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# Review of *Asie centrale 300–850. Des routes et des royaumes*, by Étienne de la Vaissière

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# Review of
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Reviewed by Victor H. Mair

University of Pennsylvania

Étienne de la Vaissière,

*Asie centrale 300–850. Des routes et des royaumes.*

Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2024

648 pp., illustrations.

This hefty volume is a remarkable achievement. It manages to be compact and concise – a very neat and handsome package indeed – while yet containing an enormous amount of information and erudition. The author is truly a *maître d'études sogdiennes*, which is an admirable vocation in and of itself, but he is much more besides, since he also commands deep knowledge of Eurasia of the early medieval period, a formative era in world history and a time fraught with tremendous political, economic, and religious complexities.

When Étienne de la Vaissière began his formal career around the turn of the twenty-first century, the Sogdians were little known, but now – as academic wits are wont to say – the Sogdians are everywhere. This is the great and overarching achievement of the author himself: he has put the Sogdians at the center stage of Asian history, and he has done so through assiduous labors, both in combing through written works (ancient and modern) and conducting research in the field (in archeological expeditions and contemporary surveys). Readers of *Asie centrale* can rest assured that

they are in the hands of a superbly capable scholar who will inform them authoritatively about the political, social, economic, religious, and cultural history of Central Asia during the medieval period. The rich assortment of topics covered in the table of contents shows that he has paid attention to small details (e.g., local affairs and personal records) as well as big ideas (e.g., structures of control and globalization).

The Sogdians were a Middle Iranian people who were, above all, peddlers and merchants, yet their impact through such seemingly mundane activities was enormous. The Iranian peoples were the often overlooked and unseen *Kulturvermittlers* ("culture brokers") of Eurasia. Among the Iranians, the Sogdians were at the heart of their contributions to world history spatially and temporally. Of course, the Scythians ranged more widely, both in time and in space, and the Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian empires and their dynastic successors operated on a grander imperial scale, but for sheer concentrated influence on human affairs, as the accumulated effect of the author's profound researches shows, it is the Sogdians who merit our most serious attention.

The Sogdians, as a distinct cultural group, eventually became extinct, primarily due to the rise of Persian-speaking Muslim cultures and the Arab conquest of Central Asia starting in the seventh century AD, which led to their assimilation and adoption of the Persian language. While the Sogdian language is now extinct, a surviving form exists in the Yaghnobi language (spoken by an Eastern Iranian people residing in Tajikistan's Sughd province), and their descendants are largely incorporated into the modern Tajik ethnic group.

Rather than deliver a conventional review of *Asie centrale* (henceforth AC), where I summarize and critique its *matières*, I will concentrate on highlighting a number of special features of the book, of which there are many, that set it apart from usual scholarly volumes. The treasures of this book are so great that it would be futile even to attempt to summarize the contents. Instead, I will focus on some unusual aspects of the book that others may overlook because they are not necessarily evident to all readers, yet they are distinctive and important. Through these exceptional characteristics the author conveys essential data about Central Asia and its denizens: the unique qualities are a part of AC's charm, but they are also essential for imparting its wisdom. Étienne de la Vaissière (henceforth LV) is a witty individual who delights in making light and lively what might, in a more sober, somber author's hands, seem ponderous.

First to be noticed here is the most conspicuous feature of AC: its large number of illustrations (135) and maps (48), all in color when that is called for.

The emphasis on visual presentation is an important element of the author's mission to educate his readers. So striking are many of the illustrations that the lessons they teach tend to stick with the reader longer than if they were only presented verbally. Here I give as an example the very first illustration in the book (p. 30). This is a full-page reproduction of a painting from Dunhuang that depicts Śāriputra and Vaiśravaṇa, two important figures in early Buddhism, carrying out the drainage of the alluvial fan at Khotan, a key oasis in the southwest quadrant of the Tarim Basin (in the middle of Eastern Central Asia [ECA]). The utilization of water is a major theme in AC, so this painting suitably sets the tone for the author's focus on irrigation and its allied topic of agriculture. (Cf. Trombert, *Glaive*.)

In contrast, Ill. 2 (p. 34), is a hand-drawn map of 1935 by the Swedish archeologist Folke Bergman of the area around Lop Nur, showing the desiccation of the lakes, rivers, and streams. In the center of the map is located "Ördeks nekropol," from which was unearthed the beautiful female mummy whom I call the "Marlene Dietrich of the Desert" and more than a hundred other Europoid Bronze Age mummies.[1]

Among other noteworthy illustrations that serve to set AC apart from typical histories of Central Asia are the two paintings from Qizil on pp. 416–17. Ill. 101 is an elaborate wall-painting that shows King Ajātaśatru (ca. fifth c. BC), who is bathing in a large pottery urn full of ghee (to assuage his grief), being shown a canvas containing drawings of the four main events of the Buddha's life: Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon, and Nirvana. The King is being informed of the Buddha's death, but in the context of his role as a transcendent being. Ill. 102 shows the Buddha painting his self-portrait for a king, who has requested it so that he can distribute it in his country, to spread the dharma. These are powerful images concerning the Buddha, but they seldom appear even in Buddhological treatises.

These illustrations also have strong implications for how Buddhism was transmitted to Central Asia and beyond to take root in foreign lands outside the South Asia region in which it originated. Namely, storytelling with pictures was extremely effective in implanting Buddhist narratives, and thereby

1 Victor H. Mair, "The Rediscovery and Complete Excavation [2000–2005] of Ördek's Necropolis," *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 34 (2006), 273–318.

doctrines, in converts' minds.[2] LV is also one of the rare general historians who pay attention to the role of vernacular language in the transmission of Buddhism to the populace of the lands where it was introduced (pp. 413–16).

Buddhism came to Central Asia in two large waves. The first, commencing in the mid-fourth century, arrived through Gandhara in what is present-day northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, then circum-Tarim to Dunhuang at the head of the Gansu Corridor. The second wave spread via Bactria (south of the Oxus River [modern Amu Darya] and north of the Hindu Kush). A subsequent sphere of the second wave emanated from Khotanese, Sogdian, and Tocharian Buddhist establishments in the Tarim Basin northeastward in a broad swath across the steppes to the Mongolian Plateau. (See pp. 358 ff. and Map 41 on p. 359.) LV rightly speaks of a "rediffusion" of Buddhism from China westward to Central Asia.

The mention of Tocharian just above reminds me to observe that we would do well to distinguish clearly the Indo-European people and language of that name from Tocharistan, to which LV devotes ample coverage in his text and maps. The former refers to the second oldest (after the Hittites) group of Indo-European speakers, who in medieval times were settled in the Tarim Basin (particularly in Kucha and Agni). (Cf. Mallory and Mair; Pinault.) The latter is a historical term used in Islamic sources of the early Middle Ages and designates the area called Bactria in Ancient Greek sources, whose occupants were a mixture of ethnicities under the overlordship of the Hephthalites and later the First Turkic Khaganate. (Golden)

The transmission of Buddhist sects, from Sarvastivadin to Mahayana, is delineated on pp. 370–74 and in Map 43. It was inextricably intertwined with this tangle of peoples who dwelt in the lands between South Asia and Central Asia.

The author's treatment of the religious dimensions of medieval Central Asian history is excellent, the discussion, not limited just to Buddhism, including ancient Iranian religion, Manicheism, Mazdaism, Christianity, Judaism, and shamanism. The author describes the art, precepts, and practices of these religions, but also how they were integrated into the political, economic, and daily life of the people.

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2 Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), plate IV and passim.

One facet of the author's exposition of religious expansion that I have not seen brought out so explicitly elsewhere is his demonstration of how Nestorian Christianity and Manicheism spread in tandem (north)eastward from Mesopotamia through the Abbasid Empire to the Karluks, Kirgiz, Uyghurs, and the Tang (p. 496 and Map 48).

The symbiotic relationship of Sogdians and Turks emphasized by LV is beautifully exemplified in Ill. 46 (p. 264), on the cover, and elsewhere in the volume. To comprehend the economic and political success of the Sogdians, it is essential to understand how they relied on the military prowess of the Turks. LV does a good job of explaining the dynamics of the two peoples. Occasionally, though, he tips the balance in favor of the Sogdians. For example, Ill. 6 (p. 71) shows a general removing an arrow from a battle horse, depicted on a stone relief of one of Taizong's (598–649) six steeds. LV's caption states that this is a Sogdian horse, but it is more likely a Turkic horse, as Taizong's other noble steeds supposedly were as well. We even know the name of this horse – Saluzi 飒露紫 ("Autumn Dew"). The horse is also associated with Turkic "Isbara," itself a derivation from Sanskrit "Īśvara" ("prince; ruler, lord"), though more research needs to be done on the origins and names of Taizong's six noble steeds. LV pays due regard to the rebel An Lushan (703–757), whose father was Sogdian and mother was Göktürk, and whose rebellion (755–763) so weakened the Tang that it led to the ultimate demise of the dynasty.

On a personal note, I am grateful to LV for publishing the transcendent photograph (Ill. 38, p. 210) of Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) kneeling in Cave 17 at the Mogao Grottos reading the Dunhuang manuscripts *in situ*. Pelliot was 30 years old when he was at Dunhuang, eight years younger than when I knelt in that same spot.

Another meaningful photograph is that of the Rawak Stupa, explored by the British-Hungarian archeologist Aurel Stein when he visited the site in 1901. The stupa is 25 miles out into the desert north of Khotan (southwest quadrant of the Tarim Basin). LV's photograph is from an unusual angle that I did not see when I was there a century after Stein. It gives a good idea of the large rectangular wall surrounding the stupa, at the base of which Stein found a considerable number of colossal Buddhist statues. Relying on local records and on-site investigations, LV tells us about Khotan and other sites in Central Asia from an emic perspective, when we all too often have to be content with the etic approach of Chinese accounts.

LV also includes photographs of sites that would have been impossible for Stein and Pelliot to manage, viz., by drone (Ill. 78, p. 348; tomb of Gendenbulak [but I could not find out anything about this presumably Old Turkic person]) and from satellite (Ill. 14, p. 110; Chateau Kafir Kala ["Fortress of the Infidels"]).

Next in value to the copious illustrations are the many ingenious maps in AC that complement LV's proper attention to the crucial role of geography in the history of Central Asia. In fact, cartography in some sense is the key to the historical development of all Asia. This is brought to the fore in another unique feature of AC: short, pithy coda-like closing sections or epilogues of the main chapters (of which there are eighteen). One, in particular, at the very middle of the book (pp. 315–16), is entitled "Une cartographie." In toto, it amounts to one page in length. Significantly and appropriately, this "cartography" begins with a map. The map is not large, but it is pregnant with meaning. This "Carte 40" spans the whole of Asia from peninsular Anatolia (< Greek Ἀνατολή [*Anatolḗ*], meaning "the East") to the Shāndōng 山東 ("East of the [Tàiháng 太行 {Great File / Row}] Mountains") Peninsula.[3] At the center of this expanse is a large circle consisting of four concentric rings that represents the heartland of the Sogdians, viz., Sogdiana, around Samarkand. Radiating outward from that central circle are lines of various colors connecting to smaller circles, some consisting of two or three concentric rings. These represent Sogdian trading colonies or outposts far flung east and west, with probes northward and southward. And what happens in this great region in which the Sogdians circulated? LV describes, in brief compass, the dynamics of the interaction among nomadic and sedentary people – always with an eye to trade, the raison d'être of the Sogdians.

The long-distance noble marriage networks of the Sogdians are graphically depicted in Map 36, p. 258, with linkages extending outward from Samarkand to Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia and Chang'an at

3 Proof positive that Central Asians (including most probably Sogdians) were present in Shandong during the Early Middle Ages may be found in painted figures on the robe of the statue of a Universal Buddha at Longxing Temple 龍興寺 in Qingzhou 青州, Shandong. These Central Asian figures were recently (around 2015) discovered and are known only to a few Buddhist art historians, so it is a gift from LV to make them known to the scholarly world at large. Just across the provincial border in Jiangsu is Lianyungang, where Kongwang Mountain 孔望山 is located. Here we find some of the earliest Buddhist sculpture (including transitional Buddho-Daoist art) in China, including pieces that possess Central Asian traits.

the bend of the Yellow River, and many other places where Sogdian communities had established themselves.

It was not easy to maintain these long-distance trade and marriage networks. For example, it took sixty days to travel the 1,460 miles from Chang'an, the Tang capital at the bend of the Yellow River, to Gaochang (also referred to as Khocho, Karakhoja, Qara-hoja, Kara-Khoja, or Karahoja, also known as Chotscho, Qocho or Qočo), one of the main trading nodes on the Silk Road, in the Turpan Basin.

LV's dedication to cartography is displayed on a larger scale by the two stunning fold-out maps on the inside of the front and back covers. The one in front covers the area roughly from Kashgar westward to the Caspian Sea, and the one in back covers the area roughly from Kashgar eastward to Lanzhou (at the eastern end of the Gansu Corridor). These are topographical maps showing in crisp color the mountains, valleys, deserts, steppes, and bodies of water. Above all, what stands out are the dark green oases that dot the land (this is likewise true of many of the other maps in the book). It must have taken the author an enormous amount of effort to locate and designate these crucial components of the landscape, and the work is abundantly worthwhile because they tell us so much about human life and livelihood. It is oases that enable people to plant crops and carry out commerce in the midst of arid, otherwise inhospitable tracts of the earth. Oases are human creations that, through different types of irrigation, wed water to terra firma. Hydrologie über alles!

Place names on the maps and in the text are given not in Chinese transcriptions (as is all too often the case nowadays), unless they really are Chinese, but in Iranian, Turkic, Indic, and so forth. This is fitting, since the people who inhabited these regions spoke these languages, not Chinese.

Some reviewers might complain that AC lacks (foot)notes. Here I would beg to disagree, since LV puts a vast amount of data into what he calls "coulisses" (in twenty-five double-columned pages of fine print [pp. 511–36]). These give "backstage" or "behind the scenes" information about various matters covered in the main text, allowing the author to afford more nuanced treatment for problems and issues that may have arisen in the initial description of the subject. In the coulisses, we also find quotations of texts in Sinographic and Arabic scripts and plentiful references to relevant scholarly publications as well as attention to philological and phonological questions. Of the hundreds of notes in the coulisses, the penultimate one is about the mysterious Radhanites (Jewish merchants), who maintained trade networks throughout Asia, especially between Christendom and the Muslim world, during the eighth–

tenth centuries. See also pp. 498–99, where LV helps to clarify who they were, including their roots in Babylon.

The final note of the coulisses is about the even more mysterious Gog and Magog, enemies of God's people who are mentioned in biblical prophecy (e.g., in the Book of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation). They represent the immense forces that will attack God's chosen in a conclusive battle for the land of Israel. In the many conflicting legends about Mog and Magog, there is one in which Alexander the Great pushes northeastward into Siberia and walls them off from civilization. That situation is portrayed in the last illustration (no. 125) of CA, also a map (!),[4] which shows Alexander's defensive wall, with massive stones and battlements, positioned toward the northeast, to keep the hordes of Gog and Magog beyond the pale.

Aside from all the fascinating, valuable information provided by the author in his erudite coulisses, LV is also generous with his bibliographical resources, with more than a thousand well-chosen entries on thirty-one double-columned pages of fine print (pp. 551–82). If I were to suggest one additional item for inclusion, it would be Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization*, revised 2nd edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

After the coulisses come the annexes: chronology (from ca. 300 [destruction of sedentary Khwarazm / Chorasmia]–848 [end of Tibetan control of Dunhuang]; pp. 539–44), glossary (pp. 545–50 [invaluable]), bibliography (see the preceding paragraph), index of names (pp. 583–601), thematic index (pp. 603–22), list of maps and illustrations (pp. 623–29), and table of contents (pp. 631–38).

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