

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

Summer 2023 Texts-in-Translation Reading Group

## Beyond the Silk Roads

Considering the ancient and modern development of the so-called "Silk Roads," this reading group proposes an alternative view of global history with a particular focus on Central Asia. This region, despite being frequently overlooked in history textbooks, has played a significant role for thousands of years in the interactions and cultural exchanges between Europe, the Middle East, China, and India. During our sessions, participants will be invited to look beyond the caravans of traders normally associated with the "Silk Roads" and explore different forms of connectivity in ancient Central Asia. To this end, we will consider a variety of primary sources in translation that best illustrate the diverse human experiences involved in processes of globalization in the pre-modern world, from personal letters written by Sogdian merchants to the extraordinary Buddhist texts of Indo-Greek kings.

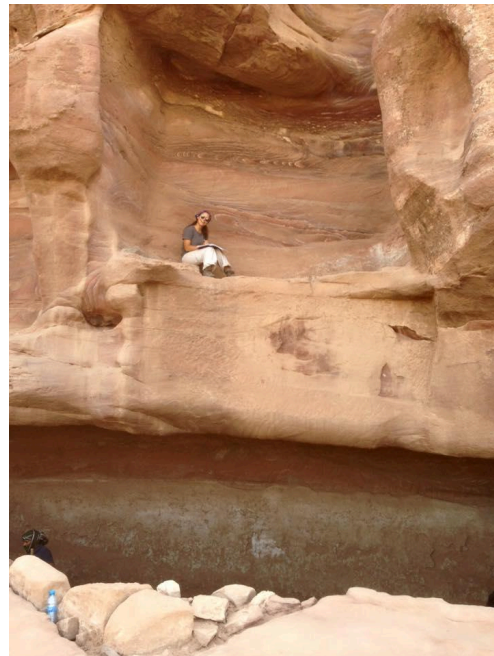
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[Session Recordings Playlist - Youtube \(Private\)](#) - please do not share outside of our reading group

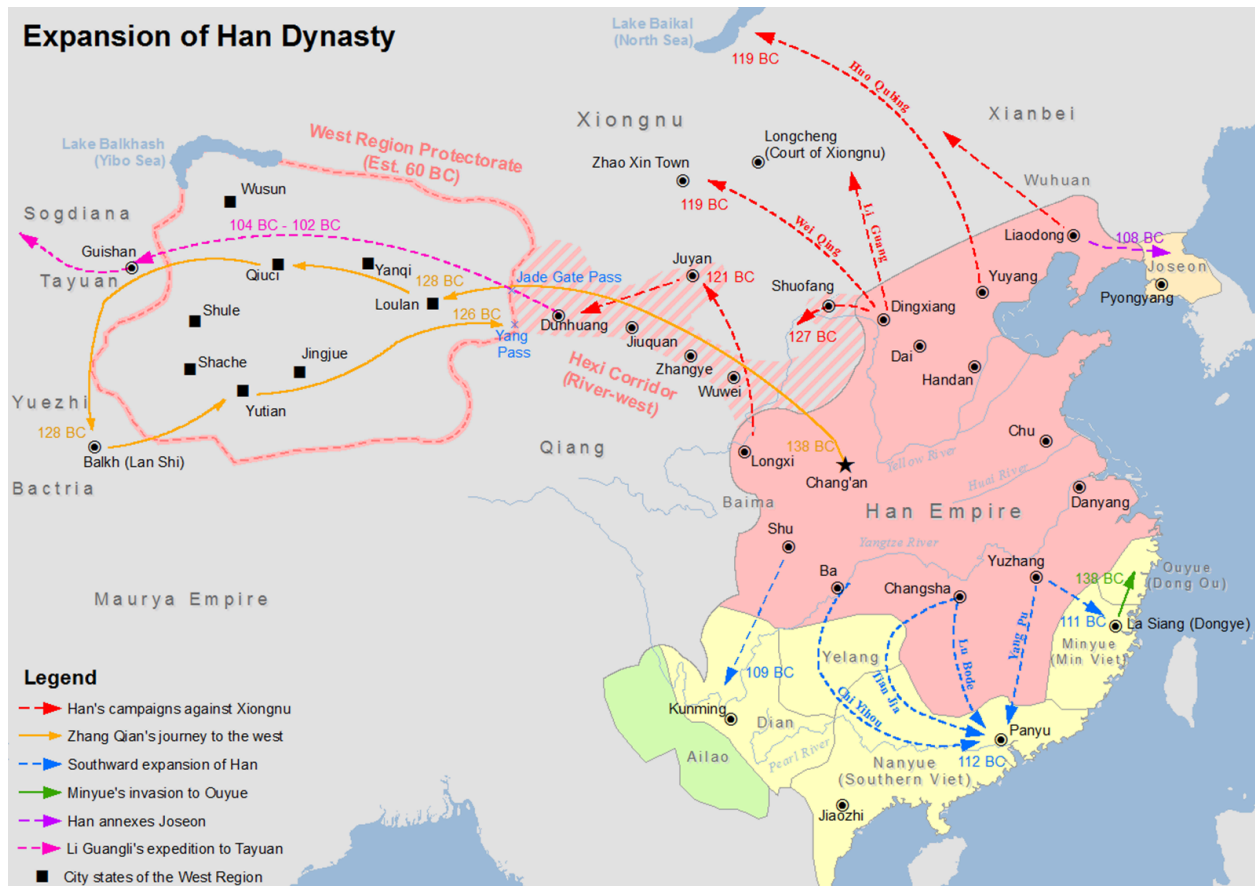
[Reading Group Folder Link](#)

## June 8th | Week 1: Intro - The "Opening of the Silk Roads"

[Shiji, chapter 123](#) ('The account of Dayuan'), translation from: Watson, B. 1993. *Records of the Grand Historian: Han dynasty II*, 264–289. New York: Columbia University Press. (If you are interested in comparing with the later record included in the *Hanshu*, see [here](#)).

C.f. [Zhang Qian](#)

1. Why does Emperor Han Wudi initially decide to send an envoy to the state of Yuezhi? What other motivations begin to transpire upon the return of the envoy?
2. According to the *Shiji*, what appears to have been the state of relations between China and the western regions prior of Zhang Qian's arrival? What are the stated and implied reasons for the state of communication between both regions?
3. What motivated Zhang Qian to embark on such journey? How might his motivations have shaped the information he brought back?
4. The embassy of Zhang Qian to the western regions is widely considered the "opening of the Silk Roads." What indications do you find in the text that could challenge this assumption?



## **June 15th | Week 2: Identity Networks - The Issue of Kushan Identity**

[Shiji, chapter 123](#) ('The account of Dayuan'), translation from: Watson, B. (1993). *Records of the Grand Historian: Han dynasty II*, 264–289. New York: Columbia University Press.

1. According to the Shiji, who are the Yuezhi?
2. Why does Emperor Han Wudi seek the help of the Yuezhi?
3. What is the difference between the Da Yuezhi (=Great Yuezhi) and the Yuezhi?
4. Upon arriving, how is Zhang Qian received by the Yuezhi prince? What is the response to his request?

[Hou Hanshu chapter 88 Section 13](#) ('The Kingdom of the Da Yuezhi'), translation from: Hill, J. E. (2003) *The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu*.

1. Who are the Da Yuezhi according to the Hou Hanshu? How does Hill identify them (in parenthesis)?
2. In the "Notes on the Text" section, Hill explains the chronology of the texts included in the Hou Hanshu. Do you find anything interesting in these dates?

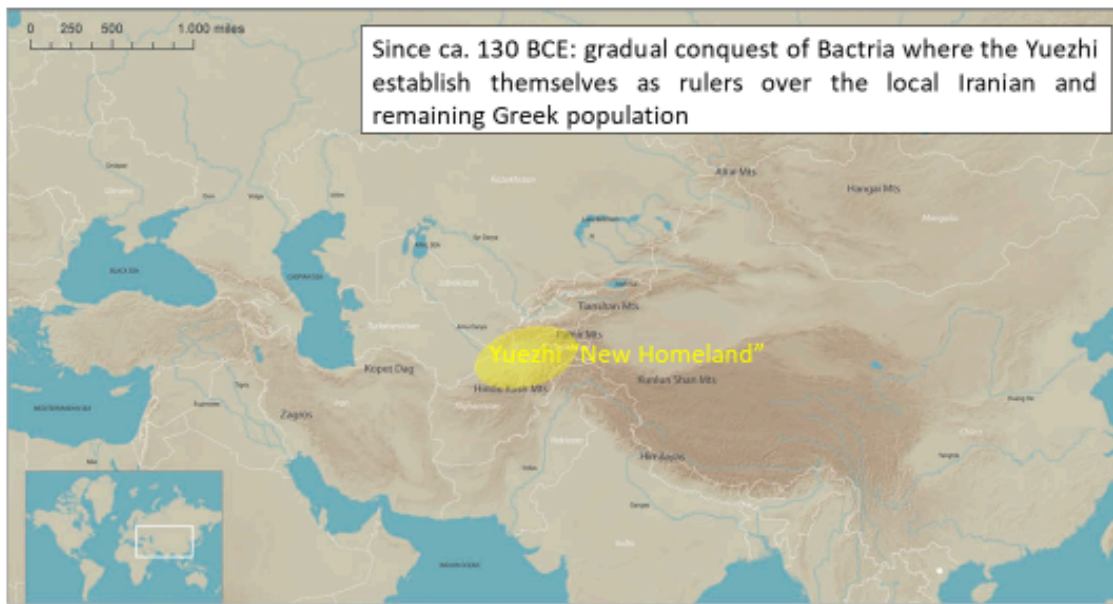
[The Rabatak Inscription](#), translation from: Sims-Williams, N. (2004). The Bactrian Inscription of Rabatak: A New Reading. *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 18, 53–68.

1. What type of source is the Rabatak inscription? What does it tell us about the genealogy of the Kushan Dynasty?
2. Do you notice any potentially relevant information missing in regard to the identity of these kings?

**General question:** How does the Chinese dynastic chronology for the Da Yuezhi compare with the Rabatak inscription?

**The migration of the Yuezhi according to Chinese sources (Stark 2021):**









**June 22nd | Week 3: Religious Networks - The Milindapañha - Guest Speaker Olga Kubica**

[The Questions of King Milinda](#), translation from: Rhys Davids (1890). Sacred Books of the East. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Pp. 1-39.

1. How are the background and the characters of the dialogue presented:
  - a. Sāgala in the country of the Yonakas,
  - b. the previous births (Pubba-yoga) of Milinda and Nāgasena,
  - c. Milinda's introduction,
  - d. Nāgasena's introduction,
  - e. the first meeting of Milinda and Nāgasena?
2. Why would an Indo-Greek king be the protagonist of a Buddhist dialogue?
3. What does the text tell us about Buddhism in the region of Gandhāra in the Indo-Greek era?



**June 29th | Week 4: Diplomatic Networks - Guest Speaker *Emily Everest-Phillips***

[\*History of Menander the Guardsman\*](#), Sogdian envoy Maniakh's Turkic embassy to Byzantium/Iran.

[\*Letters of Tughshada\*](#), King of Bukhara and Ghūrek king of Samarkand.

[\*Letter of Dewastich\*](#), 'King of Sogdiana' in Arabic.

- In each source, what evidence do you see of Sogdians engaging in diplomatic activities? For whom? Why?
- What practices/techniques of diplomacy can you identify? Does diplomacy intersect with other motivations?
- Who is writing these accounts? What are their motivations and potential biases?
- What is the state of knowledge of the people writing these sources concerning their neighbors? What does this imply about the level and nature of connectivity between them?

## July 6th | Week 5: Commercial Networks - Sogdians at Home and Abroad

[Sogdian Letters](#): Introduction and Numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5.

Based on what we have practiced so far about how to read ancient sources, and inspired by the table below, make up one question for each letter.

Document-based questions (source: OER Project):

Criteria	Questions to think about
Historical Situation	What was the historical situation of the document? <b>Y</b> (why)—What about the <b>HISTORICAL SITUATION</b> of the document might have impacted what was recorded?
Audience	Who was the intended audience of the document? <b>Y</b> (why)—What about the <b>INTENDED AUDIENCE</b> of the document might have impacted what was recorded?
Point of View	Who wrote the document? <b>Y</b> (why)—What about the <b>POV</b> (point of view) of the author might impact what was recorded?
Purpose	What was the purpose of the document? <b>Y</b> (why)—What about the <b>PURPOSE</b> of the document might have impacted what was recorded?