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Ethnicity Mobility and Status – Textiles from the Taklamakan Desert

Helen Persson

The Taklamakan Desert in the Tarim Basin is now within the boundaries of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. Taklamakan is one of the largest sandy deserts in the world and covers an area of 270,000 km². It is bounded by Kunlun Mountains to the south, Pamir Mountains and Tian Shan to the west and north. Life-giving water from the mountains forms rivers and lakes and hence creating lush oasis on the borders of the desert. Neolithic stone tools show that humans have long been present in the area. Branches of trade routes, later known as the Silk Road – although there were several – ran along the edges of the desert utilising the oasis as resting points and trading sites

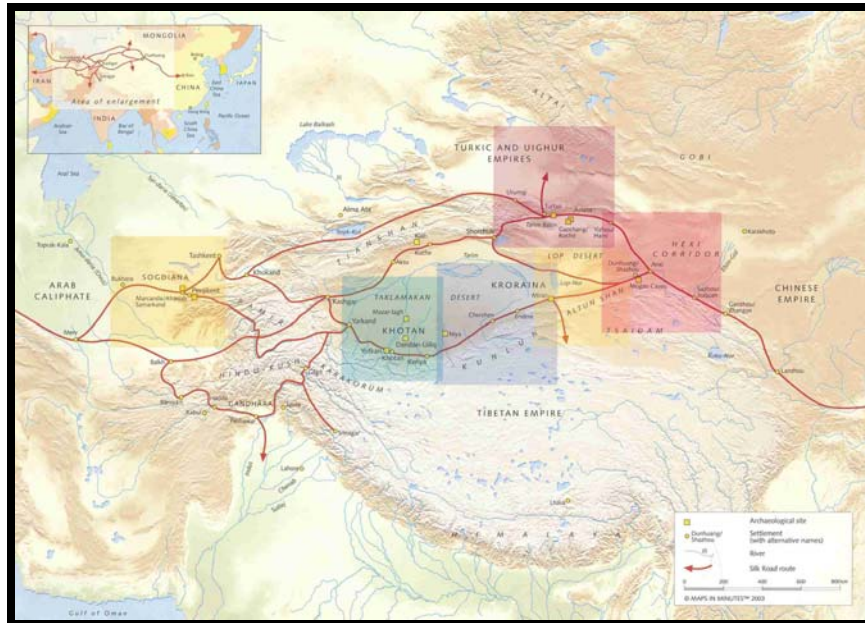


Figure 1. Map of the Eastern Silk Road, with permission from the British Library/ International Dunhuang Project.

The East Asian section at the V&A Museum is acting as custodian for nearly 600 textile fragments; all recovered from the chain of abandoned oasis settlements in the Tarim Basin. They were brought back from three long expeditions by Hungarian born British archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943) during 1900 -1916. These significant textiles, dating from 200 BCE to 1200 CE, came to the Museum in three instalments (1923, 1932 and 1933) and are on loan from the Government of India. The collection comprises plain woven silks in a rich array of colours, pattern woven silks, embroidery, and wool in all qualities, plant fibres, leather, fur and grass.

Stein visited the area of Loulan, west of the dried-up salt lake Lop-nor, twice in 1906 and 1913. Loulan was once an important town on the Loulan branch of the southern Silk Road and one of the 36 city-states of the Tarim Basin. The city-state was a large complex comprising many archaeological sites: dwellings, administrative quarters, refuse heaps, Buddhist stupa and shrines, and burial area. Loulan is the Chinese interpretation of the indigenous name of this kingdom

which was Kroraina in Indian Karoshti. The first time Loulan is mentioned in Chinese records refer to its conquest by the Xiongnu in 176 BCE.¹ A Chinese military expedition was dispatched to Loulan and in 109 BCE the local king was forced to pay tribute to China. About CE 260 the Chinese founded a military station and named it Loulan Station.² However, it is likely that this was the main centre even before the arrival of the Chinese.

The documents discovered imply that the peak of the station was between CE 260-270, and the last dated document, CE 313, suggest the end date.³ When the water supply to the region dried up by the first half of the fourth century it made life impossible and the site was deserted. Stein's expeditions revealed mainly sturdy wool and felts, coarse cottons and leather. At first glance, the textiles are of a more utilitarian and practical purposes as warm, functional clothing were needed in the cold winters. However, several scraps of plain woven silks were also found



*Figure 2. LOAN:STEIN.87, assortment of plain woven silks.
On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images.*

The apparent lack of luxury textiles, such as pattern woven silks is probably due to being expensive textiles; residents took the precious silks with them when moving. Imports from the eastern part of the Roman Empire were discovered in form of glass beads and sherds from glass vessels.

Stein identified one of the ruined buildings as the Chinese administrative headquarters by the impressive size of the rooms and the large number of Chinese documents of general official

¹ Vivi Sylwan, *Woollen textiles of the Lou-Lan people: The Sino-Swedish Expedition Publication 15* (Stockholm: Bokförlags Aktiebolaget Thule, 1941), 14

² Folke Bergman, *Archaeological researches in Sinkiang: The Sino-Swedish Expedition Publication 7* (Stockholm: Bokförlags Aktiebolaget Thule, 1939), 44ff

³ Aurel Stein, *Serindia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921, 407ff.

character.⁴ However, the remains of decorative wood-carvings of the house show close resemblance to architectural features of western influence. Furthermore, the textile finds appear not to be much different from textiles found in other ruined dwellings within the station, such as two other buildings suggested by Stein to be residences of non-Chinese officials belonging to the indigenous administration of Loulan. He bases his conclusion on the finds of records in Kharosthi being nearly as numerous as Chinese.⁵ Notably, bolts of plain woven yellow silk were uncovered. Cloth such as plain woven silk served as a medium of exchange and as standard currency. Every household in the Han Empire, 206 BCE – CE 22, was liable for taxes in grain, cloth and yarn.⁶ It seems therefore appropriate that it was found in a house of a probable official. He might have been the tax collector of the Loulan residents, or the silk bolt could have been his payment from the Han government as a foreign official. This could possibly be supported by the finds of knotted woollen fragments.



Figure 3. LOAN:STEIN.540, carpet fragments. On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images).

Carpets and rugs are mentioned in 3rd to the 4th century documents as given in payment or part-payment for a wide variety of wares, from women to camels.⁷ Finds of wooden weft beaters linked with pile making or tapestry weaving undoubtedly show that these types of textiles were produced locally. The symmetrical closed knot, or the Ghiordes knot, has generally been used in the making of the ancient pile carpets. Today, the Persian knot is used almost exclusively in

⁴ Stein, *Serindia*, 376.

⁵ Stein, *Serindia*, 372ff.

⁶ Francesca Bray, "Textile Production and Gender roles in China, 1000-1700", *Chinese Science* 12:1995, 119.

⁷ Helen Wang, catalogue entry in *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, ed. S Whitfield; London: The British Library, 2004, 149.
the Xinjiang region.

the Xinjiang region. Other woollen fragments worth mentioning are the patterned wools, such as *taquete* which is a weft-faced compound plain weave.



*Figure 4. LOAN:STEIN.229, wool taquete with rosette design.
On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images.*

This weave might have been an imitation of *jin* silk, a warp-faced compound silk produced in China. A similar taquete fragment has recently been found in the Yingpan cemetery, about 200 kilometres to the east of Loulan. Some scholars suggest that these types of woollen weaves were made in the Western Regions along the Silk Road, most probably in Bactria or Gandhara.⁸



Figure 5. LOAN:STEIN.597, fragment of tapestry woven wool.

⁸ Zhao Feng, "The Evolution of Textiles along the Silk Road", *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, ed. J C Y Watt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 71.

On Loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images.

Additionally, Stein discovered in a large rubbish heap fragments of tapestry woven wools, a technique that do not yet seem to be utilised in China. The first true silk tapestry is found in Astana tombs, dated around CE 687.

Stein also discovered in the refuse pit the only silk within the living area of Loulan, showing small-scale classic Han period patterning of cloud scrolls.



*Figure 6. LOAN:STEIN.231, small fragment of patterned silk.
On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images).*

Recent dye analysis revealed that the red dye contained only purpurin and no alizarin which suggests that something other than usual madder was used. The only known species today that contain purpurin, but no alizarin, are of *Relbunium* from South America and similar plants might therefore once have grown in south-western Xinjiang.⁹

The site called L.C. by Stein is an elevated mesa located 6.9 km to the northeast of Loulan city. The terrace is composed of salt-impregnated clay and holds several burials.

The grave pits contained the mixed remains collected from earlier graves, where they had undoubtedly been exposed by wind-erosion and therefore had been re-buried in mass-graves.¹⁰ Older graves were probably positioned on top of younger, which makes the finds difficult to date.

⁹ My deepest thanks to Professor Richard A Laursen and Xian Zhang at the Boston University, USA.

¹⁰ Aurel Stein, *Innermost Asia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia, Kan-su and Eastern Iran* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 226ff.

The grave goods were for daily needs as valuable finery, such as ornamented bronze mirrors, wooden combs, eating utensils, lacquerware, *wuzhu* coins and the like, many artefacts typical of the Han imperial culture of the East Asian heartland. However, wooden trays or miniature tables common in central China as grave finds seem to have been used by the living in Loulan, judging from the knife cuts¹¹, indicating that the people was not familiar with the original use of the tables, or life in the desert simply necessitated use.

It is in the burial ground where several of the famous Han period silks were discovered. The polychrome warp-faced compound plain weave comprise designs in brilliant colours of mountain-shaped clouds, birds, dragons and other menacing looking creatures and woven Chinese characters integrated with the other motifs. They are probably the most important group of Han silks with a style so different from any other contemporary silk groups. The woven characters are dedicatory or of auspicious nature and consist generally of about four to twelve characters.¹²

One of the pieces in the Stein collection is comparable to a recent find, now in the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology, showing birds and beasts and with the characters of eternal prosperity.



Figure 7. LOAN:STEIN.630, small fragment of characteristic patterned silk from Han dynasty. On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images.

¹¹ Bergman, 120ff.

¹² Krishna Riboud, "China's Buried Past", *Hali* (no 34, 1987), 39.

Another fragment from the same grave appears to come from a different silk bolt and display the character of ten thousand. The character of longevity is woven into another silk piece.



Figure 8. LOAN:STEIN.209, patterned Han period silk. On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images.

A length of the characteristic Han period silk is in a private collection, reportedly also from the Loulan grave pits, has been radio carbon dated to 155 BCE – CE 83. The date is much earlier than the documents found within the station (about CE 260-320). It is possible that the graves belong to a period prior to the Chinese presence, but precious silks can have been in rotation for a long time before being buried.



Figure 9. LOAN:STEIN.647, fragment of carpet with hook motif. On loan from the Government of India, © V&A Images.

One of the knotted wool fragments in the Stein collection from the Loulan grave pits has a radio carbon date of 170 BCE – CE 60¹³, a similar date span to the privately owned Han silk. Maybe this is indeed pointing to an earlier date for the burials. However, some of the carpet fragments show signs of wear, so the textiles might already have been old when put in the grave. The carpets found in tombs may have served as coverlets on which the dead were laid or as wrapping the bodies.

Other Han silks similar to the Lop-nor finds and have been recovered archaeologically in high-status burials in China, which is no surprise, but also to the far west and north. These silks were all discovered in a context of what appears to be elite members of their society: at the Oglachty burial ground in southern Siberia, Noin-ula in present-day Mongolian People's Republic and at Palmyra in what is today Syria.¹⁴

Most of these polychrome textiles carrying inscriptions were produced in modern Sichuan province which was the main centre of creative silk production of the Han period.¹⁵ They were created and manufactured in the Imperial workshops for predominant use within the Chinese Empire by the nobility.¹⁶ In Xinjiang, these silks used to decorate borders, sleeves and hems of woollen garments. The silks were sartorial trappings of power. The discoveries of Han period silks outside the Chinese mainland suggest that they were circulated over a large area, far from the Empire and their original intended area of consumption. And judging by the limited use as trimmings, it is also likely that only small amounts were distributed to foreign rulers and officials.

To conclude, looking exclusively at the textile finds from the Loulan sites do not reveal the whole story. The finds from the walled station are mainly practical wools, of a more homespun nature which show uniformity with similar types of fabric found across all the lost oasis sites in the Tarim Basin. However, the imperial silks from the grave pits dominate the archaeological records, but also researcher's interest and a picture of a rich community are put forward. Precious materials have been included in important burials. No complete garment has yet been recovered from the Loulan grave pits but discoveries in other burial sites suggest that a certain type of garment dominated in the region. This style of caftan was well cut with tight sleeves cut separately and seamed in, usually with sleeve and side gores. It was made of wool or cotton, often with silk edgings. This type of clothing represents a predominantly male garment that originated in the Eurasian steppe world and became exceedingly popular in Central Asia. However, sometimes the lapels were closing on the proper right as in Chinese fashion.¹⁷ It seems like the garments were of nomad origin, but with influences from Chinese clothing.

The finds of writings, both materials and forms, are for the most part of Chinese origin, dealing with business, administrative and political issues. Further west in the Niya region, the finds are

¹³ My deepest thanks to Göran Possnert, University of Uppsala, Sweden.

¹⁴ Evgeny Lubo-Lesnichenko, "Concerning the Chronology and Ornamentation of Han period textiles", *Orientalia* (vol. 26, no .5, May 1995), 62ff.

¹⁵ Lesnichenko, 62ff.

¹⁶ Riboud, 33-41.

¹⁷ Emma C Bunker, "Late Antique motifs on a textile from Xinjian reveal startling burial beliefs", *Orientalia* (Hong Kong, vol. 35, part 4, 2004), 35.

reverse - more Indian.¹⁸ However, the architecture, like ornamental wood-carvings appear to conform to the practice of the Indo-Hellenistic 'Gandhara' of the Niya region and the west.

It is reasonable to suggest that the interests and business was mainly Chinese and there seem to have been merely individual trading parties or occasional officials, but in general the government and administration was probably native.

Furthermore, a large craniology study took place in 1998 when 300 skulls from Xinjiang dated to 1800 BCE to CE 300 was analysed. The study suggests that in early Bronze Age the area of Lop-nor was approached from the west by a population similar to that of Central Asia, Southern Siberia and the Volga Basin up to the Don region.¹⁹ The Chinese silks might have been part of the tributary system devised by the Han court to pacify the peoples living on China's borders. The Chinese annals record that much silk and occasional princesses were exchanged with the nomads²⁰ which might explain why so many similar fragments of silk have been found in many different sites. The imperial silks found in the burials of the Taklamakan and beyond are testimonies to expanding allegiances and kinship and directly related to prosperity and hierarchical status. The mixture of Chinese (mirrors, coins, silk), Indian (Karashti documents), Western (architecture, wools) and Near Eastern (glass) objects offer a glimpse of the rich cultural melting pot of Central Asia during the first millennium.

¹⁸ F W Thomas, "The early population of Lou-lan – Shan shan", *The Journal of Greater India Society* (vol. XI, no. 2, 1944), 48.

¹⁹ E E Kuzmina, *The Prehistory of the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 91f.

²⁰ Elizabeth Barber, "Fashioned from Fiber", *Along the Silk Road*, ed. E T Grotenhuis (Washington DC: Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 57.