

Wine on the Northern Silk Road in Pre-Islamic Times:

*An Iranian, in other words, Sogdian import (to China) between the fourth
and the eighth centuries AD?*

ULF JÄGER¹

The title of this paper implies that the ancient Sogdians brought viniculture and wine-drinking to the Silk Road countries between modern Xinjiang and Northern China in the period between the later Han Dynasty in the third, and the Tang Dynasty in the seventh / eighth centuries AD, and that the Sogdians were the people who had the greatest influence on wine-drinking.

The Sogdians, an Eastern Iranian ethnic group with a Middle Iranian language, originally came from the region that earlier in the twentieth century was called Western Turkestan. Nowadays it is part of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Sogdians and their homelands already crop up in Chinese sources during the Han Dynasty in the third / second century BC as Kangju 康居. They never built up a larger empire for themselves, but lived in smaller, also larger and often fortified cities under local aristocrats, and mainly accepted the rule of stronger powers, such as that of the Hephtalites, the White Huns and the Western Turkish Khaganat, accordingly paying tribute to these stronger powers. The Sogdians were originally believers of a branch of the Zoroastrian faith, but were also early believers of Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity. In their time they were renowned for their flourishing agriculture and also for their craftsmanship in silk production and toreutic metalwork, especially in silver. The Sogdian script, derived from Aramaic script, provided the basis for the script of the Uyghurs. Most famously of all, the Sogdians advanced to become merchants and diplomats, active on an international scale between the Crimea and China at the latest roughly between the fourth and the eighth centuries AD. Furthermore, they acted as early translators of Buddhist texts in the small city-

¹ Gronau-Epe / Westphalia, Germany.

states of the Tarim Basin of modern Xinjiang². It would be impossible here to sum up all the archaeological discoveries and their interpretations concerning the Sogdians in China made within the last 20 years³ in the above-mentioned regions, and beyond the scope of our interest.

Production and consumption of alcoholic beverages started with agriculture in the Old World, at the latest possibly in the ninth millennium BC; in his paper, Patrick McGovern provides an in-depth introduction and describes the difficulties pertaining to research in this complicated field.

“Beer comes with bread” as Edward Schafer simply says when writing about alcoholic beverages in his famous book *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand. A Study of T’ang Exotics* of 1963⁴.

But making wine from grapes, whether white or red, needs more than this, much more. Grapes need to be cultivated under optimal climatic and geological conditions; making wines of high quality was and is an art in itself.

In this essay I cannot and do not wish to relate the history of wine and viticulture in Iran and neighbouring countries from the Neolithic age to Islamization, especially in connection with Iran and Sogdiana. Colleagues far more specialised than I have presented papers relating to wine in Iran, i.e. Persia.

Many facts speak in favour of a developed viticulture in the Near and Middle East, especially under the influence of the Iranian-speaking people, which doesn’t mean that other, non-Iranian peoples didn’t play important roles in this development.

It was Berthold Laufer in 1919 who, working with Chinese sources, first tried to answer to the question of when China learned about the grapevine

² Mariko Namba Walter, Sogdians and Buddhism, Sino-Platonic Papers No. 174, November 2006, Victor H. Mair (ed.), Philadelphia. (Philadelphia 2006); Boris A. Litvinsky, Die Geschichte des Buddhismus in Ostturkestan; Studies in Oriental Religions 44, Walter Heissig and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (eds.), (Wiesbaden 1999).

³ Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner (eds.), Monks and Merchants. Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia, 4th to 7th Century, Exhibition-Catalogue of the Asia Society New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and the Asia Society (New York 2001); Etienne de la Vaissiere, Histoire des Marchands Sogdiens, Bibliotheque de L’Institute des Hautes Chinoises, Vol. XXXII, (Paris 2002); both books with rich, extensive bibliographies concerning ‘The Sogdians’.

⁴ Edward Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand. A Study of T’ang Exotics*, University of California Press, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1963), chapter IX: Foods, see: grapes and grape vine, pp. 141–145.

and its cultivation.⁵ We know for sure that it was Zhang Qian 张骞, the great traveller of the early Han Dynasty, who during the era of Emperor Wudi 武帝 (141–87 BC) brought back grape seeds to be planted in the capital for early cultivation. The seeds for these grapes seem to have originated in a country west of Ferghana, i.e. Sogdia. As far as we know, the forthcoming grapes were yellow, white and ‘black’ (dark, i.e. ‘blue’) in colour and mainly used for eating. In the era of Emperor Cao Pi 曹丕 of the Wei Dynasty (222–264 AD), one of the Three Kingdoms following the later Han Dynasty, this emperor paid an early tribute to wine, again obviously from Sogdia (or made by Sogdians?), by saying: “They (the grapes) can also be used to brew wine, which is sweeter than brewed from ale. One can get goodly drunk from it, but easily recover.”⁶

In the fifth century AD, we again hear of grape wine, this time from Dunhuang 敦煌 (Gansu Province)⁷. This is interesting not only because Dunhuang was far away westwards from the Chinese capital, but was also an early location of a Sogdian colony and mentioned in the early fourth century AD in the well known “Sogdian Ancient Letters”⁸.

It is interesting that wine in China, which is to say grape wine, is strongly linked to people from Kangju, i.e. Sogdia, especially during the period between the Han and the Tang Dynasties, in the time around 250 BC to the

⁵ Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran, with special reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products*, Field Museum of Natural History, Publication 201, Anthropological Series, Vol. 15, no. 3, (Chicago 1919).

⁶ David R. Knechtges, Gradually entering the Realm of Delight: Food and Drink in Medieval China, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (April–June) 1997, pp. 229–239, p. 238.

⁷ T’ao Hung-ling, *PTKM*, 33, 20b (after footnote 23/Schafer/chapter IX)

⁸ Sir Marc Aurel Stein, *Serindia*, 5 vols, (Oxford 1921), see vol. IV, pp. 671–677 and plates CLVII–CLIV; W.B. Henning, The Date of the Sogdian Ancient Letters, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XII, 3–4, 1948, pp.601–615; Nicholas Sims-Williams (with an introduction by Daniel C. Waugh), *The Sogdian Ancient Letters* 1, 2, 3 and 5, see: www.depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/sogdlet.html; Frantz Grenet and Nicholas Sims-Williams, *The Historical Context of the Sogdian Ancient Letters, Transition Periods in Iranian History*, *Actes du Symposium de Fribourg-en-Brisgau* (22–24. May 1985), (Leuven 1987), pp. 101–122; Nicholas Sims-Williams, *The Sogdian Merchants in China and India*, in: Alfredo Cadonna and Lionell Lanciotti (eds.), *Cina e Iran da Alessandro Magno alla Dinastia Tang*, *Orientalia Venetiana* Vol. V, (Florence 1996), pp. 45–67; Nicholas Sims-Williams, 8. Sogdian Ancient Letter II, in: Julianio and Lerner (eds.), *Monks and Merchants*, (New York 2001), pp. 47–49.

eighth century AD. It was Wolfram Eberhard who in 1941 analyzed Chinese sources mentioning the contacts to Central Asian and West Asiatic people⁹.

In connection with grape wine, Eberhard refers not only to the people of Sogdian culture, but also groups of people from Khotan (his so-called “Khotan-Völker”) in the south-west of the Tarim Basin, as well as the Yuezhi 月氏 of Bactria, which is more or less equivalent to modern Afghanistan and NW Pakistan. Today, modern scholarship connects these Yuezhi with the Kushans and their ancestors.¹⁰

Dating the rulers of the Great Kushans cannot be analysed in detail here; the author still follows Robert Göbl of Vienna in this question.¹¹

The Yuezhi, formerly nomads, soon became the ruling power of Bactria but took over many elements of the Hellenised, Greek culture of Bactria. This brings up the question of how, when, and if, grapes and grape-vine and viniculture reached Central Asia with and after Alexander the Great’s conquests in the fourth century BC. This is important if we recall that Alexander also conquered Sogdia, and took Roxane, the daughter of the Sogdian king Oxyartes, as his wife in 327 BC. In our context it is perforce of interest that the Greek sources mention the strong and dark grape wines of Bactria and Sogdia. I cannot pursue the history of viniculture in Central Asia during Hellenistic times when Greek and an older, East-Iranian viniculture meet – this is again beyond the scope of this survey.

W. Eberhard makes special mention of wine and viniculture for the following city-states of Central Asia:

Qiemo 且末 on the southern route of the Silk Road, from 550 AD onwards; Yanqi 焉耆/ Karashahr, on the northern route of the Silk Road in modern Xinjiang. He also mentions Yutian 于田/ Khotan, Anxi 安息, the country of the Parthians between the Kushans in the East and the Roman Empire in the West, Chi-pin 罽宾/ Gandhara, but especially Kangju / Sogdi-

⁹ Wolfram Eberhard, *Die Kultur der alten zentral- und westasiatischen Völker nach den chinesischen Quellen*, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 73, 1941, pp. 215–275.

¹⁰ Craig G. R. Benjamin, *The Yuezhi. Origin, Migration and the Conquest of Northern Bactria*, *Silk Road Studies XIV*, Brepols Publishers, (Turnhout 2007).

¹¹ Robert Göbl, *System und Chronologie der Münzprägung des Kusanreiches*, (Vienna 1984); Robert Göbl, Donum Burns, *Die Kusanmünzen im Münzkabinett Bern und die Chronologie*, (Vienna 1993); Robert Göbl, *The Rabatak Inscription and the date of Kanishka*, in: Michael Alam and Deborah Klimburg-Salter (eds.), *Coins, Art and Chronology, Essays on the pre-Islamic History of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands*, (Vienna 1999), pp. 151–177.

ana. The Sui-shu (Sui-shu 83 = p. 2535b: see Eberhard 1941, pp. 235–236) says that “they like to drink great quantities of grape wine”. The T’ang-shu (T’ang-shu T’Y’YI 793, 4a: see Eberhard 1941, pp. 230–231) again says that “they like to drink wine and they dance on the streets”. The Chin-shu (Chin-shu 97 = p. 1337b: see Eberhard 1941, pp. 230–231) says about Sogdia: “The country is warm and produces wheat, wine, sheep, cattle and good horses”. Some centuries previously, the Hou Han-shu (Hou Han-shu 118: see Eberhard 1941, p. 231) says: “The earth and the water (of Su-te / Sogdia) are very good, because of this their grape wine is marvellous and famous”. When speaking of K’ang-kuo – modern Samarkand – in the Sui-shu (Sui-shu 83 = p. 2535b: see Eberhard 1941, p. 233), it is mentioned that “the wine can be stored for a very long time”. For the region called Ta-yüan, that is, Bactria, more or less the area of Afghanistan, we hear: “They produce wine from grapes. Rich people very often have 10 000 Tan of wine and this wine gets older than 10 years. They love drinking.”

With regard to grapevine, we should include one more state on the northern route of the Silk Road, not mentioned specifically by W. Eberhard. It is the state of Kucha. Liu Mau-tsai referred to the viniculture in this state¹² in a detailed cultural study. The Chinese general Lü Guang 吕光, who conquered Kucha in 384 AD, found 10 000 bushels of wine in the cellars of the Kuchaeen houses and it happened quite often that his soldiers became completely drunk. Another time we hear that Zhiyue 直月, a master of the Buddhist Dhyana, forced a young Chinese Buddhist monk to drink 15 litres of Kuchaeen wine in order to abandon wine forever afterwards.¹³

It is interesting that we do not hear anything in this context of Sogdian influence on wine-production for Kucha. This could mean that at Kucha we encounter another, maybe autochthonous wine culture along the northern routes of the Silk Road in modern Xinjiang. There have never been any excavations hitherto within the cities of the Kucha Empire, so we cannot say anything about Kuchaeen viniculture, or, to be more precise, about the technical facilities of Kuchean wine cellars in detail. This archaeological situation also applies to the Sogdian cities in ancient Sogdia, in Gandhara and in the other city-states of modern Xinjiang along the ancient Silk Roads. The

¹² Liu Mau-tsai, *Kutscha und seine Beziehungen zu China vom 2. Jh. V. Chr. Bis zum 6. Jh. n. Chr.*, *Asiatische Forschungen* vol. 27 (in 2 vols.), (Wiesbaden 1969), pp. 10, 31, 66, 154, 162, 171, 179, 189, 190, 241.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 31, 66.

most we can do is analyse the Chinese sources for wine in connection with the Sogdians. Nicholas Sims-Williams is certain that the Sogdians were the prominent importers of viniculture into Late Antique and Early Medieval China¹⁴. Based on Berthold Laufer in his famous study of 1919¹⁵ and an article of Paul Pelliot of 1916¹⁶ as well as an article by Sir Harold Bailey of 1954,¹⁷ Sims-Williams once more reminds us of a Sogdian city in the Lop-Nor-region of south-eastern Xinjiang, with its Chinese name of ‘Putao cheng’ 葡萄城, i.e. ‘city of wine’.

According to E. Schafer after Tang historical sources,¹⁸ during the early Tang Dynasty of 647 AD we hear of a Turkish yabgu (tribal chief) who sent the first bunch of the large purple-coloured “mare teat grapes” to the Tang court as tribute. It would be interesting to know what kind of contact this Turkish yabgu had with Sogdians.¹⁹ Recent research has shown that the contacts between Sogdians and (Western) Turks were very intensive in Northern China in early medieval times²⁰. In 640, Qocho, nearby modern Turfan, was conquered by the Tang, and cuttings of the “mare teat” grapevine were brought to China and planted in the imperial park.²¹ Yet again, the relationship as regards wine between the Uyghurs of Qocho and the Sogdians would be of the greatest interest. That the Uyghurs were profoundly influenced by the Sogdians is a well known historical fact.²² The best and most famous

¹⁴ Nicholas Sims-Williams, *The Sogdian Merchants in China and India*, in: Alfredo Cadonna and Lionello Lanciotti (eds.), *Cina e Iran da Alessandro Magno alla Dinastia Tang*, *Orientalia Venetiana V*, (Florence 1996), pp. 45–66, see p. 61 and footnote 75, p. 61

¹⁵ See footnote 4

¹⁶ Paul Pelliot, *Le “Cha tcheou tou fou t’ou king” et la colonie sogdienne de la region du Lob Nor*, *Journales Asiatiques XI*, 1916, pp. 111–123, see p. 122.

¹⁷ Sir Harold Bailey, *Madu, a contribution to the history of wine*, *Toho Gakuho XXV*, 1, (Kyoto 1954), pp. 1–11.

¹⁸ See footnote 3, Schafer, *The Golden peaches of Samarkand*, p. 142 with footnote 27.

¹⁹ See Wolfgang Ekkehard Scharlipp, *Die frühen Türken in Zentralasien*, (Darmstadt 1992), pp. 31–34 and p. 39.

²⁰ See footnote 2, Judith A. Lerner, *The Merchant Empire of the Sogdians*, pp. 220–229, and, Luo Feng, *Sogdians in Northwest China*, pp. 238–269, in: Juliano and Lerner (eds.), *Monks and Merchants*, (New York 2001); Markus Mode, *Nomadische Türk und sinisierte Sogder begegnen einander in China*, on: www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/sfb586/c5/anjia.htm.

²¹ See footnote 3, Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, p. 142–143 with footnote 30.

²² Annemarie von Gabain, *Das Leben im uigurischen Königreich von Qoco (850–1250)*, *Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica Vol. 6*, two vols, (Wiesbaden 1973), vol. 1, pp. 24–25.

large grapes of China still come from Turfan today. It is not unlikely that the Uyghurs learned to make wine from the Sogdians, but there is no evidence whatsoever for this.

Looking for archaeological traces of the Sogdians and their viniculture is problematical. Recent archaeological finds relating the Sogdians in China have been published in the excellent New York catalogue of 2001, and supplemented in a special volume of the Miho Museum Shiragaki / Japan in 2004.²³ The reliefs of Sogdian funerary couches in Northern China show that large banquets and feasts were very important for the Sogdians. The consumption of alcoholic beverages like wine was normal during such feasts, also music-making and dancing (“on the streets”). Sogdian-style feasting and banqueting were also brought from Sogdiana to the small city-states of the Tarim Basin and to Northern China via the Silk Road. The wall paintings in buildings of Sogdian cities such as Balalyk-Tepe and Panjikent show us Sogdian banquets where guests hold drinking-vessels of different shapes – high beakers, cups with and without handle, ewers and rhyta. They were obviously made of silver. Which beverages were actually consumed from these silver-vessels is another question. All written sources, especially those in Chinese, speak of the wine-loving Sogdians. Hence, based only on the evidence of the written sources, i.e. ‘e silentio’, we can assume that the Sogdian banqueters on the wall paintings and reliefs drank grape wine. Boris I. Marshak was the scholar who studied Sogdian silver throughout his academic life.²⁴ Unfortunately, Sogdian or Sogdian-style silver vessels with Sogdian inscriptions never tell us about the beverages, they only indicate their weight and sometimes their owners’ names. The question of the beverages consumed from such vessels is incidental.²⁵ We have slightly better information

²³ Bulletin of the Miho Museum 3, 2004, summing up the symposium “Central Asians in China – discoveries in the east of the Silk Road” on November 23rd 2002, presented by and at the Miho Museum Shiragaki, with contributions by Rong Xinjing, The daily life in Sogdian colonies along the Silk Road, pp. 6–15, Boris I. Marshak, The Miho Couch and other Sino-Sogdian works of art of the second half of the 6th century, pp. 16–42, Valentina I. Raspopova, Life and Artistic Conventions in the reliefs of the Miho Couch, pp. 43–89, (Symposium) Central Asians in China – discoveries in the east of the Silk Road, pp. 90–107 and 18 plates.

²⁴ Boris I. Marshak, *Sogdiiskoe srebro*, Akademiya Nauk SSSR, (Moscow 1971); Boris I. Marshak, *Silberschätze des Orients. Metallkunst des 3.–13. Jahrhunderts und ihre Kontinuität*, VEB E.A. Seemann Verlag, (Leipzig 1986).

²⁵ Martha I. Carter, Preliminary Notes on a Silver-Gilt Ewer with Bird Medallions in a Private Collection, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 9, (Kamakura 2003), pp. 185–211, p.

about Sassanian Iran.²⁶ In the Zoroastrian religion of Iran, which was professed to a certain extent by the Sogdians, wine played a certain role in the rituals, for example in libation rites.²⁷

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

I think we have to concur with Etienne de la Vaissiere and also Jonathan Karam Skaff²⁸ when endeavouring to draw a vague history of the Sogdians and their influence on viniculture in the city-states of modern Xinjiang and Northern China from Late Antiquity to Early Medieval times, that is, between the fourth and the eighth centuries AD.²⁹

At the latest since the third, but certainly since the fourth century AD, Sogdians became the most prominent traders and diplomats on the Silk Roads to China. More and more Sogdian settlers also reached the small city-states of modern Xinjiang and Northern China. Russian archaeologists discovered that in the fifth century the settlements expanded in the vicinity of the main Sogdian cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and subsequently in the sixth and seventh centuries Sogdian urban architectural styles, and agricultural methods spread to the northeast of Shash (North-eastern Uzbekistan) and Semirechye (Northern Kyrgyzstan). Presumably the settlements in East Turkestan were another aspect of the same phenomenon, as population

186; Amy Heller, *The Silver Jug of the Lhasa Jokhang: Some Observations on silver objects and costumes from the Tibetan Empire (7th–9th century)*, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 9, (Kamakura 2003), pp. 213–237, p. 213.

²⁶ A.C. Gunter, *The Art of Eating and Drinking in Ancient Iran*, in: *Asian Art* 1, no.2, 1988, pp. 7–52; Richard Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World*, (Leiden 1972), p. 7.

²⁷ Guitty Azarpay, *Sasanian Art beyond the Persian World*, in: J. Curtis (ed.), *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Period, Rejection and revival, c. 238 BC to AD 642*. The British Museum, (London 2000), pp. 67–75, p. 74; Markus Mode, *Die Religion der Sogder im Spiegel ihrer Kunst*, pp. 141–218, in: Karl Jettmar and Ellen Kattner (eds.), *Die vorislamischen Religionen Mittelasiens*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, (Stuttgart 2003), pp. 165–166, 168 and 189.

²⁸ Jonathan Karam Skaff, *The Sogdian Trade Diaspora in East Turkestan during the seventh and eighth centuries*, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46, 4, 2003, pp. 475–524, see pp. 483–484, and: www.upf.edu/materials/huma/central/abast/sogdian.pdf.

²⁹ Etienne de la Vaissiere, *Histoire des Marchands Sogdiens*, (Paris 2002), pp. 109–130.

growth in established communities encouraged migration to new areas with opportunities in farming and trade. This scenario is supported by the evidence of the trade routes of Sogdian grapes and grapevine production on the way to China. Moreover, we should also keep in mind that the Muslim occupation of Sogdiana in the eighth century must have made it more and more difficult for Sogdian winemakers to produce wine in their homelands. Many of the Sogdian winemakers may have fled to regions in East Turkestan, such as Putao cheng near Loulan 楼兰, where the soil, the climate and also irrigation was excellent for wine-making.

If new finds substantiate this in the future, it would be no surprise that Sogdian silversmiths produced fine goblets, ewers and other wine-drinking-vessels, sometimes gilt, specifically for a growing market in and around the Tang-capital Changan 长安, with its international flair and love for exotica from the West, which of course includes grape vine.

