road ... ground ... [When] you hear the order bring 10 men there. Order them to work there until they have finished. Load by load [bring?] reed there. [There is] a pond in the .?. that debouches towards the town. Next, order them to put all the loads of reed (into it). ... the ground becomes ... when thus the Masters' pack animals will be
 Now (act) quickly so that you do not then say that: »I have not heard(?)«³¹

As can be seen, the order was sent from a senior official called *spāta* Sudārrjuṃ to a local official called *pharṣa* Sāṃdara regarding the state of the road between Birgaṃdara and Pa', another one of the Six Villages. It had been reported to the *spāta* that the road was full of holes and in a bad condition, and so in Or.11344/3 he ordered Sāṃdara to gather ten men to repair it so that the movement of pack animals could resume.³²

29 See also the alternative reading of this line in Zhang, *Between China and Tibet*, 402-404.

30 Zhang, *Between China and Tibet*, 204.

31 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 108

32 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 108.

It was local men who did this work, as a form of *corvée* labour, and the men who first noticed the problem were likely also men engaged in state work, for the documents frequently mention men ordered out on inspection, as also seen in Or.11344/8. It is not clear what exactly such inspections entailed, though judging by the first text (A) of Or.11344/3, which lists men sent to inspect both a dam and several roads, it was a form of maintenance duty that rotated between the villagers.³³

As these documents clearly show, the Khotanese state, its officials, and its population spent much time maintaining local infrastructure and moving goods throughout the kingdom. As noted, the frequency of administrative movement in our sources is partly a result of the Khotanese bureaucracy's preoccupation with such movement. Yet it also speaks to the fact that the vast majority of movements in the southern Tarim Basin in this period were intensely local, facilitated by and facilitating the maintenance of local networks. At the same time, the infrastructure created by villagers from places such as Birgam̄dara and Pa' were not only used by them and did facilitate other forms of movement, sometimes over very long distances indeed.

Merchants and Commercial Movement

One group that at times crossed such long distances was people moving for commercial reasons. As previously noted, the Khotanese documents and other written sources from the southern Tarim Basin mention merchants only infrequently. This is likely not so much an indication of limited commercial activity in the region but should rather be understood as the result of the bias of our sources. The Khotanese bureaucracy and the garrisons of the Tang and Tibetan empires were primarily concerned with law, land and labour, and as such wrote about merchants only infrequently. Yet despite these limitations, the available sources still show a wide range of commercial activity, varying greatly in scale and conducted by people with a variety of ethnic identities.

Most references to merchants in the Khotanese material, in particular the material from the kingdom itself, appear to describe local Khotanese merchants trading on a fairly small scale. Two typical examples are found in Or.6394/1, a legal document, and Or.6396/1, a voucher describing a sale. Both documents likely date from the end of the 8th century and originated from the settlement Gaysāta, at or near the modern site of Dandan Oiliq.³⁴ In both cases, local Khotanese merchants were purchasing hemp and woollen cloth. These were local products, moving at most between the local oases, and both merchants likely dealt primarily within the local economy, although the merchants in Or.6394/1 had paid for 300 pieces of cloth, a significant quantity. Although the documents also record merchants trading in other goods – Or.6396/1, for example, also mentions a merchant transporting sesame oil – it appears that cloth was the most important commodity in local trade in both Khotan and the wider southern Tarim Basin region.³⁵

33 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 107-108.

34 Zhang, *Secular Khotanese documents*, 60.

35 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 5, 7-8.

Indeed, textiles and cloth appear to have been an important part of larger commercial networks too, as these goods feature heavily in the few surviving Khotanese documents probably written by actual merchants.³⁶ One good example of such a document is the torn paper document Or.12637/23 (M.T.0463). This document likely dates from the first half of the 9th century, during the period of Tibetan control, and was found at Mazar Tagh, a border fortress north of the oasis of Khotan along the Khotan River.³⁷ The text takes the form of a list and gives an account of amounts of cloth delivered and notes how many coins were received in return, as well as listing amounts of both cloth and wool received into the inventory.³⁸ Due to the fragmentary nature of the document and the lack of a firm archaeological context for it, one cannot rule out the possibility that the account was in some way related to the Tibetan garrison that was stationed at Mazar Tagh in the early 9th century. But even if the account was somehow connected to the garrison, it was certainly commercial in nature. This is clear from the detailed information the document gives of the price of the cloth delivered and is also suggested by the mention of money sent to the Inner Fort, that is the capital Khotan.³⁹ It thus most likely represents the account of a merchant or possibly a merchant family, likely cooperating or acting as agents for someone in Khotan oasis. Locating such an operation at Mazar Tagh would certainly make sense, as it lay on the main route from the Khotan oasis to the oasis towns of the northern Tarim Basin.

A similar type of activity is also seen in the other commercial documents in Khotanese, especially in P2024 from the Pelliot collection, found at Dunhuang (Shazhou) and likely dating to the 10th century. This too is an account in the form of a long list of sales and some purchases, primarily dealing in rolls of cloth, likely silk, which also functioned as a monetary unit. In addition to these cloth rolls, the account also details the purchase and sale of animals, including sheep and horses, animal products, especially antelope pelts, a sword and several slaves. Interestingly, the list is interspersed with references to arriving at specific locations, giving the impression that the merchants were moving along a planned trading circuit, as the following section translated by Kumamoto exemplifies:

15. And one roll we gave (to) **Toq** the guide.
16. (Of) one roll he gave only one third.
17. And from one roll we sewed a *drraijsai*.
18. He gave one roll (for) our camel.
19. On the road to **Quz** 20 rolls in total went, of which 12 are *Pauḍaina*'s and 8 *Tvana-kau*'s.
20. When we came to (the place of) the **Quz Tatar**, *Pauḍaina* the Tarqan sent one pot made of **durma*, worth 6 jin斤 twelve of silk.⁴⁰

36 Or.12637/23, P2024 and P2729. See also Kumamoto, *Miscellaneous Khotanese Documents*, n. 3.

37 Zhang, *Secular Khotanese documents*, 60.

38 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 132-133.

39 As shown by Zhang the Inner Fort (*hamdira prū*) is given as the location of the Khotanese king in two different documents, Or.11252/15 and Hedin 5. As such it should be understood as referring to the king's seat in Khotan. Zhang, *Between China and Tibet*, 178-179.

40 Kumamoto, *Miscellaneous Khotanese Documents*, 232.

Given that the document was found at Dunhuang (Shazhou), it seems likely that the circuit led to the east and possibly north, as most of the people and places mentioned have Turkic names. It would seem that the merchants traded rolls of cloth with the people there, mostly in exchange for animals and animal products such as pelts. There is no indication in the account of P2024 that the Khotanese-speaking merchants who made it had contact with the kingdom of Khotan itself or were active in the southern Tarim Basin. Yet given the mentions of quite distant journeys in documents found at Khotanese sites, such as Mulaka's journey to Tibet, it certainly would not be impossible that some Khotanese merchants operated even at such distances.

At any rate, these examples illustrate how Khotanese merchants moved through the southern Tarim Basin, acting on both a local and a regional scale. Yet they were not the only ones, and one group in particular was involved in commercial networks spanning truly massive distances, namely the Sogdians. Sogdians, originating from the area between the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers in Central Asia, had been active in commercial networks through the Tarim Basin since at least the 3rd century, and by the 7th century, Sogdian merchants had a particularly sophisticated network spanning the entirety of Inner and Central Asia, from China to Persia and India.⁴¹ Sogdian merchants were also active in the southern Tarim Basin in the 7th to 10th centuries, as shown both by their presence in Khotanese, Chinese, and Tibetan texts and by the presence of a few Sogdian documents found in the southern Tarim Basin.⁴² These Sogdian documents, mostly fragments, represent a variety of different types of text, including literary pieces, religious texts, accounts and letters.

One letter in particular, No.5 in Renmin University's collection, is instructive with regard to the nature and reach of Sogdian networks in the period. The exact find-spot of the document is unknown, though it was likely either Mazar Tagh or Dandan Oiliq, and its dating is very uncertain, probably sometime in the late 8th century.⁴³ The letter was sent to a man named Anyan, likely either a Sogdian or Chinese, by a Sogdian named Takhsich-vande. Takhsich-vande was acting as a commercial agent for Anyan, whom he refers to as his lord, and had travelled to a place called Parwan, that is modern Aksu in the northern Tarim Basin.⁴⁴ The letter seems to have been written in Parwan and it therefore might be concluded that Anyan, the addressee, was based in Khotan or one of the nearby oases. In the letter, Takhsich-vande is answering an accusation of having withheld the profit from Anyan and answers by giving reports on their various commercial ventures and blaming everyone but himself. While this is an instructive example of Sogdian trade activities in the Tarim Basin, the most interesting aspect of the text is the breadth of the networks described. As translated by Bi and Sims-Williams:

... But I did not go to Sogd, nor to Turkestan, nor to Tibet. (As for) your goods, whatever I brought (your) profits (?), the major (part of) your goods has gone(?) out of (my?) hands, both (to) Khumdan and to (the) Uygur(s), also to Turkestan, also to Sogd, and a profit(?) was taken (for you) (?).⁴⁵

41 De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*.

42 For an up-to-date overview of the Sogdian documents found in the southern Tarim Basin from the 7th to 10th centuries, see Bi and Sims-Williams, *Sogdian Documents from Khotan*.

43 Bi and Sims-Williams, *Sogdian Documents from Khotan*, Preface.

44 Bi and Sims-Williams, *Sogdian Documents from Khotan*, 69-70.

45 Bi and Sims-Williams, *Sogdian Documents from Khotan*, 63.

There is some uncertainty regarding what exactly is meant by all the place names given. Khumdan refers to the Tang capital of Chang'an, while Sogd refers to the Sogdian homeland and Tibet is also clear, but the terms Turkestan and the Uygurs in particular are vague. As discussed by the editors, Turkestan appears to point to the Semirech area, north of the Tian-shan, though this is not certain, while in this period the term Uygurs may point towards the Mongolian steppes.⁴⁶

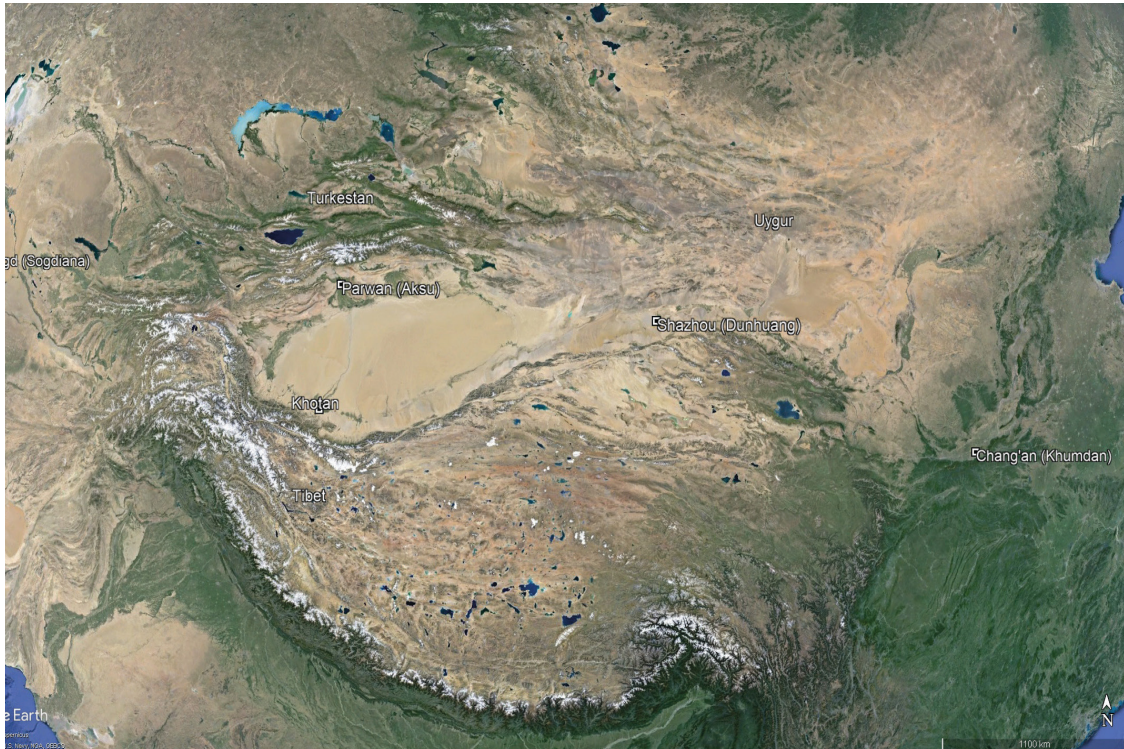


Fig.3: The Kingdom of Khotan and its network of connections from Sogdian document No.5 (T. Høisæter, 2024)

Yet no matter how one interprets the latter terms, the letter from Takhsich-vande shows very clearly the breadth of the commercial networks in which the southern Tarim Basin was enmeshed. It is also but one example, complemented for example by the Judeo-Persian letters found at Dandan Oiliq.⁴⁷ Taken together, the evidence from the Khotanese and Sogdian sources shows how merchants moved through and beyond the region, some working on a small scale, others moving further afield.

Pilgrims, Monks, and Religious Movement

Another group that was on the move through the southern Tarim Basin was people moving for religious reasons, primarily Buddhist monks and pilgrims. Admittedly, there is practically no mention of monks moving in the documents from Khotan and the southern Tarim Basin itself, in fact monks are only rarely mentioned at all.

46 Bi and Sims-Williams, *Sogdian Documents from Khotan*, 68-69.

47 Zhang, Two Judeo-Persian letters.

This might seem at odds with Khotan's reputation as a Buddhist centre in the period and the many finds of Buddhist art in the region, yet it is likely just the result of the bureaucratic and military bias of our surviving written sources. Turning, however, to the Late Khotanese material from Dunhuang, primarily from the 9th and 10th centuries, one finds a very different picture, as a large part of these texts were written by Khotanese monks that visited or had settled in Dunhuang.

Many of the religious travellers that made their way through the southern Tarim Basin and ended up stopping at Dunhuang (Shazhou) were pilgrims on their way to China, most likely headed for the holy mountain Wutai. The seven princes encountered in document IOL Khot S.13 were on such a journey and many of them are described in the text as belonging to or being masters of monasteries. An illustrative example of the movement of these monks can be found in two letters relating to Nāgendravardha, the dade of the monastery Gūśaṃdā in Khotan. One is the second text on the reverse of paper scroll Or.8212/162, which had been made by gluing together various Khotanese texts, and dates to around 966 CE.⁴⁸ It is a letter in verse, written by Nāgendravardha himself and addressed to the community of Gūśaṃdā monastery, in which he relates his journey towards China and his arrival in Shazhou (Dunhuang). Most of the letter, however, contains his poetic praise of Khotan, the Gūśaṃdā monastery, and the many friends and fellow-monks he had left behind, showing his lingering attachments even as he travelled.⁴⁹ The second document, P2786 from the Pelliot collection, is the draft of a report to be sent to the Khotanese court, written by a group of monks and ambassadors. They relate how Nāgendravardha had travelled ahead of them and informed them of the road ahead via letters as he went from Shazhou to Suzhou (Jiuquan) and then on to Ganzhou (Zhangye). The descriptions of some of these letters are particularly interesting, as translated by Kumamoto:

17. In the letter was the following:

»We came here to Su-chou. Here there are two ›painter-monks‹ of Phema. From these monks, we heard that: ›From China, a Tashih departed (towards us), Rājārimai Yaugandharāyaṇa by name'. And because of our men, he heard that envoys are coming.

18. When we came to Su-chou, we heard as follows:

»Ten days passed since he (Yaugandharāyaṇa) went (back) to the China land.«
He had passed the word to me that:
»I shall send men before you«.

19. To our men, the Ta-te of Gūśaṃdā, Nāgendravardha, sent a message by a letter as follows:

»The Kan-chou country here is all right (/ good). When this word of mine comes to you, leave immediately (for Kan-chou)!« Kan-chou men, Yangi Çor and Ttuva Çor by name, brought this letter.«⁵⁰

48 Kumamoto, *Khotanese Official Documents in the Tenth Century A.D.*, 46-51.

49 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 45-50.

50 Kumamoto, *Khotanese Official Documents in the Tenth Century A.D.*, 119-120.

These passages are interesting not only because they show how different groups of monks aided each other by supplying information about the road ahead, but also because they show how the travellers used and relied upon Khotanese monks who had settled locally. In our example, several Khotanese monks seem to have settled in the monastic community of Shazhou (Dunhuang) and in nearby oases (such as the two monks from Phema by the Keriya River who lived in Suzhou). These examples, from IOL Khot S.13 to P2786, also show the close relationship between religious travellers and diplomatic missions, which, as shown by the case of IOL Khot S.13, often overlapped.

Envoys and Diplomatic Movement

The final form of movement across the southern Tarim Basin of interest to this study is movement for diplomatic purposes, though it is worth noting that documents relating to such movement have only been found at Dunhuang and no such documents are known from sites in the kingdom of Khotan itself. The movement of envoys and diplomatic missions, especially in the period of the 9th and 10th centuries, has received a lot of attention from scholars and has been studied extensively.⁵¹ As such, the following will only give a brief sketch of the movements of the Khotanese diplomatic missions which connected the kings of Khotan to the rulers of Shazhou and Ganzhou, as well as various Chinese dynasties, in the 9th and 10th centuries.

One of the more informative sources on Khotanese embassies is the letter of Chikā Gūlai and Dūṃ Saṃgalakāṃ discussed at the start of this article, namely the document IOL Khot S.13 of the British Library collection, as well as the documents contained in fragments P2031 and P2788 and the document P2898, all from the Pelliot collection.⁵² Together they give a good impression of how such a diplomatic mission might be composed and how it moved. The mission described in the three documents was headed by two ambassadors headed for Ganzhou, who wrote document P2031-P2788. They accompanied the seven princes, whose primary purpose was a pilgrimage, but who were presumably also intended as ambassadors to Northern China. As described in IOL Khot S.13, the princes originally travelled with a number of servants. These had deserted them by the time they were found by the two escorts Chikā Gūlai and Dūṃ Saṃgalakāṃ, who lived in Ganzhou and were to take the princes there. Finally, attaching themselves to the group, at least as far as Shazhou, were the three merchants previously mentioned. The group had originally travelled with a large number of animals, both horses and camels, most of whom had since been lost. The animals were indeed essential, as shown by the repeated laments over their loss in IOL Khot S.13 and the attempts by the ambassadors to acquire replacements, even donkeys as a last resort, in P2031-P2788.

But animals and supplies were not enough, and the envoys and princes also needed clothes, gifts, and diplomatic letters for their mission to be successful. Suitable clothes were essential, indeed document IOL Khot S.6 appears to give rules for what sort of clothing and animals the envoys should use.⁵³

51 Arakawa, *Silk Road trade and traders*; Wen, *Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*.

52 For translations, see Kumamoto, *Two Khotanese fragments*; Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 508-514.

53 Skjærvø, *Khotanese Manuscripts*, 485.

Furthermore, the envoys and princes carried gifts, both to placate the rulers they met along their route and also to please the rulers to whom they had been sent. As shown by IOL Khot S.13, these gifts were clearly expected, for a rumour had spread in Shazhou that the princes still carried large amounts of jade despite their poor condition. Indeed, without such gifts and accompanying letters, the missions would not be successful, as the princes themselves lament in the final part of the letter, saying: »How (can) we then come to Shuofang, since we have neither gift nor letter for the Chinese king?«

Yet above all, all sources make clear that the diplomatic missions were reliant upon aid along the way. This could take the form of information sent by others further along the route, as seen above in the case of the monk Nāgendravardha, or escorts such as Chikā Gūlai and Dūṃ Saṃgalakāṃ, who had the local networks and the ability to negotiate their way. Finally, all travellers were reliant upon guides, as stated so forcefully by Begrek Atṭemä of Shazhou, and the lack of guides with knowledge of the routes ahead is a recurring problem in the three documents of the seven princes and other reports by envoys such as P2786.

The Interconnected Nature of Mobility

Documents such as IOL Khot S.13 or P2786 highlight a further important point when it comes to understanding mobility and movement in the southern Tarim Basin and its neighbouring regions in the 7th to 10th centuries CE – namely the interconnected nature of the various groups that moved. Take, for example, the mission in IOL Khot S.13. This group contained not only the seven princes, who were part pilgrims and part envoys, but also two ambassadors, their escorts, who were merchants, as well as three other merchants following along. Such mixed groups are in fact very commonly encountered in the sources from Inner Asia, and monks were often envoys, while envoys often conducted trades.⁵⁴ This close interconnection, especially between diplomatic and commercial activity, has prompted the idea of what has been termed »Tributary Trade«, which proposes that merchants pretended to be gift-bearing diplomats in order to get access to both counter-gifts and trade opportunities.⁵⁵ More current research, such as Xin Wen's monograph, has, however, sharply rejected such notions.⁵⁶ Instead, Wen (2023) and in particular Arakawa (2016) highlight the close relationship between official envoys, monks, and merchants, stressing how the latter two groups benefited immensely from the protection and infrastructure that could be accessed by travelling with envoys. Indeed, both authors argue that the diplomatic networks established by Inner Asian polities played crucial roles in underpinning other forms of mobility in the period from the 7th to the 10th century.⁵⁷

54 Illustrated repeatedly in Wen, *Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*.

55 See, for example, Yü, *Trade and Expansion*, chap. 6.

56 Wen, *Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*, 294.

57 Arakawa, *Silk Road trade and traders*, 43-44; Wen, *Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road*, 285-287.

But while it certainly is true that monks, merchants and other travellers would have benefitted from the activities of official missions, whether from travelling with them or from the infrastructure they engendered, such an explanation appears to miss half the picture. Documents such as IOL Khot S.13 and P2786 highlight that the embassies of the Khotanese king often had to rely on monks or merchants in order to be able to travel. This was especially true where merchants or monks had emigrated and formed diaspora communities from which local experts could be drawn. This was almost certainly the case with Chikā Gūlai and Dūṃ Saṃgalakāṃ in document IOL Khot S.13, who were both residents of Ganzhou, the final destination of the two envoys and an important step on the route of the seven princes. Similarly, in P2786, the ambassadors were receiving intelligence about the road ahead from monks who had passed along it before them, in this case Nāgendravardha, who himself relied on locally settled Khotanese monks for his information. The letters of Nāgendravardha were, furthermore, carried to the envoys in Shazhou by two Turkish merchants, Yangi Çor and Ttuva Çor, who were both from Ganzhou. Thus, while the mobility of monks and merchants was certainly facilitated by official missions, the monks and merchants in turn could be said to be crucial in facilitating the movement of envoys.

Even this, however, misses one crucial piece of the puzzle. For the fundament of all the forms of mobility in the southern Tarim Basin and adjacent regions in this period was the local networks, tying together the many oasis communities strung along the foothills of the mountains. These were maintained by acts such as the inspection and roadworks described in document Or.11344/3, or the provisioning of pack animals as described in document Or.11252/11. It was these networks, maintained on a very local level for very local reasons, that formed the basis upon which all other forms of mobility depended, and which facilitated the movement of merchants, monks, and envoys across the inhospitable terrain of Inner Asia.

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