Status of Women in Ancient Sogdian Society

古代粟特社会中女性的地位

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Abstract: *Despite the major advances in Sogdian studies conducted in the past decades, research on the status of women in Sogdian communities still remains a rather controversial topic. Direct sources on this subject are scarce, the most important of which are only some partial historical narratives about Sogdian princess Roxana, wife of Alexander the Great, the marriage contracts (婚书), found in the citadel of Mount Mugh, and the Sogdian „Ancient letters", discovered by Sir Aurel Stein near Dunhuang. Sogdian women presumably enjoyed rights and freedoms and exerted a strong influence not only in the social sphere, but also on the cultural and political life of local communities. In order to further develop this hypothesis and elucidate the role of women in ancient Sogdian society, the author shall investigate and examine some circumstantial evidence stemming from religious practices, artistic sources as well as other aspects of the material and spiritual culture of the Sogdians.*

Sogdian studies have drawn increasing academic interest during the past few decades, the fruits of which have contributed to the reconstruction of many aspects of the political and cultural life of ancient Sogdiana. Nonetheless, the historical and archaeological record still appears rather fragmentary, thus causing a great number of issues and posing more questions than answers. Research on the social framework of local communities in Sogdian city-states and colonies along the Silk Road usually centers around the models of governance and interdependence between different formations [1], or examines the trade and interaction paradigm of Sogdian merchants[2]. The latter are relatively well documented in both Eastern and Western sources, which undoubtedly portray the male figure in Sogdian society as the main driving force behind its progress and prosperity. At the same time, historical records, which biasedly reflect important and great deeds, rarely shed light on the silent yet continuous contribution of female characters to the development of their nation. Therefore,

[1] For the latest study on the emergence and development of Sogdian civic communities see Shenkar 2020.
[2] For recent research on the Sogdian trade diaspora and trading network see Skaff 2003.

the topic of women in ancient Central Asian societies in general remains little explored and ambiguous, despite the fact that a clarification of their roles is crucial for the understanding of the internal processes within their respective communities and the external cultural influence exerted through them.

After Cyrus the Great conquered Sogdiana in around 540 BC, it was incorporated into the Achaemenid Empire as a satrapy, and this eventually led to a certain degree of religious, cultural and political integration of the Sogdian city-states with the Persian Empire. The territory of Sogdiana was later annexed by Alexander the Great in 328 and in the following centuries it was successively ruled by the Seleucid Empire, the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, the Kushan Empire, the Hephthalite Empire and the Sassanian Empire, before eventually falling into the hands of the Arab Muslims in the early eighth century. Little is known about life in Sogdiana during the first few centuries of the Persian rule, due to vandalism, which severely mutilated the historical and archaeological record. This makes our understanding of the role of women in ancient Sogdian society largely dependent on their depiction in secondary sources, such as the historical narratives of Greek and Roman authors. The laconic mentions of Sogdiana in the writings of Hecateus, Herodotus, Arrian, Quintus Curtius and Ptolemy, however, cannot be totally regarded as reliable, since their information often tends to be distorted or mainly focused on particular details, or in other words – was formulated in accordance with the current historiographical traditions and ethno-political sentiments of the time. The vague records found in ancient Chinese chronicles, such as in "The Records of the Grand Historian" 《史记》, "The Book of Han" 《汉书》 and "The Book of Later Han" 《后汉书》[3] are also tediously silent when it comes to the customs of the Sogdians and the organization of their society. Nonetheless, since during most of their development Sogdian city-states were under cultural and political influence of the Persian Empire, it would be safe to assume that they had adopted many cultural practices of the Persians[4] and the general attitude toward women in Sogdian society was not essentially different from the prevailing attitude in the old Iranian world. Therefore, a glimpse at the status of women in ancient Persia could help to outline the background factors that may have shaped the female identities in Sogdian society.

[3] For an examination of the references to Sogdiana in ancient Chinese chronicles, see Cheng (2018).

[4] "The Sogdians, with their capital at Samarkand, were to all intents and purposes a Sassanid successor state. They continued to dress, arm and fight exactly like the Sassanids down to 737, when they were in turn subjugated by the Arabs" (Heath 2015:102).

Women in Pre-Islamic Persia

The activities of royal and non-royal women in pre-Islamic Persia are reflected in a number of religious and mythological sources, historical works and archaeological artifacts. The administrative records of the imperial government during the reigns of Darius the Great, Xerxes and Artaxerxes, discovered in Persepolis in 1933-38[5], are considered as one of the most reliable sources for the discussion of women in the Achaemenid period, shedding light on their titles, activities and economic status (Brosius 2010). These records, as well as certain passages in the writings of ancient authors[6], attest that in pre-Islamic Iranian society high-ranking women enjoyed a high degree of independence and respect, they had access to education, participated in state affairs, held audiences and councils, owned land and estates within and outside the Persian heartland, employed their own workforce, were involved in political marriage alliances and accompanied the king and the nobles on military campaigns, frequently under threat of capture or even death (Grayson 1975; Brosius 2010; Bosworth 1999:119-20). By examining Old Avestan passages bearing on the position of women in Archaic Iran, Schwartz (2003:1-4) also arrives at the conclusion that in early Iranian society, women were regarded as equally qualified with men for being patrons and even rulers, and were granted the right to participate in both secular and spiritual life of the empire. The achievements of these distinguished women found artistic expressions in their depiction in sculpture, relief, painting, silver vessels, miniatures and occasionally – coins (Grabar 2005:213-214). Virtuous women were also ritually memorized for their achievements – medieval historiographical sources inform us that in ancient Persia there was a special celebration day, devoted to women and Mother Earth, called Isfandarmadh. According to renowned Iranian scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973-1050) this custom, in which women were presented with gifts and honored in many ways, was still flourishing in the eleventh century CE (Biruni 1879:216), although its origin and Zoroastrian roots can be traced back to the Achaemenid Empire (Boyce 1990:19-20).

Little information from reliable sources has come to light that would allow us to discuss the legal and economic situation of non-royal women in pre-Islamic Iran. The administrative records from Persepolis attest to female laborers, who worked alongside men and children

[5] These records, also known as "The Persepolis Elamite Tablets", were discovered in the course of two archaeological expeditions of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and comprise an archive of more than 30 000 clay tablets, the texts of which have been only partially translated.

[6] See Hdt., 2.98.1; Xen., *An*. 1.4.9; 2.4.27; Xen., *Cyr*. 1.3.4; Plato, *Alc*. I 121C-123CD; Athenaios, 4.145c; Plut., *Art*. 5.5; Plut., *Crass*. 21, Tac., *Ann*. 12.44 -47; Plut., *Art*. 19.10; Isidore of Charax, *Parth. Stat*. 1; Josephus, *Ant. Jud*. 7.7.4; *The Book of Esther* 1:9-12; cf. Dan. 5:2,10; *The Book of Nehemiah* 2.6.

(Brosius 1996:171-78). One can speculate that in a pastoralist society rural and low-class women were included in agricultural duties, such as sowing seeds, harvesting and tending livestock as well as in weaving and production of carpets and clothing, which were major commodities across the Iranian Plateau. The advance of the Zoroastrian teaching during the Achaemenid period brought new emphasis on women's roles in society and became the foundation of moral values in the Iranian world. Zoroastrianism not only advocated religious equality of men and women, but, according to classical researchers of Zoroastrian cult Mary Boyce (1975:308) and Albert de Jong (1995), in its doctrine women were generally held in high esteem, and their negative portrayal within the same tradition was only isolated and occasional phenomenon. On the other hand, Zoroastrianism, like all ancient religions, maintained a dualistic view towards the feminine nature and women were often perceived as susceptible to demonic influences, thus frequently associated with evil, chaos and disorder[7] (Choksy 2002:2, 81, 118). Therefore, they were encouraged to take on positive roles through marriage and procreation of "those of the Good Religion", as part of the ethical teaching of the Avesta and as a meritorious act and a duty of every believer (Yakubovich 2006:336). This fact determined the role of women in ancient Iran and Sogdiana as the invisible fabric of society being responsible for the procreation and education of children[8] as well as for the cultivation of moral values in them.

Sogdian women in the light of primary written sources

Direct textual evidence shedding light on the identity of Sogdian women is rather limited, especially considering the fact that the majority of written sources illustrating life in Sogdiana from a sociohistorical perspective come from the lands beyond Sogdiana proper. Thus only through the records of ancient Greek historians do we learn of Roxana, who became the most famous Sogdian woman after marrying Alexander the Great. Her story is best documented in the writings of Arrian of Nicomedia (c. 86/89 – c. 146/160 CE), who relates that when the invading army of the Macedonian king captured the mountain fortress near Samarkand, called "The Sogdian Rock", *"... the wives and children of many important men were there*

[7] Jonhnston (2004:149-151) provides an interesting discourse on women's association with magic in the Mediterranean world, pointing out that in ancient written sources, women were often portrayed as being prone to demon possessions and witchcraft.

[8] Herodotus (I.136) informs us that the sons of the Persians "are carefully instructed from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone – to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth. Until their fifth year they are not allowed to come into the sight of their father, but pass their lives with the women. This is done that, if the child die young, the father may not be afflicted by its loss". See Davis (1912:60).

captured, including those of Oxyartes. This chief had a daughter, a maiden of marriageable age, named Roxana, who was asserted by the men who served in Alexander's army to have been the most beautiful of all Asiatic women, with the single exception of the wife of Darius. They also say that no sooner did Alexander see her than he fell in love with her; but though he was in love with her, he refused to offer violence to her as a captive, and did not think it derogatory to his dignity to marry her... He acted with honesty and spared her honour, ... exercising a great amount of chastity, and at the same time exhibiting a very proper desire to obtain a good reputation"[9]. The marriage of Alexander and Roxana contributed to the alliance between the ancient Western world and the Orient, which had a beneficial impact on the development of science, culture and art of Central Asia. But their romantic love was short-lived as Alexander died only four years later and Roxana and her young son, who was perceived as a threat to the Macedonian throne, were eventually put to death[10]. Although the accounts of the beautiful Sogdian princess Roxana are rather fragmentary, she remains one of the most vivid images of antiquity, inspiring generations of artists, writers and playwrights from around the world.

Apart from the historical narratives, one of the most important documentary sources that allow us to catch a glimpse of the live in Sogdian communities in Xinjiang and Gansu are the six nearly complete letters, discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in 1907 in the remains of a watchtower on the Chinese frontier wall (Livshits 2008:289). These records, which later circulated in scientific literature under the euphonious pseudonym of "Ancient Letters", were dated to 312-313 CE by W.B. Henning and are considered to be the earliest Sogdian handwritten texts as well as the oldest paper documents discovered so far[11] (Livshits 2008:289-290). While most of them discuss contemporary commercial affairs, hence, revealing the existence of well-developed Sogdian trade channels and a network of settled resident communities in Gansu and the interior of China (De la Vaissière 2005), the author of two of these documents is surprisingly a Sogdian woman named Mewnai. In the letters, respectively addressed to Mewnai's mother and her husband, she describes her distress after having been abandoned by her husband in Dunhuang for three years. She confides to her mother: *"And I, unfortunate, live without clothes, without money. I ask [to grant me] a loan, but no one agreed to give me, so I had to beg alms of the priest"*[12]. The letter to her husband

[9] Arrian. *Anabasis* 4.19.4-4.19.5. See in Chinnock (2012:242).
[10] Plut. *Alex*. 77.3, 77.4; cf. Paus. *Description of Greece* 1.6.
[11] Each letter was folded several times and the names of the sender and the addressee were written on the outside (Livshits 2008:289).
[12] I use the English translation of the Sogdian "Ancient Letters" by Livshits (2008:291).

reveals the full extent of her personal tragedy: *"But here [I am] in trouble, I am doing badly, [very] badly, and I consider myself [almost] dead. I send you letters again and again, but [I] do not receive a single letter from you, and I lost [all] hope of seeing you. And in such a trouble I have lived already for three years in Tun-huang, because of you... And [then] a noble man Afraxtak, who enjoyed the confidence of the Chinese and had good [women?] clothes, helped [me]... And you,... write me, when you take me [from here] and what do you think [to do]?... And I think, that if you do not take me, then I have to become a servant with the Chinese, I have to learn to serve the Chinese... Thus, all these three years, I have obeyed your orders, I came to Tun-huang despite the objection of my mother and brothers, ... I followed your words in everything. But then [I will tell you] so: I should have better become the wife of a dog or a pig, than your [wife] – I think so now"*[13].

The full text of the letter implies that in the absence of her husband, Mewnai and her daughter are under the guardianship of a clan council, which provides not only "directives how to act", but also resources for their living. According to De la Vaissière (2005:55-56), the letters reflect the importance of family connections within the Sogdian merchant communities and the distribution of roles among members of the family, exposing the economic dependence of women. The text of Mewnai's letters was probably dictated to a scribe – a fact that could be interpreted as a sign of prevailing female illiteracy in the Sogdian diaspora, which undoubtedly further aggravated the dependency of women on the male members of society. Thus the overall character of the group of "Ancient Letters" indicates that in the merchant communities of the Sogdian diaspora, the actual power was concentrated in the hands of men, be they husbands, heads of the clan council or of the local society.

On the other hand, the tone of the letters suggests that the wives of Sogdian merchants most likely enjoyed certain rights within the family boundaries and possessed sufficient authority to hold their husbands accountable for the fulfilment of their family obligations. It is also highly possible that as immigrants in a foreign country, women in Sogdian colonies who were left to fend for themselves had very few options to find employment, and perhaps the only decent alternative for illiterate women, as was the case of Mewnai and her daughter, was being at the service of Chinese masters. It is understandable why in the two letters this option sounds like a last resort, since servitude implied the endurance of suffering, hard labour and humiliation, all far from the desirable fate of a merchant's wife. Yet, the fate of many young Sogdian girls from impoverished families was even more unfortunate, as they

[13] Livshits (2008:291-292).

were destined to become either barmaids and entertainers (胡姬, *huji*), or be sold as house slaves to wealthy Chinese citizens. The term *"huji"*, literally meaning "barbarian maids", was used in a number of literary and historical sources from the Tang period to denote the graceful young Persian and Sogdian women, who served wine and entertained guests at local inns and public houses in Luoyang and Chang'an (Lin 1992:49). These beauties were celebrated by many Tang poets such as Li Bai (李白), Zhang You (张祐) and Cen Shen (岑参), and their idealized images are thought to reflect the absorption of the culture of the Western Regions into contemporary Chinese art (Long 2021:121). On the basis of textual evidence from the biography of Li Xun in "The Book of the Later Han" (《后汉书。李恂传》), the eminent Chinese scholar Lin Meicun (林梅村), supposes that the import of "barbarian maids" had probably started as early as the end of the first century CE reaching its peak during the Tang era (Lin 1992:49-50). Historical records also reveal the establishment of female slave markets in many city-states in the Western Regions, such as Gaochang and Kucha, under the influence of the flourishing female slave trade along the Silk Road (Lin 1992:50). Many of these girls were traded to local inns, becoming barmaids, singers, dancers or courtesans, while others were sold to Chinese families, thus receiving the status of "permanent property" of the latter, as was explicitly stated in their bills of sale[14]. The contract of sale of a female slave of Sogdian descent that was unearthed from the Astana cemetery and dated to 639 AD (Frye 1993:73), reveals grim details about the destiny of these unfortunate women: the owner, as well as *"his children, grandchildren, clansmen and his descendants"* were granted the right "*to beat, mistreat, bind, trade, pledge, bestow as a gift and do whatever they wish with the slave girl"*[15]. Apparently, in the eyes of the Chinese society at the time, the "barbarian maids" from Sogdian colonies were identified with the lowest stratum and seen only as resources suitable for either entertainment or exploitation, stripped away from their humanity and reduced to objects.

The marriage contract (婚书) from Mount Mugh

[14] The clause of becoming a "permanent property" is stipulated in the contract for sale of a slave girl from Turfan, written in Sogdian language, which was translated and published in Japanese by Yutaka Yoshida and Takao Moriyasu in their article "A Sogdian Sale Contract of a Female slave from the Period of the Gaochang Kingdom under the Qu Clan" in *Studies on the Inner Asian Languages*, Vol. 4, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, 1988, pp. 1-50. For this research work I use the Chinese translation of the same document in Lin (1992:51).

[15] After Lin (1992:51).

The important discovery in 1932-1934 of various documents in the citadel on Mount Mugh in Central Tajikistan proved to be a valuable documentary source for the political activities of the Sogdian rulers during the turbulent period of the early eighth century. Among the official documents retrieved from the fortress, there was a marriage contract with an accompanying guarantee letter[16] dated to around 709-710 CE (Yakubovich 2006:307). This Sogdian marriage contract, reminiscent of the modern prenuptial agreement (Hansen 2015:133), provides a basis for drawing parallels with similar legal agreements from the Hellenistic world[17], Bactria[18] and the corpus of Babylonian marriage contracts[19], which were needed for the social and legal recognition of a couple's marriage.

The bride in this marriage contract, named Chat, is of royal descent, being the stepdaughter of the Prince of Nawekat[20]. The document does not provide information regarding the rank of the groom Ot-tegin, but since no titles are explicitly stated, it is assumed that he belonged to a lower social stratum. The contract stipulates that: *"Ot-tegin will treat Chat as his dear and respected wife, [providing her] with food, garments and ornaments, with honour and love, as a lady possessing authority in his own house, the way a noble man treats a noble woman, his wife... If, however, Ot-tegin, without sending Chat away, should take another wife or concubine, or keep another woman that does not please Chat, then Ot-tegin, as husband, will be owing and pay Chat, his wife, a fine of thirty good, poor dirhams... and will not keep that afore mentioned woman either as a wife or as a concubine, but will send her away. But if it should occur to Ot-tegin that he will not have Chat as a wife [any more], but send her away, he will release her with [her] inherited and acquired property, [as well as] with the gifts received, without compensation, and [he] will [also] not be owing or pay any compensation [to her], and after that he may marry such a woman as pleases him. And if it should occur to Chat that she will not remain with Ot-tegin, but will go away from him, she will leave him the undamaged garments and ornaments, all that, which is received by her from Ot-tegin, but she will take [back] her own share with an indemnity and will not be owing or pay any other compensation, and after that she may marry such a man as pleases her"*[21].

[16] Both documents were translated into Russian by Vladimir Livshits in 1960-1962, for English translation see Livshits (2015); Grenet & De la Vaissière (2002) and Yakubovich (2006).
[17] For a discussion of the structural resemblances and the prototypes of juridical documents from the Near East, see Yakubovich (2006:330-339); Yakubovich (2005).
[18] See Sims-Williams (2001); Sims-Williams & De la Vaissière (2011).
[19] See Greengus (1969) and Roth (1989).
[20] Nawekat has been hypothetically identified with a prosperous Silk Road town in the Semirechye (Yakubovich 2005).
[21] For this research paper I use the translation of Yakubovich (2006:311-312).

In the accompanying guarantee letter, Ot-tegin further specifies his obligations towards his future wife and her family: *"I shall not sell her, give her as a hostage, give her away as tribute, or place her under [another's] protection. And if someone, from my [side] or from the enemies' side takes her and detains her, I shall have her immediately released without damage or injury. And if [it] is not agreeable for Chat to remain with me, or if I send her away, I shall deliver her and give her...to your... family... in good health, without damage or injury. And if I do not give her, do not deliver her in good health, I shall be owing, and give, and pay you 100 approved, good, pure silver dirhams... And, until I pay, I shall hold them at the rate of 12 to 10"*[22].

Apparently, the main purpose of the two marriage documents was not just the provision of a mechanism for settlement of the financial obligations of the spouses under specific conditions, but rather the establishment of a principal basis for the future relationship between husband and wife, incorporating both moral and material elements. The several "moral clauses", formulating an idealistic vision for the commitment of the partners, and the regulations concerning the disposal of the property, probably represent general attitudes towards marriage that were prevalent in Sogdian society at that period, while at the same time reflecting the local development of Zoroastrian juridical tradition and certain aspects of Sogdian family law[23].

It is evident that the rights and interests of the female party are very well protected in these two documents, while respect for the principles of fairness and equal treatment of both parties is demonstrated. The penalty that the husband should pay in case he takes another wife or concubine that "doesn't please his wife" can be viewed as an innovation going beyond the boundaries of the normal obligations of the male party, but the most striking feature of the marriage agreement is undoubtedly the right to initiate a divorce, granted to the wife. The repudiation of a husband by his wife is in full contradiction with the Near Eastern family law, which not only strictly prohibits it, but also prescribes punishment by death for such a misdeed[24]. It is therefore rather tempting to interpret the divorce clause in this marriage contract as indicative of the high degree of freedom and privilege enjoyed by Sogdian women

[22] Yakubovich (2006:314).

[23] Shenkar (2017:204) draws attention to the fact that the marriage contract from Mount Mugh also sheds light on the temples' multifaceted functions in the Sogdian society, assuming that they were central public institutions that answered to various needs of the community.

[24] "In Old Babylonian marriage contracts, it is a usual clause that a wife who says to her husband "Thou art not my husband" is to be thrown into the river. The Neo-Babylonian marriage agreements normally do not even mention such a possibility, prescribing instead that if the wife is discovered with another man, she will die by the iron dagger. The repudiation of a husband is not mentioned in the Torah and is explicitly prohibited by the Rabbinic Law" (Yakubovich 2006:333).

in general, but such a speculation has numerous weak points, which have to be carefully examined. It should be noticed that while the bride is of royal descent, the groom is not explicitly introduced as holding any princely rank. This difference in social status could be the reason behind the unusually high degree of independence granted to Chat by the marriage agreement (Yakubovich 2005). If one analyses the Sogdian marriage contract from this angle, it would be plausible to assume that it reflects a private case with special obligations imposed on the groom by the bride's family, rather than an established practice that could be valid for all social groups. Therefore, as much as one can agree that the marriage contract from Mount Mugh and the accompanying guarantee letter do manifest a rather liberal approach to the bride's rights by granting her an ample scope of protection, it would be methodologically incorrect to extrapolate the conclusions drawn from this private case to all Sogdian women in the Sassanid Era in general, unless such extrapolation is backed up by other substantial evidence.

Depictions of Sogdian women in art

The art of the ancient world has become a rich source of information, conveying historical events and narratives through images on textiles, metal, stone and wood. Thus, the artistic representation of Sogdian women in the artwork of Central Asia and China can be seen as a reflection of their significance to the society and to the religio-cultural exchange along the Silk Road. Sogdian art is thought to have syncretised a rich variety of Sassanian, Chinese, Byzantine, Indian and other foreign influences, although it also boasts a great degree of originality (Ciafaloni & Della Rocca de Candal 2011:111). A number of narrative freezes from Panjikent and Samarkand depict women warriors while fighting alongside their male counterparts or being engaged in single duels with the enemy (Azarpay 1981:115). These artistic representations enrich our understanding of the roles of Sogdian women in the Heroic Age, suggesting that they combined complex functions both as mistresses of domestic life and as active participants in the important affairs of their world. Hunting and fighting scenes in Sogdian art also offer rare surviving examples of depictions of female hunters (Fig. 1), despite the fact that such scenes are generally not so common in the Sogdian context and probably also reflect an absorption process of external influences from Sassanian models (Ciafaloni & Della Rocca de Candal 2011:111). Terracotta figurines from the Samarkand region dated to between the second/first century BC and the fourth century CE, which to some extent reflect the costumes, worn in real life by local inhabitants, are also valuable

visual evidence to understand certain aspects of female identity from that period[25] (Kidd 2003:35, 38).

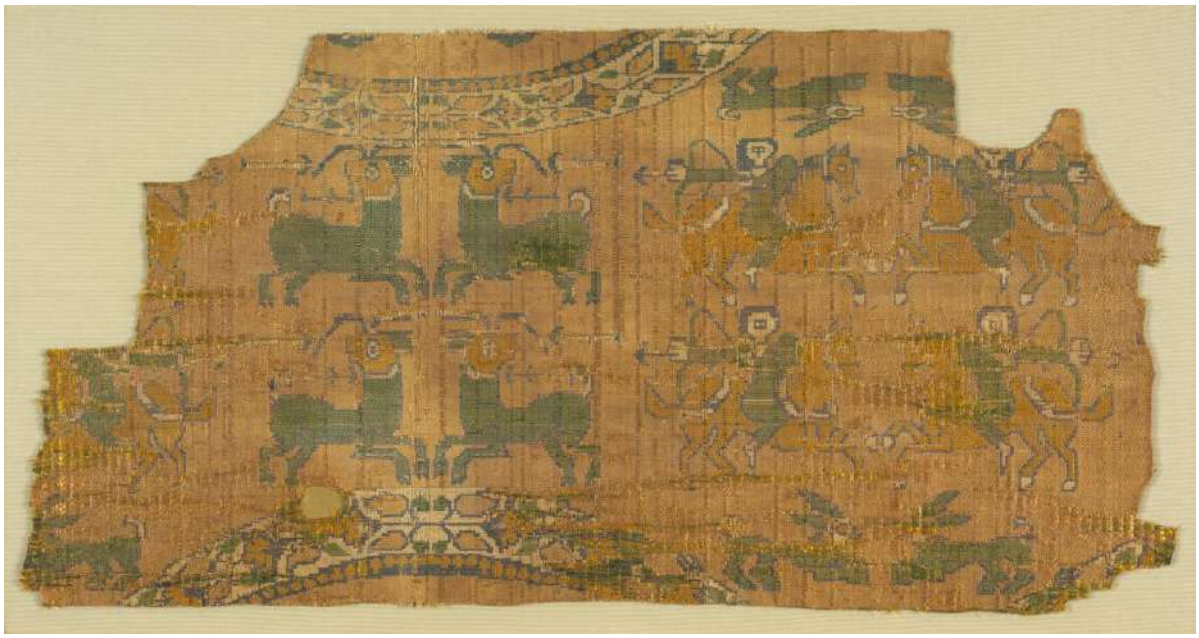

Fig. 1. Fragment of Sogdian silk with female hunters[26]

It is beyond any doubt that artistically talented women were one of the main vehicles of the growing cultural influence of Sogdiana along the Silk Road, especially towards the seventh century CE, when the socio-economic importance of Sogdian communities in China intensified and Sogdian culture reached its zenith. The following centuries witnessed the penetration of Sogdian artistic traditions into Chinese music, dance and visual arts, thus enriching them with new contents and creative forms. As an indispensable part of Sogdian folklore, musicians were often depicted on different media, and these depictions attest to the active role of female musicians in all types of performances. Images of female musicians from the lands of Sogdiana proper include a perfectly preserved figurine of a female flutist from the collection of the State Hermitage Museum, acquired in the region of Samarkand (Fig. 2), and a painting of a female figure playing a bowed harp from Panjikent (Fig. 3). Female entertainers also often feature in tomb paintings, stone reliefs and other forms of mortuary art in Sogdian burials from Tang China. Among the sixteen figurines, recovered from the Sui dynasty tomb of the Sogdian governor Yu Hong in Shanxi province, there are three marble figures of female musicians, respectively holding a pandean pipe, a pipa and a

[25] For detailed examination of the costumes, portrayed on Sogdian terracotta figurines from Samarkand region, see Kidd 2003.
[26] Image and data retrieved from The Cleveland Museum of Art; http://www.clevelandart.org/.

konghou (Wertmann 2015:88, 207). A detail from the Sarcophagus of Shi Jun (Wirkak), named "Drinking and Entertainment in a Grape Arbor" reveals two groups of musicians, divided by gender: a band of male entertainers playing a harp, lutes, a drum and a flute, encircle a group of seated men feasting in a grape arbour. Beneath them, there is a small group of noble ladies who are being entertained by a female ensemble, performing a *sheng*, a lute and a harp (Fig. 4).

Fig. 2. Figurine of a female flutist from Samarkand, date unknown[27]

Fig. 3. Female figure playing a bowed harp from Panjikent, 7th-8th century CE[28]

[27] Image and data retrieved from *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*, organized by the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. https://sogdians.si.edu.

Fig. 4. Detail from Sarcophagus of Shi Jun: Drinking and Entertainment in a Grape Arbour. Xi'an, 6th century CE[29]

It is beyond any doubt that Sogdian women have left their brightest traces in the dance artistic tradition of China. The famous Sogdian leaping or whirling dance (胡腾舞 or 胡旋舞), performed by both male and female dancers, gained enormous popularity in China and was represented in various artistic works. Western "barbarian" music, songs, dances and drama were greatly enjoyed not only by the court members and government officials, but also by ordinary people, as knowledge and admiration for Sogdian art increased in Tang China (Liveri 2019:82-83). Many famous Chinese poets, such as Li Bai (李白), Yuan Zhen (元稹) and Bai Juyi (白居易) were fascinated by the beauty of the Sogdian girls and dancers they met in various entertainment places in China. The poem "Iranian whirling girls"[30] (《胡旋女》) by renowned Tang poet Bai Juyi (白居易) describes how young courtesan Yang Guifei

[28] Image and data retrieved from *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*, organized by the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. https://sogdians.si.edu.
[29] Image and data retrieved from *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*, organized by the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. https://sogdians.si.edu.
[30] For the English translation of 《胡旋女》by Bai Juyi (白居易), see Mair (2000:277-278).

(杨贵妃) stole the ruler's heart with the Sogdian Whirl, revealing so the impact of this Sogdian import on the cultural and political life of early medieval China. The evolution of the Whirl Dance as an element of Buddhist devotional practice and its Sinicization, as part of the Tang dynasty dance repertory, are well documented by depictions of both male and female whirl dancers in the Buddhist murals of the Mogao caves (莫高窟)[31], as well as in the funerary art of the Sogdian family tombs across China (Fig. 5, 6, 7) (Sun 2015; Huo 2007, cf. Wertmann 2015:46, 70, 104, 110; Houseal 2016).

It is evident from the above examples that as a consequence of the extensive cultural exchange between China and the Western regions in early medieval times, a considerable number of Sogdian women, probably originating from lower social strata, found their vocation as musicians and dancers in the hedonistic society of Central and Easten Asia. Considering the nature of their professions that were meant for entertainment, one can speculate that most of these women did not enjoy high social status or privileges; nevertheless, the strong influence they exerted on cultural and social life soon became emblematic and was immortalised in various forms, shaping so the artistic image of the epoch.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the discussion of Sogdian women has been impeded by the lack of sufficient written and archaeological material that could illustrate the evolution of their social status in the long historical period before the Muslim conquest. The examination of the primary and secondary sources reveals that at the background of the political and economic dynamism, distinguishing Sogdian city-states and merchant colonies along the Silk Road, women had to engage in complex multi-layered roles, that were being shaped by two main centers of influence. During the period between the sixth century BC and the fifth century CE, their rights and freedoms were largely defined by the social customs of the Persian empire and the prevailing principles of Zoroastrianism, underlying the general egalitarian attitudes toward women in ancient Iranian world. These attitudes were also maintained in the doctrines of Manichaeism, Buddhism and Nestorianism, which subsequently took root in Sogdian society[32], but the advance of Islam, propagating female

[31] For an extensive analysis of the Buddhist art from Dunhuang, see Sha (2019).

[32] Considering the fact that the most important deity in Sogdiana and Bactria was Goddess Nana(i), which is confirmed by the popularity of her image on coins and in personal names, as well as her frequent representation in Sogdian art during the seventh and eight centuries (Compareti 2017:2; Azarpay 1981:134), it would be

subjugation, inflicted a radical change to women's status quo, and they fell into oblivion in the following centuries.

With the evolution of the Silk Road network after the Han dynasty, Sogdian immigrant communities were formed throughout Asia, establishing a strong presence in China. As the exchange of goods, arts, ideas and technologies flourished, the influence between Sogdiana and the Chinese empire also increased. Sogdian women from this period may not have had the strong business acumen of their male counterparts, but they certainly played active roles in these bilateral relations, albeit in a more subtle manner. The wives of wealthy merchants in diaspora areas were addressed by complimentary titles such as "mistress of the house" or "noble lady"[33], and were held in high esteem, as evidenced from Sogdian family tombs across China. Young Sogdian women from more humble backgrounds were imported into Tang China to become either servants and house slaves, or to make their way into society as barmaids, musicians and dancers. Thus the hedonistic medieval Chinese society emerged as a second center of influence that added new semantic layers to the identity of Sogdian women outside their homeland and preserved their traces in its art and literary works.

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interesting to examine the female elements in Sogdian pantheon and their connection to the female identities in society.

[33] In two Sogdian letters (L27, L44) from the collection of the Renmin University of China, dated to the second half of the eight century, the use of laudatory phrases as a very polite form of address to women are attested, such as *βγh xwt' ynh*, "noble lady", which contains the word *βγh*, "goddess"; and *δ(β)' (mpnw)h*, "mistress of the house" (Bi & Sims-Williams 2015:261, 273). In the marriage contract from Mount Mugh, the bride is referred to as "a lady possessing authority in his (the groom's) own house" – a title that might be functionally equivalent to Middle Persian "mistress of the house", i.e. a term defining a woman who has entered a regular type of arranged matrimony (Livshits 2005).

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