

Buddhism in Central Asia 1.

Tibor Porció

Department for the Study of Religions,
Faculty of Arts

University of Szeged, Hungary

Buddhism in Central Asia / *Serindia*

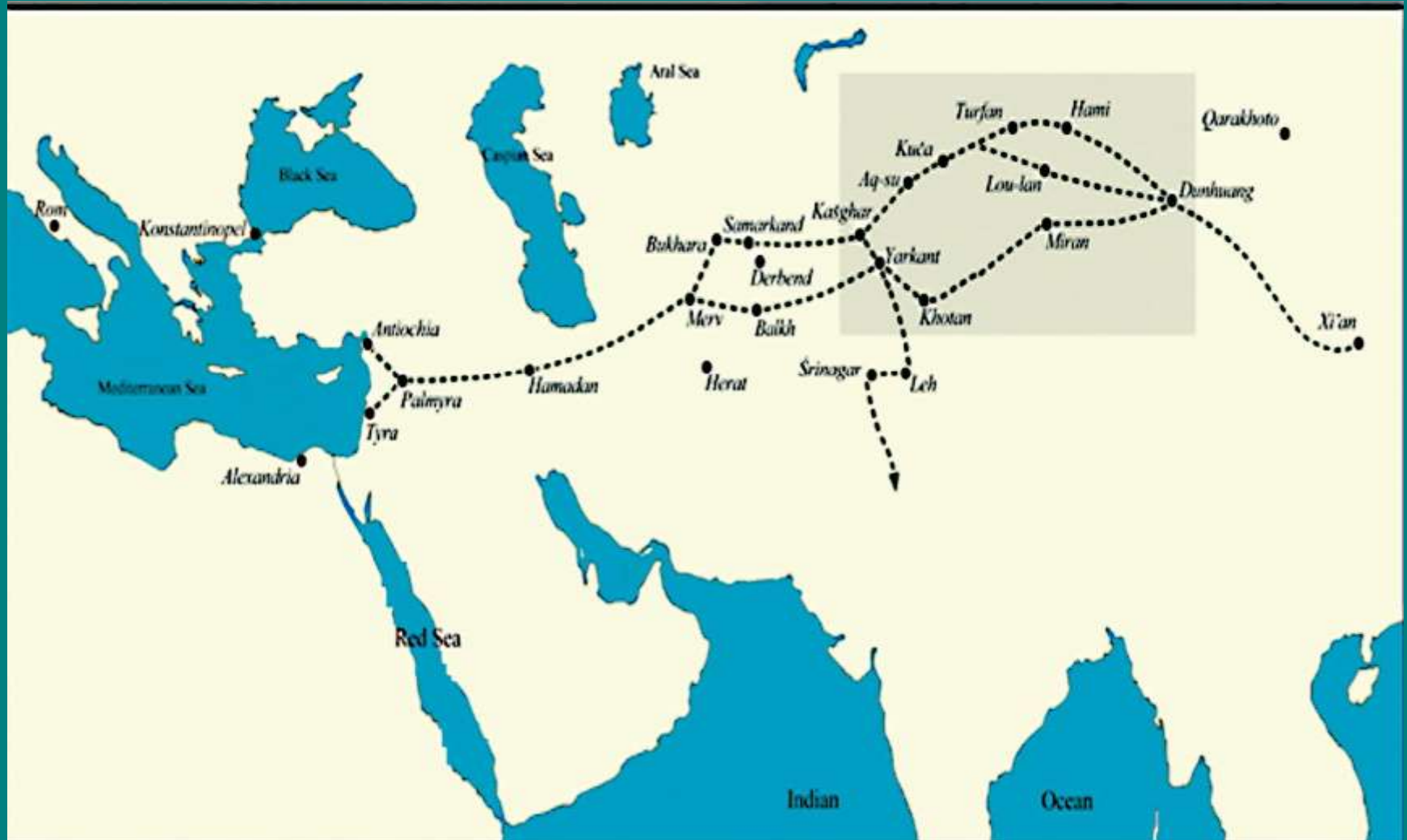
Central Asia / *Serindia*

- ~ played an intermediary role in the early period of the spread of Buddhism from India to the far East.

Central or Inner Asia?

- Inner Asia: may designate the entire region of Central Eurasia.
- *Central Asia* in the narrow sense refers only to the network of oasis towns of Inner Asia.

Inner and Central Asia



TREMBLAY, X., 2007, The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia: Buddhism among Iranians, Tocharians and Turks before the 13th Century. In: *The Spread of Buddhism*. Eds: A. Heirman and S.P. Bumbacher. Brill, Leiden, Boston, pp. 75–129.

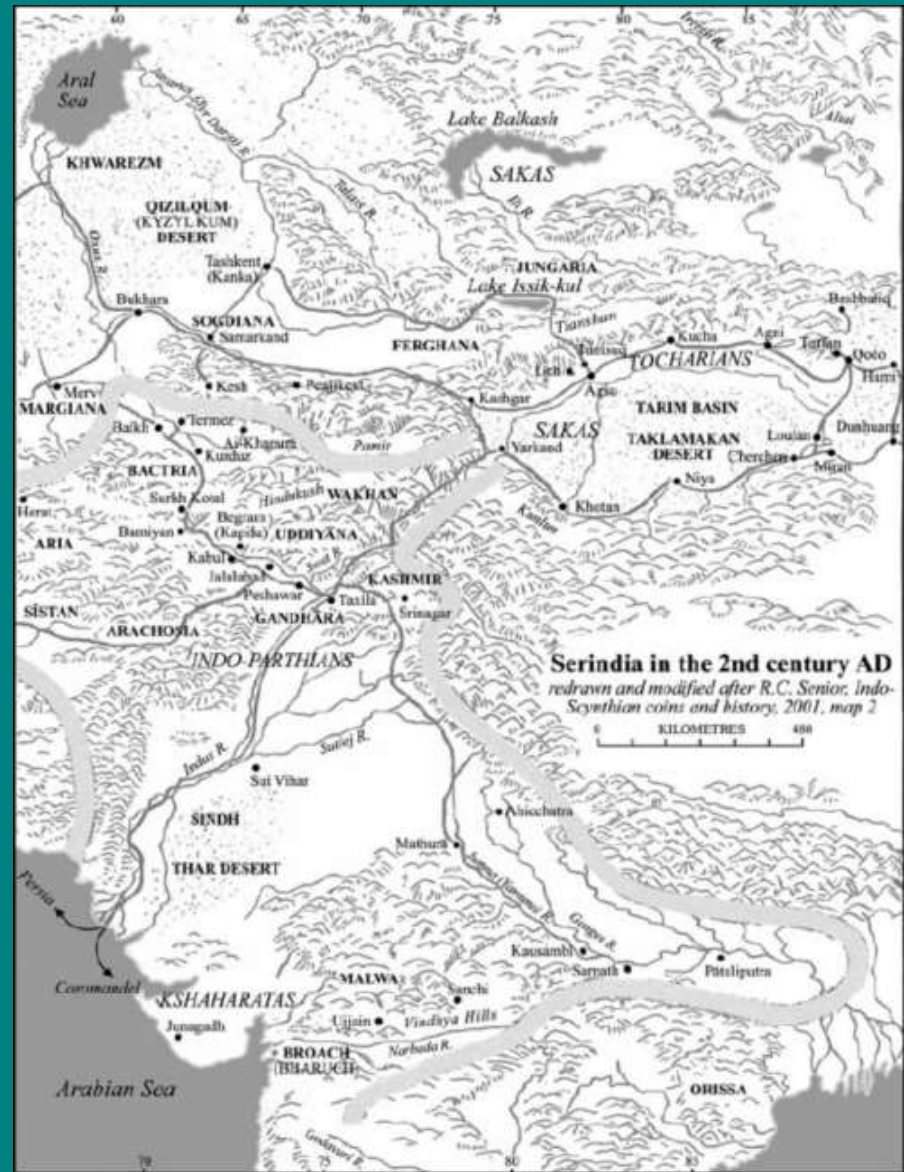
SERINDIA



Serindia in the 2nd century AD

“Serindia”, coined by Aurel Stein

- combines Northwestern Afghanistan, and the former Soviet and Chinese Turkestans
- united by the coexistence of Iranian and Indian influence between the beginning of the Christian era and the period of Islamicisation
- encompassed four geographically and ecologically distinct areas



Serindia in the 2nd century AD

1. The partly desert-like eastern fringe of Western Iran, with the provinces of Margiana around Merv (now in Turkmenistan, near Mary) and Aria around Herat. It is probable that Parthian, a Western Iranian language, was spoken in Margiana up to the sixth century AD when the province was persianised.



2. The mountainous Hindukush and Turkestan ranges, in which almost every valley had its own language (as it is still often the case now). Two regions were prominent:



2.1. Bactria

between the Hindukush and the Iron Gate

- Kuṣāṇa Dynasty (120 BC–233 AD)
- Sassanian occupation (233–ca. 375 AD)
- Chionites and Kidarites (360–480 AD)
- Hephthalites (480–560)



2.2. Sogdiana divided into numerous principalities

- Sogdiana remained outside the Kuṣāṇa Empire,
- but stood under Bactria's dominion from 402 to 560.
- Its dynasties survived until the Muslim conquest in the 740's.



Bactrian and Sogdian

- were Eastern Iranian languages.
- Bactrian: written from the first c. AD onwards in the Greek alphabet
- Sogdian: in a national alphabet derived from Aramaean.
- the national religion was Mazdeism.

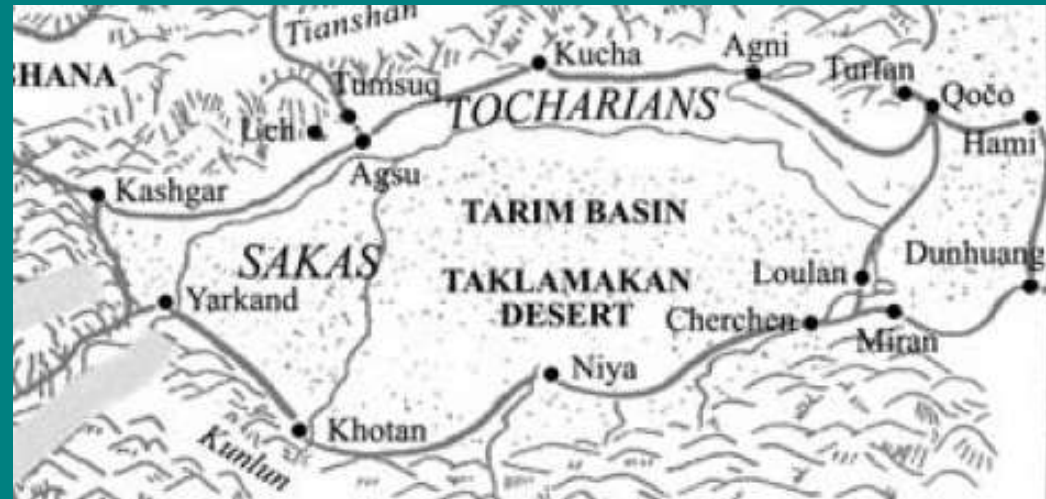
Alexandros (r. 336–323 BCE)

- waged a successful military campaign to defeat the Achaemenes Empire (550–330 BCE) in Persia.
- crossed the Indus River and entered India (326 BCE).
- many Greeks settled in the areas extending from present-day Iran through western Turkistan and northwest India

3. Tarim Basin

Each oasis constituted a separate kingdom

- Kashgar and Khotan
Saka dialects of Iranian
- Aqsu and Kucha (West)
Tokharian A
- Agni and Turfan (East)
Tokharian B
 - Loulan
unknown vernacular



Tokharian

is the name of the language or languages which were spoken in the Northwestern part of East Turkestan and is a non-Iranian Indo-European language of the centum-type (100 „käfte”). The Tokharians in Turkestan who spoke this language are not to be confused with another people in Bactria called Tokharian by several Greek, Old Indian and Chinese sources and who spoke an Iranian language.

4. The northern steppe

Xiungnu (from 3rd c. BC onwards)

Ruanruan 蠕蠕 Empire (ca. 390-552)

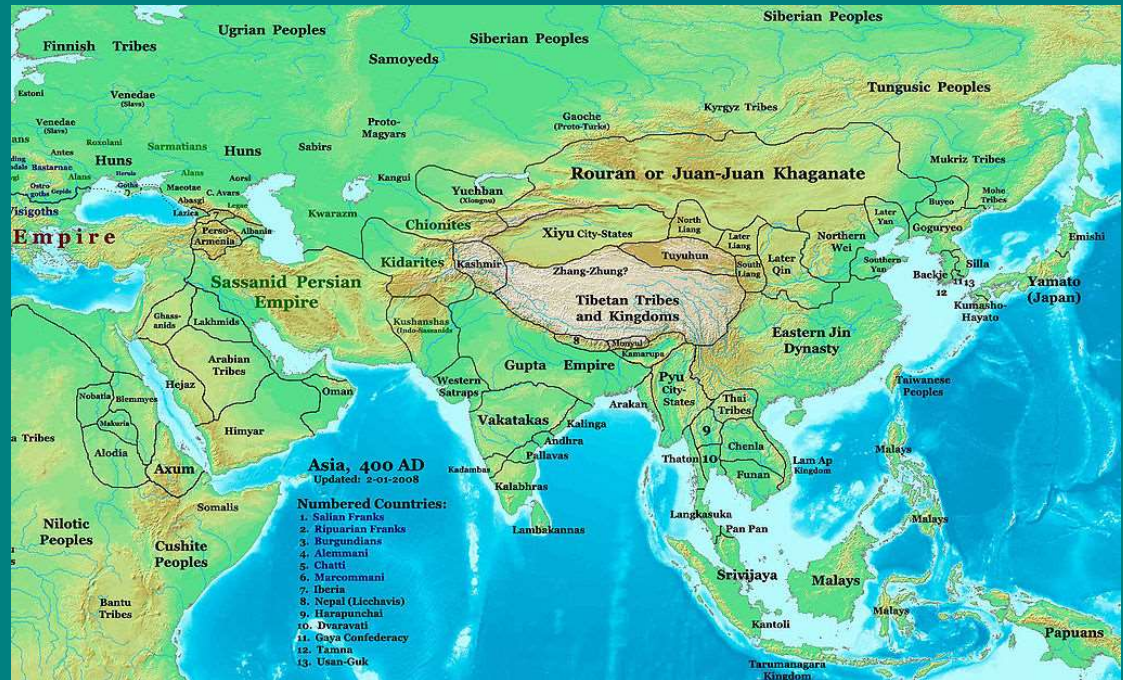
Turkic Khanates (552-742)

East Uygur Empire (744–840)

West Uygurs (857-1450)

The Khitans 丹契 (Liao 遼 period 916–1125)

Manchu-speaking Jurchens (1115-1234)



In all *Serindian* countries Buddhism coexisted with other religions:

- Iranian Mazdeism
- Turkic "Tengri religion,"
- Manichaeism
- "Nestorian" Christianity

Serindia occupies a somewhat subordinate rank in Buddhist studies

Reason 1:

all the languages of Serindian Buddhism are dead languages which were totally unknown before the eve of the twentieth century and which require a great deal of linguistic work before they can be, even approximately, understood.

Serindia occupies a somewhat subordinate rank in Buddhist studies

Reason 2:

- almost all its countries have become Muslim:
 - Eastern Iran between the 8th and the 9th c.
 - Khotan in 1008
 - Turfan around 1430
 - Hami 哈密 in 1451
 - Dunhuang around 1500
-
- Buddhism has survived down to the present among the Yellow Uygurs, who live in the Gansu 肅甘 province in China.

**OUTLINE OF A HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN
CENTRAL ASIA:
THE EARLY PERIOD (100 BC–850 AD)**

Buddhism among the Parthians

- No historical account upon Buddhism among the Parthians has survived.
- No Buddhist texts in Parthian are extant,
- but their existence can be inferred from the presence of Buddhist and Indian terms in the Manichaean Parthian theological vocabulary from the earliest texts onwards (3rd–4th century BC)
- E.g.: *byxš-* “to beg” < *bhikṣu-*; *nbr’n* “paradise” < *nirvāṇa-*;
zmbwdyg “earth” < *jambudvīpa-*
- These terms show that the Manichaeans developed their apologetics in a Buddhist milieu.

Buddhism in Bactria

- no primary evidence that Buddhism was cultivated in Bactria proper before the middle of the 1st century AD.
- the Kuṣāṇas reigned upon a culturally dual monarchy across the Hindukush, uniting Bactria and Northern India (Kapiśa, Gandhāra and the Gangetic plain) where Buddhism had flourished since at least the reign of the Mauryan king Aśoka (r. 268–231 BC)

King Aśoka (r. 268–231 BCE)

- unified the fragmented Indian subcontinent;
- sought for the ideals of „nation”-building and policy-making in the teachings of the Buddha;
- promoted these Buddhist ideals in the form of edicts and by sending Buddhist missionaries to neighboring countries.

Buddhism in Bactria

Buddhism among Iranians in India

- Several Iranian dynasties in India (the Indo-Scythians and Indo- Parthians) seized parts of Gandhāra and Northern India (as far as Mathurā) after 90 BC. Under the Śakas and their vassals, the Buddhist donations grew considerably and Buddha was depicted for the first time.
- Iranian rulers, princes, officials were generous in supporting Buddhism (also Hinduism)
- The Kuṣāṇas inherited and kept this tradition of sponsorship,
- although they were not Buddhists but Mazdeans.

Buddhism in Bactria
Under the the Kuṣāṇa Reign

- Politically united Bactria and Northern India.
- Situated between Han China in the east and the Roman Empire in the west, the Kuṣāṇa Empire controlled the major east-west trading routes for the exchange of rare goods and cultural information.
- This afforded Buddhism an easy opportunity to expand to both the east and west.

Buddhism in Bactria
After the the Kuṣāṇas

- the Hephthalites do not seem to have been Buddhists
- Mazdeism and Buddhism coexisted peacefully
- the Great Buddhas of Bamiyan were erected under the Hephthalites

Buddhism in Sogdiana and among Sogdians (100 AD–1000 AD)

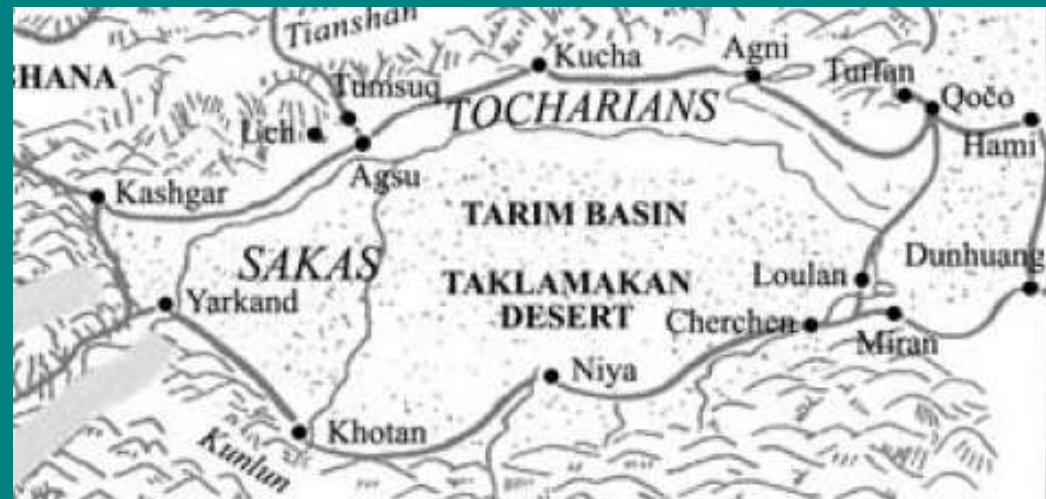
- The puzzling history of Buddhism in Sogdiana is the result of the obvious discrepancy between the philological and the archaeological evidence about Sogdian Buddhism.
- whereas in Kucha, Turfan and elsewhere in China numerous Sogdian Buddhist inscriptions and manuscripts, dating from the seventh to the eleventh century, have been found, archaeology has brought to light no Buddhist building and only very few inscriptions from Sogdiana.
- We have to differentiate Sogdians in Sogdiana and Sogdians abroad, who partly adopted the customs of the local population but clung to their vernacular language.

4 kinds of Sogdian Buddhism

- Indian
- Chinese
- Tocharian
- Indo-Bactrian

Buddhism in the Tarim Basin (100 BC–850 AD)

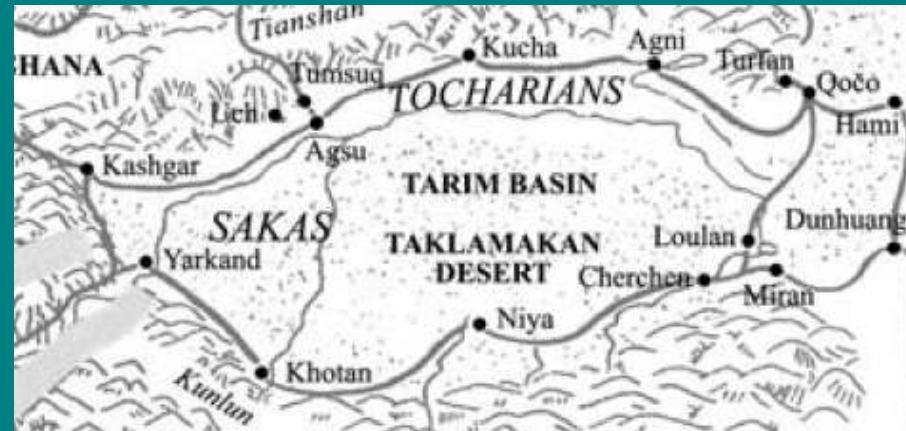
- Khotan
- Loulan
- Kucha
- *Turfan*
before 791
 - Agni
- Kashgar



Khotan

- For the beginnings of B. in Khotan – mainly legends.
- 73 AD, Ban Chao – Mazdaism;
- Strong influence by Indian culture
- 260 AD, the Chinese monk Zhu Shixing,; Prajñápáramitá, sent to Luoyang for translation.

Most Kh. monks were non-Maháyánists.



Khotan

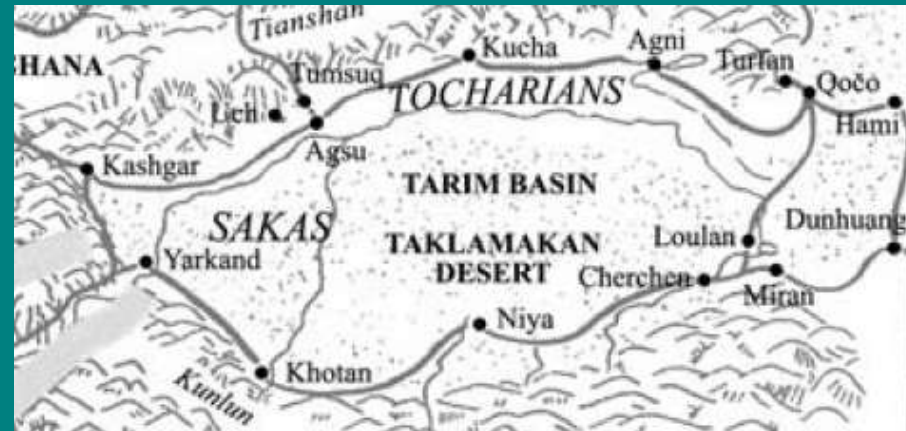
- 401 AD, Faxian mentions that the whole population of Khotan was Buddhist, most of them Maháyánists.
- The earliest long manuscripts in Khotanese are not earlier than the 7th century.
- the composition of the oldest Old Khotanese texts: tent. 5th c.
(Maháyána)

Khotan (600–1000 AD)

- the full amount of Khotanese, Khotan Sanskrit and (from 750 onwards) Tibetan manuscripts.
- continuous intercourse between Khotan, on the one hand, and India, Tibet and China, on the other.
- After the Tibetan conquest of Khotan in 750, many Tibetan texts—secular as well as Buddhist—were translated in Khotanese.
- in 975 the king of Khotan had married a Qarakhanid princess. Later, one of his sons allied with the Muslims to conquer the city.

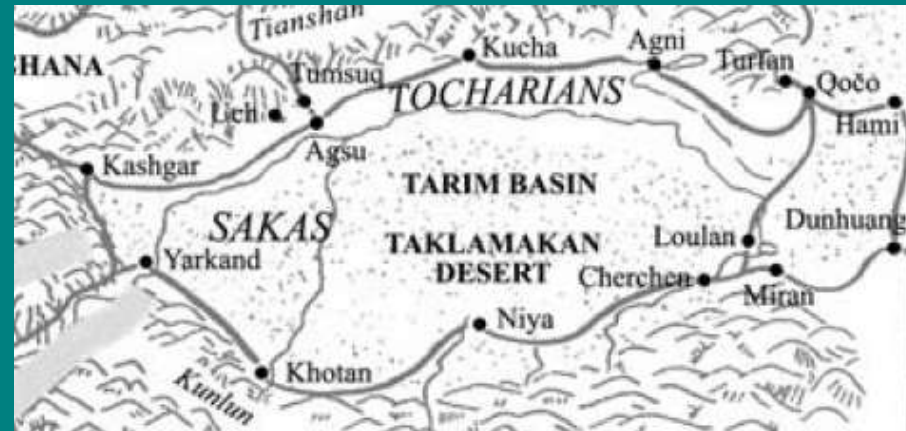
Loulan

- apparently declined after its capture by the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 in 441 AD.
- texts with religious content are sparse. Yet, they display a variety of sectarian affiliations and languages.
- Art: close ties with Kuṣāṇa art
- Script and languages clearly shows Iranian influence.



Kucha

- The introduction of Buddhism in Kucha, the mightiest city-state on the Northern Silk Road, is still more obscure than in Khotan.
- Indian king names appear in Chinese sources from the first century onwards.
- Kuchean B. figures:
 - Kumārajīva (344–413)
 - Po Srimitra (early 4th c.) who brought magic practices to South China
 - Dharmabhadra
 - All sects, dhyána, Tantrism



Nomadic-sedentary relations in CA

- Archeological evidence suggests that urban-based political structures in the Oxus region began to develop from the early part of the first millennium BCE.
- To the north, within the vast swath of steppelands reaching across the Asian continent from above the Black Sea all the way to the frontiers of China, the culture was mainly nomadic or semi-nomadic.
- As urbanization developed, the pastoral peoples of the Eurasian steppe entered into a long, rocky partnership with settled civilization which lasted for well over two thousand five hundred years – a symbiotic relationship often characterized as "the steppe and the sown".
- Central Asian history is defined largely by the dynamics of nomadic-sedentary relations, often hostile, even violent, but always **mutually interdependent**.

- In most cases the dominant peoples of the Eurasian steppe have belonged to
- either the Iranian
- or Turkic language families.

The Iranian-speaking peoples of Central Asia

- played a major role in the transmission of religions from the Near East to the Far East throughout the first millennium of the Common Era.

Religions rooted in or encountered the Iranian world

- Zoroastrianism/Mazdeism
- Judaism
- Buddhism
- Christianity / Nestorianism
- Manichaeism
- Islam

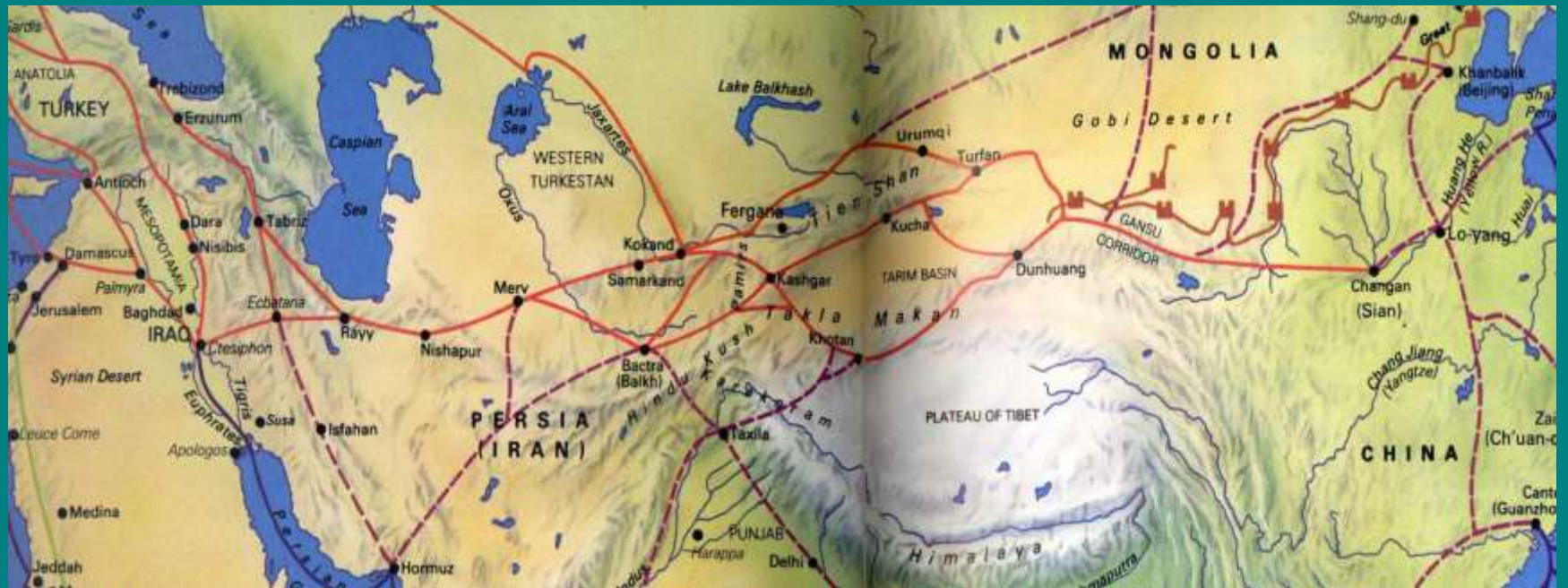
Sogdians 1.

For over a thousand years, up through the 10th c. CE, the prime actors in the transmission of the world's major religions from West to East were the people of Transoxiana, roughly modern Uzbekistan.

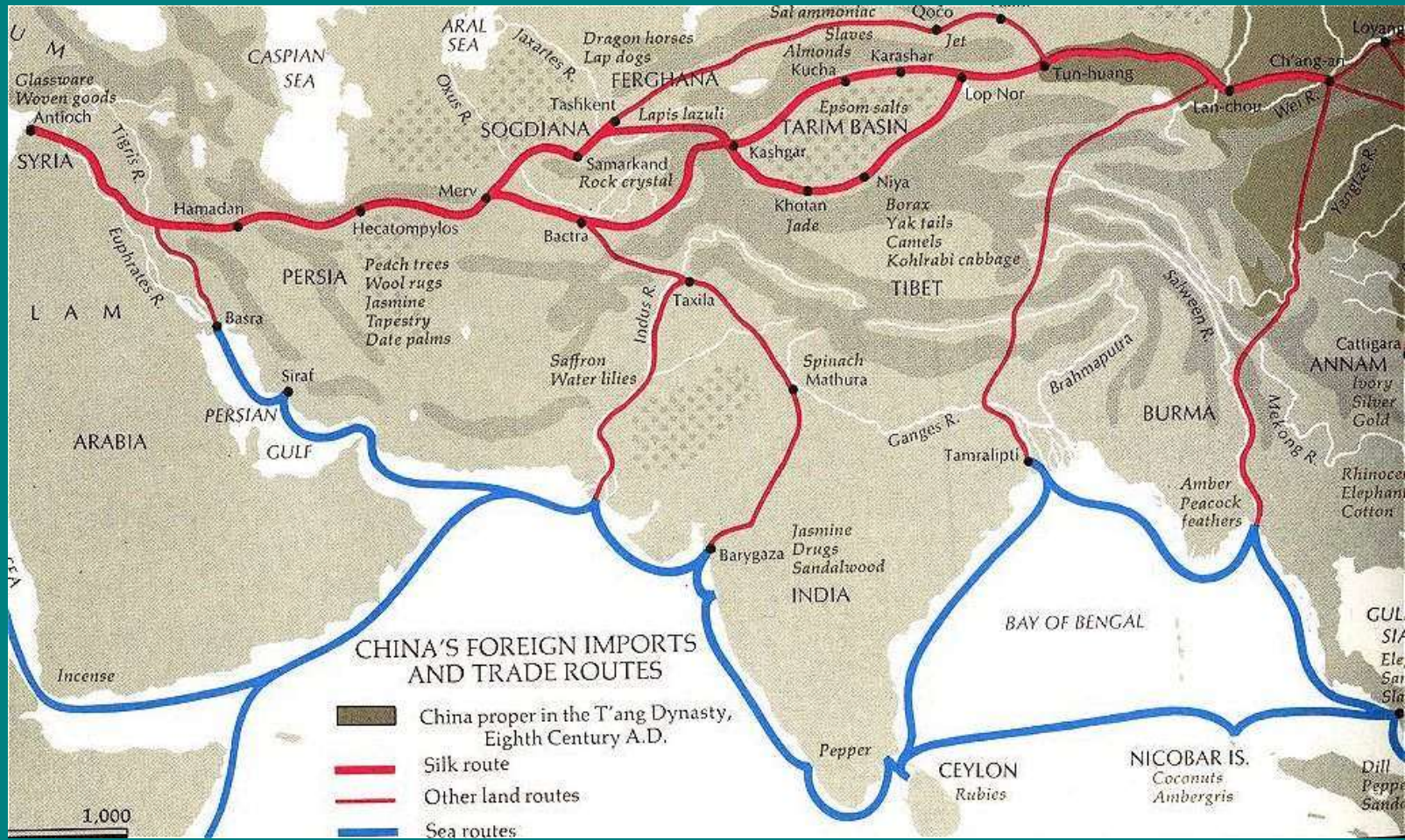
Situated halfway between the Mediterranean and Chinese centers of civilization, the natives of this region, Iranian-speakers, were ideally situated to be middlemen.

Sogdian merchants were for centuries among the most successful in Asia, and their trading activities formed the major link connecting East and West.

For centuries Sogdian was the lingua franca of the Silk Road.



China's imports & trade routes



Sogdians 2.

- With their international connections ~ knew foreign languages, and many were literate.
- ~ were often engaged as interpreters and translators.
- It was ~ scribes who translated most of the religious texts of Buddhism, Manichaeism and Christianity into the various languages of the Silk Route, from Prakrit, Aramaic, or Parthian into Bactrian, Tokharian, Khotanese, Turkish or Chinese, either via Sogdian or directly.
- As Central Asia became Islamicized beginning in the eighth century, the ~ gradually adopted the Persian language and Iranian Islam.

Sogdiana

- was (until the Samanid dynasty made it the most dynamic center of the Muslim world in the tenth century) **never a region of religious orthodoxy;**
- the region was at the fringes of both east and west, equally removed from the centers of all the great religious traditions;
- it had always been middle ground, a transit point, a place where anything could and did pass through sooner or later.