The languages of the Silk Road

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The Silk Route(s)

The Main Routes Across Eurasia

- Silk Road
- Ancient site

After Hansen 2011
Cose bisognevole a mercatanti che vogliono fare il sopradetto viaggio del Gattaio

Primieramente conviene che si lasci crescere la barba grande e non si rada. E vuolsi fornire alla Tana di turcimanni, e non si vuole guardare a rispiarmo dal cattivo al buono, chè il buono non costa quello d’ingordo che l’uomo non — s’ene megliorì via più; e oltre a’ turcimanni si conviene menare per lo meno due fanti buoni che sappiano bene la lingua cumanesca. E se il mercatante vuole menare dalla Tana niuna femmina con seco, si puote, e se non la vuole menare non fa forza, ma pure se la menasse sarà tenuto di migliore condizione che se non la menasse, e
Written records of language contact

RECOVERING HISTORY FROM RECYCLED PAPER
The needle marks and shape of this document indicate that it was part of a funerary garment, possibly a shirt, buried in a Turfan graveyard. The text records testimony given by an Iranian merchant before a Chinese court. This section of the document begins in the upper right-hand corner with the name of the merchant, Cao Lushan, and his age, thirty. Xinjiang Museum.
Written records of language contact

EAST MEETS WEST ON A KCHAROSHTHI DOCUMENT
This wooden document from Niya survives intact: the upper drawer has been slotted into the lower holder, and cords have been wrapped around both pieces of wood through notches and then sealed with clay. The seal on the left is in Chinese; that on the right shows a Western-looking face, most likely a Greek or Roman deity, which are often shown on Gandharan seals. These double rectangular tablets record the exchange between two parties of various types of property—slaves, livestock, and land—and give the names of the officials who recorded the transaction.
Dunhuang

After Hansen 2011
Dunhuang

**LANGUAGES**

1. Arabic
2. Avestan
3. Chinese (Chinese and ‘phags-pa scripts)
4. Kothanese
5. Gāndharī
6. Greek
7. Judeo-Persian (Hebrew script)
8. Khitan ("large Khitan" script)
9. Mongolian
10. Parthian
11. Persian (middle and modern)
12. Sanskrit
13. Syriac (*Maḏnḥāyā* script)
14. Sogdian
15. Tangut
16. Tibetan
17. Tokharian A
18. Tokharian B
19. Tumshuqese
20. Turkish (Kok script)
22. Unidentified languages
Dunhuang
Sino-Tibetan phylum

- Chinese
- Tibetan
- Zhang-zhung
Brahmi family of scripts

- North Brahmi
  - Gupta (320-550 AD)
    - Siddham (500 AD)
    - Tibetan (600 AD)
      - Nagari (1000 AD)
      - Japanese Kana (806 AD)
    - Devanagari
    - Bengali
  - Devanagari

- South Brahmi
  - Grantha (400 AD)
    - Tamil
    - Malayam
    - Sinhala
      - Burmese
      - SE Asian Scripts
  - Kannada
  - Telegu

- Brahmi (500 BC)
Languages belonging to other *phyla*

- Tangut (Tibeto-Burman)
- Xiong-un’s language (Proto-siberian?)
A page of the manuscript of the *Suvarnaprabhasottamaraja Sutra* (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. AD)
Altaic languages
Altaic languages

- Mongolian
- Khitan
- Manchu
- Turkic languages
Orkhon Turkic inscriptions
Orkhon Turkic inscriptions
Orkhon Turkic inscriptions

Consonants with back vowels:

Consonants with front vowels:

Other consonants:

Vowels:

- ø/ü
- o/u
- y/i
- a/ä

Symbols:

- D Y H C I J K L T
- q/q q/q
- D Y H C I J K L T
- k g d b
- ñ/nj nč z ř n/ng/ŋ m p ě/či č yq/qy
- bâš ot/ut ld
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>a/e</th>
<th>w/w</th>
<th>o/u</th>
<th>ö/ü</th>
<th>z</th>
<th>ž</th>
<th>x</th>
<th>q</th>
<th>y/y</th>
<th>ḱ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Latin | k/g | d | m | n | b/p | č | r | s | š | št | l |

### Uyghur script

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Medial</th>
<th>Final</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

The Uyghur script is a script used to write the Uyghur language. It is a variant of the Perso-Arabic script and is used in Xinjiang, China, and historically in Central Asia.
Kucha and Turfan regions
Indian languages and scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semitic Value</th>
<th>Phoenician</th>
<th>Aramaic</th>
<th>Indic Value</th>
<th>Kharosthi</th>
<th>Brāhmī</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>ק</td>
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<td>a</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Indian languages and scripts

Map 1
Extent Of Kharosthi Script

Shaded areas indicate the approximate regions where Kharosthi was in general use. Points inside shaded areas mark major Kharosthi sites; those outside the shaded areas indicate isolated finds of Kharosthi inscriptions or documents.
Indian languages and scripts

Coinage of the Indo-Greek kingdoms: Apollodotus I
Spread of the *kharoṣṭhī* script

**DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE ON THE SILK ROAD**

This wooden document represented an entirely new writing technology that migrants from northern Afghanistan and Pakistan introduced around 200 CE to the residents of northwest China, who had no writing system of their own. Using two pieces of wood, they crafted a base (shown here) with a top that slid over it like a drawer and protected the contents. These wooden documents written in the Kharoshthi script of their homeland, which include contracts, royal orders, letters, and rulings in legal disputes, make it possible to reconstruct this early encounter of people from radically different backgrounds. The upside-down label gives the date and name of the site, Niya, where the wooden slip was found. Courtesy of the Board of the British Library.
Iranian languages

• EASTERN LANGUAGES:
  - Sogdian, Khwarezmian
  - Bactrian, Khotanese and Tumsuq
  - Sarmatian, Alanic

• MIDDLE LANGUAGES:
  - Parthian
  - Middle Persian
Sogdian

After Hansen 2011
Sogdian manuscript of the Avesta, 10th c. AD
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>initial</th>
<th>medial</th>
<th>final</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a, e</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>γ, x, q</td>
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<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td>w, u, ū, o, ō</td>
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<tr>
<td>δ, θ</td>
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<tr>
<td>ĕ, ğ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>h (final)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bactrian: inscription from Rabātak
Kushan empire according to the Rabātak inscription
Bactrian: Dasht-i Duwar I

1. ΣΟΘ Γορπιώιου ε

2. Ραονανο Ραο ι αζαδο
   King of Kings, the noble,

3. οαζοβο Οομο Τακπισο
   great Ooemo Takpiso,

4. κοθανο ι μανοξινιγο ι λαδο-
   the Kuśāṇa protégé of the moon [god], the right-

5. γο ι βαγο οζολαδο ειδο
   cous, the Majesty had this prepared,

6. χοζογαρνο αβο ζαχφαο
   he, the benefactor for the welfare.
Parthian

Naqsh-e Rajab bas-relief, Fars, Irán (Sasanid period, 3rd c. AD)
Trilingual inscription in Parthian, Persian and Greek
Parthian
Parthian
Languages spoken in the western part of the Silk Road

- Greek
- (Latin)
- Semitic languages:
  - Aramaic and Syriac,
  - Arabic,
  - Palmyrene, Nabataean, etc.