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The New Old Mummies from Eastern Central Asia:  
Ancestors of the Tocharian Knights Depicted on the  
Buddhist Wallpaintings of Kucha and Turfan?  
Some Circumstantial Evidence

by  
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The New Old Mummies from Eastern Central Asia:  
Ancestors of the Tocharian Knights Depicted on the Buddhist Murals?  
Some Circumstantial Evidence

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Since the leading archeologist of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Wang Binghua of Ürümchi, and his Uyghur colleagues have discovered and excavated Bronze Age and Early Iron Age European-Caucasoid mummies at Qizilchoqa near Qumul (Hami) and other parts of the region starting in 1978, these mummies came to the attention of Prof. Dr. Victor Mair of the University of Pennsylvania. Two decades have passed since that time, but at the beginning of the nineties Prof. Mair initiated a major, cooperative research project centering on the mummies and their culture. As a result, an international group of scholars is now working on these sensational finds. Already it is clear that larger parts of the early history of China, of the ancient Silk Roads, and even of Eurasia have to be written completely anew. At the present moment, it is not certain what this new picture of Eurasia's early history / prehistory will look like. For this reason, many scholars and students of archeology and history met at the University of Pennsylvania for an international congress (April 19th - 21st, 1996) to discuss the results of their studies.

For the mass media all over the world, the fact that Europeans of prehistoric times had been found in western China was a sensation. For scholars in the field of archeology and Indo-European philology, however, a much older question once more came back to their minds. This was the question of the so-called Tocharians, or better, those people of European appearance on the Buddhist murals of the Kucha area in the former "Eastern Turkistan", dating to the 5th-7th centuries CE. These murals had been found by the "Königlich Preussische Turfan-Expeditionen" before the First World War. Together with the murals in the Buddhist cave-temples had been found manuscripts in many scripts and languages.<sup>1</sup> Most intriguing of all was the thitherto completely unknown Tocharian language, an Indo-European language of the Centum group, written in the Indian Brahmi-script.<sup>2</sup> It shows connections to the western group of languages of this type, for example Celtic, Germanic, and Hittite. But the precise relationships among these languages and with the rest of the Indo-European language family is a question for linguists to solve.

The European-Caucasoid mummies of Qizilchoqa and other sites in Eastern Central Asia that have been excavated up to now are a little bit over one hundred in number. According

to Prof. Mair, many more could be excavated. He supposes that some of the mummies of Qizilchoqa and adjacent areas around the Turfan and Tarim basins, which date -- according to modern methods -- to a time between 1800 BCE and 300 CE, are the ancestors of the knights on the murals of the Buddhist caves at Qizil (in the Kucha area), discovered by the German Turfan-expeditions. So at least there is a gap between the youngest mummies and the knights on the murals of approximately another 300 years. But the circumstantial evidence in support of Prof. Mair's assumption is extremely persuasive.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the fact that the deceased people, or better the mummies, are of European-Caucasoid race or stock, their grave goods also show indications of being connected to prehistoric cultures in western and northern Europe. Certain elements related to the mummies can also be found in tombs of the older northern Bronze Age of Denmark; other elements may be found in the eastern Hallstatt-circle of the early Iron Age of Europe.<sup>4</sup> First of all, there are the techniques of textile production. The clothes some of the mummies wear are so remarkably made in the same way as those from the Bronze Age and Iron Age of Europe that the linkage between them is evident. Pointed, elongated caps are worn by many of the deceased people from various ancient burials in Eastern Central Asia. We not only know comparable caps from the so-called Saka Tigrakhauda (=Sakas with elongated caps) of the Old Persian cuneiform texts and the reliefs at the Apadana of Persepolis, but also from Siberia, such as from Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains and from the Issyk kurgan of the 6th/5th century BCE. In Europe we have such a cap from a salt mine in the Hallstatt area, from the so-called Kilb-mine.<sup>5</sup> If one bears in mind how few photographs of the mummies from Eastern Central Asia have been published and made available to the scholarly world up to now, even these few photos show strong affinities between the ancient Eastern Central Asian materials and the later murals on the walls of the Buddhist cave temples of the Kucha / Qizil-area and around Turfan.

Admittedly, between the youngest mummies and the Tocharian knights is at least a 300 to 600 year time-gap. But, if we suppose that the mummies and the Tocharian donors are indeed related to each other, not only in their Indo-European origin but also in the origins of their technical and material culture, it seems possible that there was also an evolution concerning their material life, for example, their clothes. We have, for instance, the grave of an old lady who wears, besides a striking elongated cap, a coat of leather and fur. The long skirt is ornamented with alternating rows of red, green, and blue color. The shoes or boots worn by the mummies and their later followers, the donors of Kucha, are also related to each other. For the time of the donors on the murals, we know that a very good quality of ammoniac (ammonium chloride) was found to the north of Kucha, which enabled the Tocharians of that area to produce extremely fine leatherwork, or better, tannery crafts. This craftsmanship seems to have derived from a very old tradition.<sup>6,7</sup> In his final paper at the

conference on the mummies of Eastern Central Asia, Prof. Mair told the audience that the now famous "Chärchän-man", whom he affectionately calls "Ur-David", wears boots made out of whitish stag-leather. One of the pious Buddhist donors in the so-called "Sechszehnschwertträgerhöhle" from Qizil wears such boots.

It is interesting to note that up to now few, if any, weapons have been found in the earlier graves of Eastern Central Asia. Archeologists are always trying to discern from the way people buried their deceased relatives something about their religion. If the fact of no weapons in the graves says something about religion, one could assume that the deceased people from prehistoric Eastern Central Asia had a very peaceful religion. On the other hand, we have the much later Buddhist donors from the murals: here every man wears a longsword and a dagger. So even the peaceful Buddhist surroundings do not imply that there was always peace. Also, the Chinese sources tell another tale. Kucha was very well known for its weapon industry. This affinity for weapons may have arisen only after the time that they became Buddhists, because they needed to strengthen themselves so that they could defend their Buddhist faith and their economy, especially the silk trade. That their ancestors did not have weapons in their graves leads one to think that they had no real human enemies. Maybe this is also one reason why these European-Caucasoid ancestors of the Tocharians could easily be won for Buddhism: perhaps there was a peaceful "pagan" foundation for this peaceful religion.

But let us return to the weapons of the donors on the Kucha murals. Soon after the discovery and the study of the murals, Prof. von Le Coq saw relationships between some of the longswords of the 6th/7th-century CE murals and some form of Hallstatt swords.<sup>8</sup> This may very well be true. Very often we see mushroom-shaped sword-pommels on the swords of the murals. In grave No. 573 from Hallstatt (Lower Austria), we have a longsword with a length of 1.15 meter. Its pommel is decorated with ivory and amber inlays. Its structural form is very close to the form of sword-pommels on the Buddhist murals of Qizil.<sup>9</sup> A few years later, W. Ginters, a Baltic archeologist, saw the same relationships.<sup>10</sup> A definite answer how these sword-forms are connected to each other is not possible at the moment. Perhaps these swords derived from a single archaic form; in other words, the people of Kucha may have retained the ancient form and did not develop their swords since coming from an old homeland somewhere in the west. The daggers of the Kucha donors show strong Sassanian influence; they derived from the so-called Iranian Akinakes. But the Tocharian longswords do not. Or perhaps they derive from a common form which comes from the zone of contact between the Hallstatt Culture and the Scythian world. This seems to be quite probable, for an Alanian or Sarmatian longsword from the Black Sea of Southern Russia with a greenish mushroom-

shaped pommel, now in the British Museum, may be considered a transitional type belonging to the intervening steppe.

As soon as possible, many more graveyards and settlements of the pre-Tocharians should be excavated. Only then can detailed studies follow immediately and the cultural ties between the European-Caucasoid people of the Tarim Basin and other, more western, prehistoric cultures will become clearer.

It is extremely interesting to compare the materials from Eastern Central Asia with material from graves of the older Nordic Bronze Age of Jutland (Denmark). Of course, it is not only the dating of the material which is comparable, but it is also the point of view of the conservation of the material that makes a comparison so very interesting. The similar appearance of the textiles in both complexes is more than obvious. Folke Bergman, the Swedish archeologist of Dr. Sven Hedin's expedition to the area of Lop Nor,<sup>11</sup> excavated several graves in this region, for example the grave of an old woman who was also completely mummified by the dryness of the climate. The old woman has been named the Qum Darya Lady. The Qum Darya Lady wore a skirt made of woolen strings comparable to that of the Lady from Egtved (Jutland, Denmark).

The mummies found by Folke Bergman in the 1920s were said to date approximately to a time roughly around the few centuries before and after the beginning of the Common Era (4th-3rd c. BCE to 2nd c. CE). We may note that most of the "new" mummies (i.e., newly discovered since the late 70s) are older by several hundred to nearly two thousand years. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the "new" mummies are of European-Caucasoid stock; it is not until after the beginning of the Common Era that mummies of Mongoloid stock begin to show up in the archeological record in significant numbers. This is particularly true the farther west one goes beyond Qumul (Hami).

Some more relationships to Europe's prehistory and especially to the older Bronze Age of Denmark can be shown. In Jutland the deceased people were buried in coffins made of fresh oak wood, or better oak trunks. In addition to the acidic oaken coffins, the tumulus/barrow and the burial itself were protected by a special layer of earth from further decay. This layer stopped water from infiltrating the burials directly. Thus, the bodies were protected against decomposition. It is an open question whether the people who constructed these tumuli knew the results of this type of construction for the enhanced preservation of the corpses buried in them, but it appears that they were aware of the effects.

In Qizilchoqa and in the Lop Nor area the burials were protected from water by always having the graves situated on terraces above the water-level of the rivers and streams nearby. At Chärchän, ditches were carefully dug around the bottom of the tomb to carry off any water that might collect there and other precautions were taken to keep the main occupant of the tomb

dry (even underneath his body -- air was made to circulate below his body by the manner in which it was placed). Furthermore, the mummies of Lop Nor are buried in coffins made of complete trunks of trees, here poplar-trees (oaks were obviously not available to the people of the dry Tarim Basin). Maybe in both complexes, in Denmark and in the Tarim Basin, the tree-trunk coffins were meant to be small boats; boats to carry the deceased to the land of the dead?

These comparisons must be enough for the moment, because one needs much more material and data than have been available up to now in order to be able to draw more reliable conclusions.

What I would like to add are some other finds which show clear evidence for prehistoric East-West contacts. I would like to recall the finds of clearly identified Chinese silk from the Hallstatt tumulus of Hochmichele County in Saugau (grave No. VI) (southwest Germany) and from the graves at the Kerameikos of Athens; both complexes date to the 6th century BCE, when the Chou Dynasty ruled China.<sup>12</sup> I also would like to add the newly excavated green-colored dish of glass from a woman's grave at Ihringen near Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany). According to R. Dehn,<sup>13</sup> the origin of this vessel seems to be Achaemenid Persia. The woman's grave of Ihringen is also dated to the Hallstatt Culture.

An old theory gains new material, namely, that the Silk Roads had an earlier, pre-Roman background. For example A. Herrmann and later H. W. Haussig, but also others like F. Altheim, have argued in favor of this early stage for a beginning of the Silk Roads.<sup>14, 15</sup> So the Issedonians of Pliny could be the people in the graves of the Tarim Basin. The latest Eurasian-Caucasoid mummies of Eastern Central Asia date to the 3rd-5th centuries CE. According to legend, the Indian emperor Ashoka (273-232 BCE) sent Buddhist missionaries to Kucha. An account in the Chinese dynastic histories records that a water jar from Kucha with a Buddhist inscription had been brought to China in 109 BCE. This would mean that European-Caucasoids, quite likely the ancestors of the historical Tocharians, were resident in the northeastern part of the Tarim Basin when Buddhists first arrived in Kucha.

Last, but not least, I would like to direct the reader's attention to some details on one of the Buddhist murals from the cave temple complexes of Qizil and Qumtura and Kucha during the 6th-7th century CE. Several Tocharian knights or aristocrats of Kucha are shown playing the role of the Malla kings after Buddha's death.<sup>16</sup> They are depicted as fighting in order to get parts of Buddha's ashes after his cremation (Fig. 1). All these knights more or less wear costumes and weapons of Sassanian style. From Chinese sources, we know that Kucha was an important place for weapon industry,<sup>17</sup> thus Chinese interest in the region was sometimes brought into question. However, four of the knights wear helmets of a late antique / early medieval type, called by their German name "Spangenhelme". It would appear that this type of helmet has its origin somewhere in the world of the Iranian east. On top of the helmets of

these four knights in particular, we can see different animals. In all four cases the animals' legs come together at one point, so that it looks as if the animals stand on only one small spot on top of the helmets.

Helmets of this Spangenhelm type have been found at archeological sites in Iran and in early medieval graves (so-called "Adelsgräber") of the Dark Ages of Europe (6th-7th centuries CE). But such small animal statuettes have never been found on top of this type of helmet. However, comparable "flagtops", in the form of animals, have been found in Siberia and in the Ordos region.<sup>18</sup> There is no doubt that these bronze statuettes are to be dated at least to the 6th-5th century BCE.

It is a question now how a painter of the 6th-7th centuries CE in Qizil could know of such archaic signs or symbols. Perhaps the four different animals were clan-symbols; clan-symbols from the time of the Tocharian wandering? Was there a living memory among the Buddhist Tocharians that they had a long history, a history of their wandering from west to east? Until now, we cannot answer this question definitively. But we are today only at the beginning of research about the mummies from the Tarim Basin. New answers will be found, but also new questions will arise and only through international cooperation will we find answers for these questions. Such questions are certainly worth posing. Answering them will require more concerted investigations by specialists from a number of fields.

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6. See note 3, p. 33, the Chärchän man.



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17. See note 7, p. 18, 3: Handwerk: concerning the weapon-industry.
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Ulf Jäger, "The New Old Mummies from Eastern Central Asia: Ancestors of the Tocharians?"  
*Sino-Platonic Papers*, 84 (October, 1998)

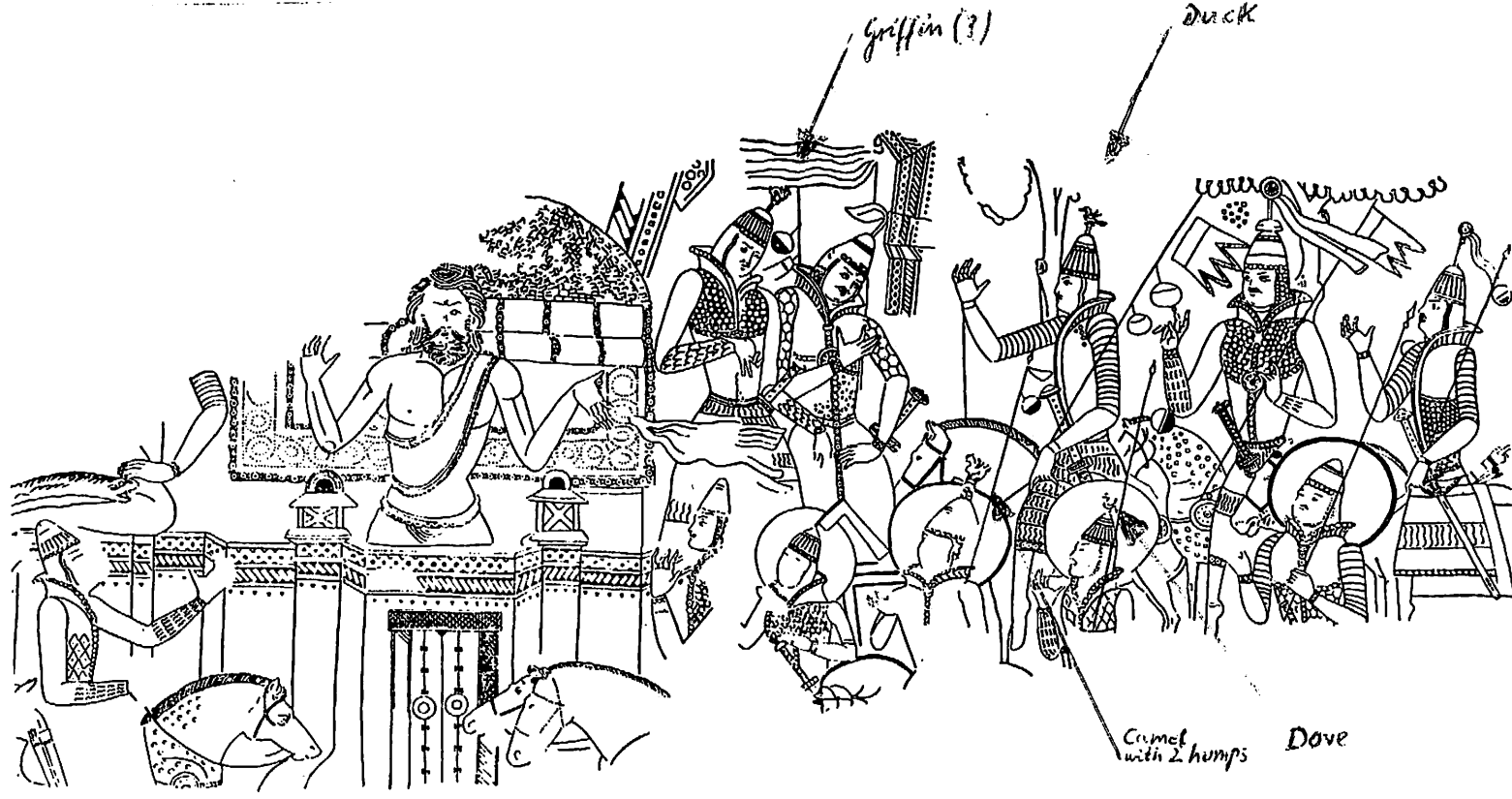


Fig. 1. Archaic helmet tops in the form of animals on the Buddhist murals of Qizil, "Cave of the Painter" (6th-7th c. CE). Noble Tocharian knights playing the role of the Malla kings after the death of Sakyamuni. Source: Albert von Le Coq, *Bilderatlas zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Mittelasiens*. Berlin, 1925, p. 54, fig. 50.

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*Sino-Platonic Papers*, 84 (October, 1998)



Color Plate: Four Tocharian Knight-Donors. From the "Cave of the Sixteen Sword Bearers",  
Qizil, 600-650 CE. Courtesy of the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin.

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