

# Sogdian Ancient Letters 1, 2, 3, and 5

Sogdian culture flourished in Central Asia between the fourth and ninth centuries CE. Many Sogdian merchants also resided in commercial towns along the Silk Road in other parts of Eurasia. Below are translations of letters sent between various Sogdians residing in Central and East Asia.

[*Verso*] From her daughter, the free-woman Miwnay, to her d[ear] mother [Chatis].  
[*Recto*] [From her dau]ghter, the free-woman Mi[wnay], to her dear [mother] Chatis, blessing and homage. It would be a good day for him who might [see] you healthy and at ease; and [for me] that day would be the best when we ourselves might see you in good health. I am very anxious to see you, but have no luck. I petitioned the councillor Sagharak, but the councillor says: Here there is no other relative closer to Nanai-dhat than Artivan. And I petitioned Artivan, but he says: Farnkhund ..., and I refuse to hurry, I refuse to ... And Farnkhund says: If your husband's relative does not consent that you should go back to your mother, how should I take you? Wait until ... comes; perhaps Nanai-dhat will come. I live wretchedly, without clothing, without money; I ask for a loan, but no-one consents to give me one, so I depend on charity from the priest. He said to me: If you go, I will give you a camel, and a man should go with you, and on the way I will look after you well. May he do so for me until you send me a letter!

## Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 2

[*Envelope*] . . . should send and bring [this] letter to Samarkand. And [the noble lord Varzakk . . . should receive(?)] it all(?) [complete(?)]. Sent [by his] servant Nanai-vandak.

[*Verso*] To the noble lord Varzakk (son of) Nanai-thvar (of the family) Kanakk. Sent [by] his servant Nanai-vandak.

[*Recto*] To the noble lord Varzakk (son of) Nanai-thvar (of the family) Kanakk, 1,000 (and) 10,000 (times) blessing (and) homage on bended knee, as is offered to the gods, sent by his servant Nanai-vandak. And, sirs, (it would be) a good day for him who might see you happy (and) free from illness; and, sirs, (news of) your (good) health having been heard (by me), I consider myself immortal!

And, sirs, Armat-sach in Jiuquan (is) safe (and) well and Arsach in Guzang (is) safe (and) well. And, sirs, it is three years since a Sogdian came from "inside" [*i.e., from China*]. I settled(?) Ghotam-sach, and (he is) safe (and) well. He has gone to Kwr'yнк, and now no-one comes from there so that I might write to you about the Sogdians who went "inside," how they fared (and) which countries they reached. And, sirs, the last emperor, so they say, fled from Luoyang because of the famine, and fire was set to his palace and to the city, and the palace was burnt and the city [destroyed]. Luoyang (is) no more, Ye (is) no more! Moreover, the . . . Huns(?), and they . . . Changan, so that they hold(?) it(?) . . . as far as N'yn'ych and as far as Ye, these (same) Huns [who] yesterday were the emperor's

(subjects)! And, sirs, we do not know wh[ether] the remaining Chinese were able to expel the Huns [from] Changan, from China, or (whether) they took the country beyond(?). And [. . . in . . . there are] a hundred freemen from Samarkand . . . in [. . .] Dry'n there are forty men. And, sirs, your [. . . it is] three years since [. . . came] from "inside" . . . unmade (cloth)(?). And from Dunhuang up to Jincheng in . . . to sell, linen cloth is going [= selling well?], and whoever has unmade (cloth)(?) or *raghzak* (which is) not (yet) brought (to market)(?), not (yet) taken, [can](?) sell [all](?) of it . . . And, sirs, as for us, whoever dwells (in the region) from Ji[ncheng](?) up to Dunhuang, we (only) survive [*lit.* "have breath"] so long as the . . . lives, and (we are) without family(?), both old and on the point of death. If this were not (so), [I would] not be ready(?) to write to you (about) how we are. And, sirs, if I were to write to you everything (about) how China has fared, (it would be) beyond(?) grief: there is no profit for you (to gain) there from. And, sirs, it is eight years since I sent Saghrak and Farn-aghat "inside" and it is three years since I received a reply from there. They were well . . ., (but) now, since the last evil occurred, I do [not] receive a reply from there (about) how they have fared. Moreover, four years ago I sent another man named Artikhu-vandak. When the caravan departed from Guzang, Wakhush[akk] the . . . was there, and when they reached Luoyang, bo[th the . . .] and the Indians and the Sogdians there had all died of starvation. [And I] sent Nasyan to Dunhuang, and he went "outside" [*i.e., out of China*] and entered (Dunhuang), (but) now he has gone without (obtaining) permission from me, and he has (received) a great retribution and was struck dead in the . . .

Lord Varzakk, my greatest hope is in your lordship! Pesakk (son of) Dhruwasp-vandak holds 5[...]<sup>4</sup> staters from me and he put it on deposit(?), not to be transferred, and you should hold [it . . .] sealed from now (on), so that without (my) permission . . . Dhruwasp-van[dak] . . .

[Lord] Nanai-thvar, you should remind Varzakk that he should withdraw(?) this deposit(?), and you should (both) count [it], and if the latter is to hold it, then you should (both) add(?) the interest to the capital and put it in a transfer document, and you (Nanai-thvar) should give this too to Varzakk. And if you (both) think (it) fit that the latter should not hold it, then you should (both) take it and give it to someone else whom you do think fit, so that this money may thereby become more. And, behold, (there is) a certain orphan . . . dependent(?) on this income(?), and if he should live and reach adulthood [*lit.* "years"], and he has no hope of (anything) other than this money, then, Nanai-thvar, (when) it should be heard that Takut has departed(?) to the gods — the gods and my father's soul (will) be a support(?) to you! — and when Takhsich-vandak is grown up [*lit.* "big"], then give him a wife and do not send him away from yourself. Mortal(?) gratification(?) has departed(?) from us(?) in the . . ., because (from) day (to) day we expect murder(?) and robbery. And when (the two of) you need cash, then you (Nanai-thvar) should take either 1,000 staters or 2,000 staters out of the money. And Wan-razmak sent to Dunhuang for me 32 (vesicles of) musk belonging to Takut so that he might deliver them to you. When they are handed over you should make five shares, and therefrom Takhsich-vandak should take three shares, and Pesakk (should take) one share, and you (should take) one share.

[*Verso*] This letter was written [*lit.* "made"] when it was the year thirteen of Lord Chirthswan in the month Taghmich.

## Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 3

[*Verso*] From (his) daughter Shayn to the noble lord Nanai-dhat.

[*On another part of the verso*] From (his) servant [*left unfinished*].

[*Recto*] To (my) noble lord (and) husband Nanai-dhat, blessing (and) homage on bended knee, as is offered to the gods. And (it would be) a good day for him who might see you healthy, happy (and) free from illness, together with everyone; and, sir, when I hear (news of) your (good) health, I consider myself immortal!

Behold, I am living ..., badly, not well, wretchedly, and I consider myself dead. Again and again I send you a letter, (but) I do not receive a (single) letter from you, and I have become without hope towards you. My misfortune is this, (that) I have been in Dunhuang for three years thanks(?) to you, and there was a way out a first, a second, even a fifth time, (but) he(!) refused to bring me out. I requested the leaders that support (should be given) to Farnkhund for me, so that he may take me to (my) husband and I would not be stuck in Dunhuang, (for) Farnkhund says: I am not Nanai-dhat's servant, nor do I hold his capital. I also requested thus: If he refuses to take me to (my) husband, then ... such support for me that he may take me to (my) mother. The leaders say: Here in Dunhuang there is no other relative closer than Artivan, (but) Artivan [say]s: Farnkhund ... whatever ... to do for you. If(?) I(?) (had) no guarantee, no protection, my father ... I have become ... not ... How much more would I have ... by my father if ... a servant of the Chinese! A free man ... who found ... and ... keeps (his) clothing in good condition(?). And you write (your) bidding to me about everything in ... so that I should ... you and I should know how to think, and if I do not ... you, then you write to me so that I should know how to serve the Chinese. In my paternal abode I did not have such a restricted ... as with(?) you. I obeyed your command (lit. took your command upon my head) and came to Dunhuang and I did not observe (my) mother's bidding nor (my) brothers'. Surely(?) the gods were angry with me on the day when I did your bidding! I would rather be a dog's or a pig's wife than yours! And for me ...

Sent by (your) servant Miwnay. This letter was written in the third month on the tenth day.

[*Added in the margin*] From (his) daughter Shayn to the noble lord Nanai-dhat, blessing (and) homage. And (it would be) a good [day] for him [who] might see [you] healthy, rested (and) happy. ... I have become ... and I watch over a flock of domestic animals. Differently to you, I had a ..., and ... went out. I am ... and I know that you do not lack twenty staters(?) to send. It is necessary to consider the whole (matter). Farnkhund has run away; the Chinese seek him but do not find him. Because of Farnkhund's debts we have become the servants of the Chinese, I together with (my) mother.

## Sogdian Ancient Letter No. 5

[*Verso*] To the noble lord, the chief merchant Aspandhat. — [Sent] by your servant [Fri-khwataw].

[*Recto*] To the noble lord Aspandhat, blessing (and) homage. And (it would be) a [good] day [for him] who might see you healthy (and) safe, happy, free from illness (and)

content. Fr[om Fri-khwataw] your servant. And [for me the] day (would be still) better if [I might see] you [my]self [and] might pay homage to you from nearby, [as] (homage is offered) to the gods.

[From] inside (China) [I] have heard worse, not better, (news) day (by) day, and whatever I might write concerning A[khurmaztakk](?), how he himself went (away) and what he had . . . I have become isolated, and, behold, I stay here in Guzang and I do not go hither (and) thither, and there is no caravan(?) (departing) from here. In Guzang (there are) 4 bundles of "white" for dispatch, and 2,500 (measures of)(?) pepper for dispatch, and a double *prasthaka* of *n(iiy)t*, and 5 *prasthakas* of *rysk*, and half a stater of silver. When Ghawtus went (away) from Guzang I went after him, and I came to Dunhuang, (but) I was prevented(?) from straying(?) outside (China). (If) . . . Ghawtus had seen [= found?] a level route, then I would have brought out the "Blacks." Many Sogdians were ready to leave, (but) they could not leave, for Ghawtus went by(?) the mountains. I(?) would (have) remain(ed) at Dunhuang, but they [= *the Sogdian inhabitants*] were destitute. I depend(?) on charity(?) from your *ëpr'k*, for I am serving(?) . . . in Guzang, and [they . . .] me, and they make me . . ., and they obtain my . . ., [and] they increase (it) with our . . . And . . . I am very wretched, and . . . the . . .

I heard thus: Kharstrang [owed(?)] you twenty staters of silver, and he declared(?) thus: I (will) bring(?) (it). He gave me the silver, and I weighed it, and (there were only) four and a half staters altogether. I asked: If he [sent] twenty staters, why do you give me four and a half staters? He said thus: Aspandhat found me on the way and he gave (it) to me(?). {He said thus: (There are) seven and a half staters of silver.} And for four staters I obtained four loads ofÖ. And the "Blacks" took the silver, for they said thus: We(?) have no money. For (according to them it is) better (that) I should be wretched than they! (If) you should hear how Akhurmaztakk has done me harm, then you should pay heed (to this) too.

Sent by your servant Fri-khwataw. This letter was written from Guzang in the third month on the thirtieth (day).

Etienne de la Vaissière, *Histoire des Marchands Sogdiens* (Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises 32, Paris, 2002). Translations © 2004 Nicholas Sims-Williams