

Settled rather than saddled Scythians: the easternmost Sakas

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Abstract

At the easternmost edge of the Iranian world, settled rather than saddled Scythians ran the kingdom of Khotan as Iranian-speaking Buddhists who traded and tussled with their T'ang and Tibetan neighbours. Straddling the Sino-Tibetan and Irano-Indic oecumenes, these Saka dynasts of the southern 'Silk Road' were conquered and converted by the Turkification and Islamisation of the Tarim Basin. Their effect, both historical and artistic, merits consideration in Scythian studies for their own achievements. This survey is based on the existing corpora of administrative and religious texts in Khotanese, an amply documented Middle Iranian language, which enables the tracing of the trajectory of these Scythian legates until the end of antiquity.

Keywords: Bactria; Mahayana Buddhism; eastern Middle Iranian; Khotan; Khotanese Saka; Kushans; Parthia; Sakas; Scythians; Sistan; Tarim Basin; Tillya tepe; Yuezhi

'The Scythians, however, though in other respects I do not admire them, have managed one thing, and that the most important in human affairs, better than anyone else on the face of the earth: I mean their own preservation. For such is their manner of life that no one who invades their country can escape destruction, and if they wish to avoid engaging with an enemy, that enemy cannot by any possibility come to grips with them'.²

'The Bactrians and Parthians descended from the Scythians, as did Attila the Great ... Our Lombards, Hungarians, Castellani, and Goths are descended from the Scythians ... The Turks too ... came from Scythia'.³

'In every age the immense plains of Scythia, or Tartary, have been inhabited by vagrant tribes of hunters and shepherds, whose indolence refuses to cultivate the earth, and whose restless spirit disdains the confinement of a sedentary life. In every age, the Scythians, and Tartars, have been renowned for their invincible courage, and rapid conquests'.⁴

At the easternmost edge of the Iranian world, settled and not saddled Sakas, as Iranian speakers and Buddhist practitioners, ran the kingdom of Khotan which traded and tussled with its T'ang and Tibetan neighbours respectively.⁵ Straddling the Sino-Tibetan

and Irano-Indic oecumenes, these eastern Saka dynasts of the southern 'Silk Road' came to an end with the Turkification and Islamisation of the Tarim Basin.⁶ Their impress, historical and artistic, merits consideration in Scythian studies for its own achievements.

This survey draws on our corpora of administrative and religious texts in Khotanese, an amply documented Middle Iranian language, which enables one to trace the trajectory of these *supposed* Scythian legates down to the end of antiquity. As Sir Harold Bailey rightly observed: 'Early Saka people had no occasion to write books or documents ... Khotan is thus the only ancient Saka state which we can know intimately from its own writings'.⁷

It cannot be gainsaid that the said Sakas must not be deemed direct descendants of those mounted nomads constituting the theme of the exhibition and accompanying conference. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest linguistically, genetically or culturally, what with the vast stretches, temporal and spatial, which preclude descreying much less discerning socio-cultural congruences. Subsumed as the Khotanese are under the ethnonym Saka, this Iranian-speaking group is but one among several under that imprecise ethnic nomenclature. One might be permitted a cue from Gibbon who pleaded: 'I indifferently use the appellation of *Scythians*, or *Tartars*'.⁸ Literary license, however, cannot endorse academic inaccuracy even if

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² Herodotus, *The Histories* 4.46.

³ Bergamo, *Supplementum*.

⁴ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*: Womersley ed. 2005: vol. I, 1025.

⁵ Dickens 2018: 863.

⁶ Sundermann 1996: 470; Soucek 2000: 302; Higham 2004: 339–42; Dickens 2018: 1454 with correction therein for he misattributes Soucek's authorship to a 'G.R. Smith' in his bibliography.

⁷ Bailey 1978: 5 in the maiden issue of *Afghan Studies* was the published version of a lecture read at the inauguration of the Society for Afghan Studies, London, 1972.

⁸ Womersley ed. 2005: 1025.

some residual vestige lingered in classical and medieval sources that Gibbon would have consulted. He would, in all likelihood, have been aware of that aforementioned Augustinian monk, da Bergamo's universal chronicle of 1483, whose enthusiasm for genealogically tracing a multitude of marauders to the Scythians is almost superstitious.⁹ One may mitigate by adducing that such vestigial notions of ethno-genesis need not be dismissed as wholly untenable. Both late Russian academicians, Elena Efimovna Kuzmina and Vadim Mikhailovich Masson, adumbrate these antecedents with conflated qualifiers.¹⁰ Likewise Sir Barry Cunliffe who remarks: 'Predatory nomadism first becomes apparent in Scythian-Saka cultures from the 9th to the 8th century BC'.¹¹ Herodotus, lest it needs reminding, plainly noted:

'The Sacae, a Scythian people, wore on their heads the *kurbasia*, a tall, pointed cap made of stiff material, they sported trousers, and, in addition to their native bows and arrows, carried battleaxes known as *sagareis*. In fact, these Sacae were Scythians from Amyrgium, but were called "Sacae" because that is the name given by the Persians to all the Scythians'.¹²

Again Sir Harold Bailey observed, in an appropriately-titled lecture, *A Half-Century of Irano-Indian Studies*: 'Saka, if we adopt the *Achaemenian value of the word for all the northerners from the Danube to the Iaxartes*, the modern Syr-darya, now survives in Ossetic of the Caucasus and in the Iranian dialects of Shughnān, Wakhān, and Munjān of the Pamirs'.¹³

⁹ Whitfield 2018: 15, n. 31.

¹⁰ Masson 1988: 102 convincingly stated: 'Since none of the peoples of the Eurasian steppes had a system of writing in ancient times, the scholars of the modern times endeavouring to reconstruct their history and culture relied at first on the antique tradition and, accepting the broad meaning of the term Scythae, regarded all inhabitants of the region as a single people'. Kuzmina (2007: 379–83) is a sound conspectus. She notes how east Iranian tribes in self-styling themselves as *arya* 'noble' was not so much 'self-consciousness of a gigantic Aryan unity' as a 'relic of the common origins of the tribes that had emerged from this unity' (Kuzmina 2007: 382). Bailey apud Vogelsang cautiously observed that 'we may safely assume that many of the newcomers [from south central Asia to northern Afghanistan] spoke an Iranian language and were related to the Scythian tribes that for hundreds of years had dominated the vast expanse of central Asia' (Bailey 2008: 137). The Harvard Iranist and now doyen of Khotanese studies, P. Oktor Skjærvø, in his opening remarks at a 1988 Paris symposium matter-of-factly commented: 'The history of Khotan, a small nation of speakers of an Iranian language, descendants of the Saka, or Scythian, tribes that once roamed the southern reaches of what is today's Soviet Union, is poorly known' (Skjærvø 1991: 255–56). Skjærvø's landmark edition of Khotanese texts has enriched us substantially.

¹¹ Cunliffe 2015: 459.

¹² Herodotus, *The Histories* 7.64; on Amyrgian Scythians see Piankov 1994 [1996]: 37–39.

¹³ Bailey 1972: 103, a lecture delivered at his conferral of the Royal Asiatic Society's Triennial Gold Medal, April 1972; emphasis mine. For Khotanese see Bailey 1958: 132; 1971a: 11–12; 1972: 103; 1976a: 8–9; 1976b: 34; 1979b: vii; 1982: 55; Frye 1984: 192; Hoernle apud Emmerick 1992: 6; Frye 1993: 186; Piankov 1994 [1996]: 42–43 furnishes

This disquisition is foregrounded recalling that 1978 exhibition in Great Britain, *Frozen tombs: the Culture and Art of the Ancient Tribes of Siberia*, also mounted at the British Museum in conjunction with the State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.¹⁴ Recalling Russia's tumultuous century at our October 2017 conference, one harks to Petrograd 1915, two years before the revolution, where Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev composed his *Scythian Suite*, opus 20. It was premiered there in January 1916. St. Petersburg, thankfully again it is, to whose enlightened namesake despot, we owe the founding seeds of the collections displayed in London (November 1978–February 1979) and now almost four decades later.¹⁵

Two years after the debut of Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite*, Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtzeff (1870–1952) fled Bolshevik Russia and during his English exile at Oxford's Bodleian library wrote daily what duly became a classic, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia*.¹⁶ Colleagues toeing the party line in the old country felt obliged to debunk 'this greatest of Russian experts in the field' according to whom 'Scythians had appeared from the east as nomadic conquerors, already possessing the animal style in fully developed form, and had superimposed their culture upon the matriarchal peasant communities of southern Russia seemed the epitome of bourgeois arrogance'.¹⁷

ethnographic data for these east Pāmīrī connections; Mallory and Mair 2008: 112, 255–56; Narain 1998: 33–35; Mallory and Adams 2006: 132; Kuzmina 2007: 381–82; Narain 2013: 39–40. Wakhī is laterally related but cannot be traced back to any known form of Khotanese as reminded in Skjærvø 1989: 375; 2006: 345.

¹⁴ Morris 1978; the exhibition opening was reviewed in Tisdall 1978: 13.

¹⁵ Korolkova 2017a charts Czar Peter's attempts at conceiving and coordinating the collection of material cultural remains in the distant Siberian east; also recounted briefly in Jettmar 1967: 13–14, 179–81. Coverage of the British Museum exhibition is in: Aspden 2017; Campbell-Johnston 2017; Hudson 2017; Januszczak 2017; Jones 2017; Kennedy 2017; Leighton 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Maitlan 2017; Richardson 2017; Sooke 2017; Whitworth 2017; Pankova 2020a. The Scythians have consistently captured the public imagination as evinced in lavishly illustrated publications commissioned by Time-Life Books (Trippett *et al.* 1978) and *National Geographic* (Edwardes 1996; 2003). Several catalogues of travelling exhibitions, especially of Scythian gold, have been published: the most recent Russian tome of the Hermitage's Golden Room collection is Alekseev (2012), gifted me by Dr Pavel Borisovich Lur'e, central Asian antiquities curator at the Hermitage, and available in a namesake English edition: A. Alekseev, *The Gold of the Scythian Kings in the Hermitage Collection* (2012). Also see overviews written by Alekseev for other visiting exhibitions of Scythian art in Alekseev 2000a; 2000b. Piotrovsky [1975]: still repays reading although written for the very first travelling exhibition of 197 loaned artefacts in April 1975, following five years of negotiations, to New York's Metropolitan Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles. Thomas Hoving, then director of the Met, pointed out in the catalogue's foreword that the exhibition came to pass through the efforts of Dr Kissinger, Secretary of State, and was expressly included in the joint communiqué issued on 3rd July 1974 by President Nixon and Premier Brezhnev following the former's official visit to the U.S.S.R. (27th June–3rd July 1974), erroneously noted as 13th July in Glueck 1975: 46.

¹⁶ Rostovtzeff 1922; anon. 1952: 8.

¹⁷ Jettmar 1967: 39. Momigliano 1994: 34, 36 is a timeless sketch first published in 1954 of one great savant by another. He notes how

A first, often overlooked, point is that Scythians, like Cimmerians, are the only peoples identifiable by their name and not artefacts in western central Asia.¹⁸ And in both cases by the Greeks. But we are not concerned with the Royal Scyths of the West but those of the East or the Sakas (transliterated in Chinese sources *sai*) who must be identified with the Issedones.¹⁹ Those Royal Scyths, *hoi basiléioi Skýthai*, designation of the leading tribe of the Scythian federation is probably an Iranian loan-translation of **saka-rauka* ‘Saka-ruling’ (*saka-* ‘strong’, cf. Avestan *sak-*, Old Indian *śak-*) from a base **ru/rau-* ‘to rule, command’, *rūkyām* (Khotanese gen. pl., an official title), cf. ‘ruler’ (Khotanese *rrund-nom. sg. rre*); and the tribal demonym in classical texts (Greek *sakaraukoi*, *sakaurakoi*, Latin *sacaraucae*, *saraucae*).²⁰ It lends ballast to the belief of existent bilingual relations between Greeks and Iranians in ancient southern Russia.²¹

any ‘talk on Rostovtzeff was discouraged or controlled’ although Soviet authorities published an ethnographic history of southern Russia in 1925 from a draft manuscript Rostovtzeff had left behind: he remained unaware of it until much later. Rostovtzeff ‘already knew the Hellenistic side of this civilization, soon proved to be an authority on Scythians and Sarmatians as well. In following up his nomads, he reached the borders of China and tackled problems of Chinese art whenever they could throw light on the Iranian elements of southern Russia.’ Ideological skewering of sources by communists is matched by that of chauvinists as evident in a recent multi-volume, pan-Turanian project: ‘The Uralo-Altai view, the strongest, most recent view, and the idea that the Scythians were Turkish have [*sic*] gained more and more support. Scientists evaluated the issue with [*sic*] all aspects of it [*sic*]. Putting paid a century-plus of scholarship on the ethnohistoric, namely Iranian, record inspires this *pièce justificative* by Çay and Durmuş 2002: 162; cf. Jettmar 1967: 17 for this fixation of ‘Turks in art’ universally and Taishan (1998: 152) on the baseless originating of Saka, Wusun and Yuezhi tribes as Türks from the Altai. Their just as frenzied Iranian counterparts, especially in the diaspora, remain ignorant thankfully of the now more than half-century-old writings of Yale University’s Ukrainian émigré historian, George Vladimirovich Vernadsky (1887–1973). His broad strokes, predicated on superficial philological similarities and an over enthusiastic recognition of Iranian cultural ubiquity across ancient Russia, discredited his wide readings and prolific writings. In Vernadsky (1946: 97; 1959: 63–64; 1968: 22) he persistently presumed that the origin of the ethnonym *Rus*, now consensually taken as Norse-Finnish in origin, was Iranian because Caucasian Scytho-Alans, ancestors of present-day Ossetes, numbered a clan known as Antes who merged sometime c. AD 800 with the *Rus*, whence *Rus-Alan* (Rokholani), an Alanic tribe who defeated the Scythians c. 200 BC, following which the former became known simply *Rus*, given the first half of the tribal name, and so Alanic *ruxs* ‘radiant light’ was the derivative for *Rus* or *Ros* (Russia, Russians). Frye (1946) and Clauson (1959) are rightly severe reviews detailing rectifications to the flawed application of oriental source evidence in Vernadsky 1946; 1959. Misleading conclusions as regards ‘Uralic cognates’ for the Scythian language are in Kuttner 1978: 225 but authoritatively examined in Schmitt 2018.

¹⁸ Hambly 2005: 706; Tokhtas’ev 1992: 563–67 and Ivantchik 2018 are authoritative surveys; Cimmero-Scythian interactions are examined in Vogelsang 2008: 86; Baumer 2012: 224–28; Cunliffe 2015: 192–98. Narain 2013: 31 wrongly erases distinctions between Cimmerians and Scythian ‘incomers’ pointed out in Khazanov 2015: 33–36; Adali 2017, an exhaustive recent treatment, compels a rethink of Cimmeric-Scythian dynamics in the region with ‘pre-existing power structures of the Ancient Near East’.

¹⁹ Taishan 2014: 8, 10.

²⁰ Bailey 1977/78: 45; 1979a: 207; 1985b: 8–9, 67–68; Thordarson 1988: 537, n. 1; Bailey apud Frye 1993: 44, 60, n. 52; Windfuhr 2000: 19.

²¹ Ball 2010: 101–105.

Nikolaev and Pankova bring down the curtain on our exhibition’s catalogue in their closing chapter entitled ‘After the Scythians’.²² They conclude therein by situating the Scythians as the first of the great Eurasian empires following which came the Sarmatians down to the Türks and Mongols.²³ An echo of this lingers in Christopher Marlowe’s transposing a Scythian shepherd’s rise to power in the person of that Çağatay Türk of the Barlas tribe hailing from the region of Kiš, modern Šahr-i Sabz (Özbekistān), Tīmūr or Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405). Marlowe’s landmark Tudor drama, scripted sometime in 1587/88, and whose title went as, *Tamburlaine the Great, Who, from a Scythian Shepherde, by his rare and wonderfull Conquests, became a most puissant and mightye Monarque*, was published in 1590 at Holborne Bridge, not far from the British Museum.²⁴ Academically inclined Marlowe, grounded in his classics, assuredly would have known of the Athenian tragic poet and dramatist, Choirilos of Samos, who declared: ‘the Saka, sheep shepherds, of the Scythian kin, live in Asia’.²⁵ Marlowe’s opening act, was set in Persepolis, ancient Pārs, homeland of the Achaemenians and, also later, the Sasanians. The fate of the Scythians was, for some three millennia, linked with the imperial destinies of both aforementioned and the Parthian empires.

Our earliest Iranian – and epigraphic – attestation of distinctly enumerated Scythians is in the Old Persian regnal inscriptions. It is by this gentilic (Old Persian *sakā*) that they were subsequently recorded in Indic sources: in Darius’s Bisutūn inscription, (DB I.6, DB II.21), Scythians are listed as *sakā* after the Bactrians, Sogdians and Gandhārāns respectively but last mentioned in DB II.21.²⁶ Likewise mentioned in Darius’s Persepolis terrace wall edict, DPe 18, following the lands of Achaemenid India; and DPh 5–6 where that Persepolis tablet’s body text commences delineating the empire’s four directions, *haca Sakaibiš tayai para Sugdam* ‘from the Scythians who [are] beyond Sogdiana’.²⁷ Far more important is their distinctive enumeration and pairing in Xerxes’ *daiva* or trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian) inscription at Persepolis, XPh 26–27, *sakā haumavargā*, ‘*haoma*-venerating Scythians’, *sakā tigraxaudā* ‘the Amyrgian Scythians, Scythians with pointed caps’.²⁸ The former are inconclusively conjectured to be the easternmost Sakas somewhere

²² Nikolaev and Pankova 2017.

²³ On Alans, Scythians and Sarmatians see Berndt 2018; Dickens 2018: 1334, 1346–47 respectively.

²⁴ Cunningham and Henson eds 1998.

²⁵ *Persika*, fragment 3; cited in Kuzmina 2007: 380.

²⁶ Schmitt 1991: 50, 56; Lecoq 1997: 188, 195.

²⁷ Bailey 1982: 8; Lecoq 1997: 228; Schmitt 2000: 61, 64, 93; Kuhrt 2007: II, 486.

²⁸ Lecoq 1997: 257; Schmitt 2000: 92–93; also listed in Susa empire list, DSe 26–27; Lecoq 1997: 232–33; Kuhrt 2007: II, 491; cited in Bailey 1970: 68; 1971a: 5; 1971b: 17–18; 1972: 100; Frye 1984: 103, n. 55; 1993: 45–46; Kuzmina 2007: 380; Mallory and Mair 2008: 107–108; Vogelsang 2008: 87; discussed as imperial representations and realities in Briant 2002: 172–83; Taishan 2014: 3; Benjamin 2018: 159.

between the Bactrians and Indians.²⁹ The latter are artistically evident along the eastern stairs of the Apadāna, Persepolis, c. 520–485 BC. But here Irān owes something to 'Irāq – or at least its Babylonians. At the northwest end in Nimrud of the palace of Aššurnāširpal II (885–889 BC) is a bas-relief depicting two shooting and galloping horsemen, trouser-clad with pointed caps and soft top boots.³⁰

A mention of Parthians may well bring to mind their 'armoured cavalry' (Greek *katáphraktoi*) and the Parthian shot for they were 'adept at this than anyone else except the Scythians'.³¹ But the Scythians were a long shot ahead. Credit where credit due: Clement of Alexandria (8.62) declared that 'both men and women of the Saka had bows and were able to shoot turning back when galloping a horse'.³² But eventually the Parthians wielded the whip in shunting off the Sakas into southeast Irān henceforth *sakastāna* in Pahlavi sources or *drangiana* of Greek geographers (Old Persian *zranka*, Inscrp. Parthian *skstn*, Middle Persian *sīstān*, Christian Sogdian *sgst'n*, Greek *segistēnē*, Buddhist Sanskrit *śakasthāna*, Classical Armenian *sakastana*, Classical Chinese *wuyishanli*, New Persian *sīstān*, Classical Arabic *sijistān*, Seistān va Baločistān, present-day Irān's largest province.³³ This is dateable between 120 and 80 BC because the Indo-Greeks collapsed at the hands of the Sakas. Parthia played its walk-on part in the destiny of the Sakas by preventing further tribal movements from upper Asia but not before losing two monarchs in battles, Phraates (c. 128 BC) and Artabanus II (c. 123 BC).³⁴ Only Mithradates II (c. 123–87 BC) was able to resume Iranian suzerainty in the east by which time the Sakas were temporarily ensconced in Sistān.³⁵

A gripe in sources from the 2nd century BC permits one to sketch not confidently but cursorily. The eastern part of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom north of the Hindu Kuš, particularly around the environs of Aī Khanum,³⁶ was annexed by nomads in 145–140 BC. In the first instance Scythians and second time around by the Yuezhi wave emerging from Gansu farther east in China. A Scythian runic inscription on a silver ingot gives away their

presence during the initial invasion.³⁷ Indirect evidence comes from Chinese sources. Bactria (Chinese *daxia*), to be sure, was under the sway of the Sakas until 130 BC. The Yuezhi themselves were being pushed out west thanks to the Xiongnu onslaught.³⁸ This billiard ball effect of tribal waves into south central Asia, and eventually the northern rim of the subcontinent, need not detain us here. Briefly, the Sakas were ejected from Bactria by the Yuezhi who established themselves in north-central Afghānistān. They re-arranged it into five *yabghu* or sub-provinces, the third of which would stand out in history and attested in Chinese annals as the Guishuang/Kueizhuang or Kušāns.³⁹ It is entirely plausible that the Kušāns absorbed some of the Sakas into their confederation. Tellingly tantalising, this has been proposed in recent scholarship where we have now come to consider those interred at Tillya tepe with their Bactrian gold may not be Yuezhi-Kušān, as the late Véronique Schiltz had cautioned.⁴⁰ Her French compatriot, Claude Rapin, reminds us as well that the Tillya tepe burials,⁴¹ containing a plethora of bronze mirrors and decorative plaques betraying Chinese links, demonstrates how this location was a waypoint 'between the steppe belt and Indo-Scythian world'.⁴² The exact ethnic provenance of buried artefacts at Tillya tepe as that of Sakas, as previously suggested by the late Paul Bernard, is still to be determined.⁴³

The Kušāns, at any rate, played a pivotal role in the eventual formation of the kingdom of Khotan before the 'Silk Road' opened in the latter part of the 2nd century BC. Indian Buddhism arrived at an Iranian, namely Kušān remove, in the Tarim Basin (modern Chinese *talimu pendi*) and therefrom China. Accompanying the Mahāyāna doctrine was its liturgical medium, Sanskrit and another distinct dialect of post-Aśokan, inscriptional northwest Prakrit or Gāndhārī for daily administration in the oasis towns of the southeast Tarim Basin during the 3rd century BC. Far removed from its Indian locale, it was an entirely different dialect of Gāndhārī known locally as Niyā or Krorāna Prakrit.⁴⁴ Sir Harold Bailey coined it Gāndhārī that was

²⁹ Schmitt 2004: 63–64.

³⁰ Kuzmina 2007: 380.

³¹ Plutarch, *Lives*, *Crassus* 24; Clements 2017: 35; Benjamin 2018: 160.

³² Cited in Kuzmina 2007: 380.

³³ Bailey 1958: 132; 1970: 68; 1978: 2; 1982: 8; 1983: 1230–31; 1985b: 66; Frye 1992: 166; Wolski 1993: 86–87; Frye 1996a: 444.

³⁴ Daffinà 1967 is an exhaustive monograph combing all classical sources on this movement. Junge 1939: 103; von Gabain 1961: 497–98; Bailey 1970: 68–69; Bivar 1969: 40; Frye 1984: 193–94; Taishan 1998: 2, 167–77 is a detailed examination of Chinese sources on the Sakastana-Wuyishanli kingdom; Higham 2004: 291; Wiesehöfer 2007: 111; Liu 2010: 22; Callieri 2016; Rezakhani 2017: 34–38; Benjamin 2018: 157–59.

³⁵ Herzfeld 1935: 8, 54; Frye 1984: 194; 1993: 206–207; Stavisky 1986: 118; Narain 1990: 158; 1998: 47; Benjamin 2007: 213; Wiesehöfer 2016: 5; Benjamin 2018: 160.

³⁶ Higham 2004: 29–30.

³⁷ Rapin 2007: 50.

³⁸ Enoki, Koshelenko and Haidary 1999: 175–76; Higham 2004: 390–92; Benjamin 2007: 89–90; Chakravarti 2016: 1290; Rezakhani 2017: 94–95.

³⁹ Bivar 1969: 38–40; Brentjes 1978: 193–94; Frye 1984: 250–51; 1993: 180–81, 185–87; 1996c: 456; Narain 1990: 159; 1998: 41–47; Posch 1995: 84–88 marshalls Chinese sources for a regional Bactrian history extensively; Enoki, Koshelenko and Haidary 1999: 185–86; Higham 2004: 189–91; Benjamin 2007 is the standard and most comprehensive treatment of their Tarim Basin *Urheimat* and forced *Volkerwanderung* to Bactria; Rapin 2007: 61; Mallory and Mair 2008: 95; Vogelsang 2008: 144–45; Liu 2010: 6–7, 15; Baumer 2014: 46–47; Hansen 2017: 110, n. 32; Rezakhani 2017: 49–55; Benjamin 2018: 181–83; Whitfield 2018: 57–63.

⁴⁰ Schiltz 1999: 71.

⁴¹ Higham 2004: 349–51.

⁴² Rapin 2007: 56–57.

⁴³ Contra Bivar 1983: 193–94; contra Frye 1996b: 455; Vogelsang 2008: 143; Callieri 2016; Benjamin 2018: 184; see also Francfort 2011; 2012.

⁴⁴ Sundermann 1996: 469; Higham 2004: 205–207, 309–11; Mallory and Mair 2008: 81–87, 278. Emmerick 1983b: 963; 1989: 134 notes that

written in the *kharoṣṭhī* script (Old Iranian *xšaθra-piṣtra* ‘royal writing’).⁴⁵

Scholarly consensus contends that migrating Saka tribes migrated in the first half of the 2nd century BC to the Tarim Basin and settled on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert (modern Chinese *takelamağan shamo*).⁴⁶ Chinese history attests the presence of these Sakas from the 2nd century BC as ruling monarchs when Zhang Qian filed his report sometime after 140 BC for the (Western) Han emperor, Wudi concerning a possible alliance with the Yuezhi against the Xiongnu. From the 3rd century BC comes our earliest literary, indirect evidence of Iranians domiciled in Khotan because hitherto there is nothing to confirm their advent much less presence.⁴⁷ Later literary evidence comes from Khotanese, an eastern Middle Iranian language written in a southern Turkestan Brāhmī script.⁴⁸ Khotan was a centre of Mahāyāna Buddhism by the early 5th century BC.⁴⁹ The alleged introduction of Buddhism by 84 BC need not be dismissed out of hand.⁵⁰ What can be is the supposed Indian conquest of Khotan in the 3rd century BC notwithstanding the presence of Prākṛit-speaking, Indian colonists along the burgeoning ‘Silk Road’ even before Buddhism’s regional expansion.⁵¹ But the foundation legends tracing Buddhism’s advent in Khotan to the 3rd century BC, thanks to Aśoka’s son Kuṇāla or some of his ministers, merits consideration,⁵² as does the earliest local documentation of Khotan through a series of Sino-Kharoṣṭhī coins whose dating has been vexing but dateable in all probability before AD 260.⁵³

Khotan must have initially been following Hīnayāna Buddhism as its Sarvāstivādin variant was prevalent across most of central Asia and only later the Mahāyāna sect became popular.

⁴⁵ Bailey 1946: 764–97; 1972: 103; 1982: 64–65; Emmerick 2001: 34; Higham 2004: 182.

⁴⁶ Bailey 1970: 68; 1971b: 18; 1982: 3; Emmerick 1983a: 263; 1992: 2; 2012: 377; Russell 1983: 684; Frye and Litvinsky 1996: 461; Sundermann 1996: 470; Skjærvø 2004: 34; Mallory and Mair 2008: 315; Kumamoto 2009; Baumer 2014: 138; Walter 2014: 31. The dates are inconclusive and range across the 3rd–2nd centuries BC with recent scholarship preferring an earlier date.

⁴⁷ Bailey 1979b: viii; Emmerick 1979 [1983]: 168, n. 7 for references to the Endere Kharoṣṭhī document 661 mentioning *khotana maharaya rayatiraya* ‘of the great king of Khotan’ and commonly presumed as that of the 3rd century thereby leading one to surmise that titles, namely, ‘the use of Iranian terms such as *hīnāyasa-* and *kṣuṇa-* points to an established connection between the Iranian inhabitants and royal power’; Emmerick 1983a: 265; 1992: 2; Skjærvø 1987: 784; 2003: lxv; Mair and Skjærvø 1992: 465; Tremblay 2007: 99; Kumamoto 2009.

⁴⁸ Bailey 1958: 136–37; Emmerick 1979 [1983]: 168; 1992: 7 notes a 10th-century document addressed to the court of Khotan; Maggi 2009: 334–35.

⁴⁹ Sundermann 1996: 470; Nattier 2004: 121; Uwe-Hartmann 2005: 1146; Maggi 2009: 341; Whitfield 2018: 144–45. Walter 2014: 32 notes that Tantric Buddhism was on the ascent from the 7th century onwards in Khotan.

⁵⁰ Emmerick 1983b: 952; 1989: 133; 1992: 3; Sundermann 1996: 470.

⁵¹ Bailey 1982: 43; Emmerick 1990: 492; 1992: 3; Mallory and Mair 2008: 300.

⁵² Skjærvø 1987: 783; 2004: 34; Emmerick 1979 [1983]: 167; 1983b: 951; 1992: 1–2.

⁵³ Cribb (1985: 145) estimated that the coins range from c. AD 1 to c. AD 130 and must be acknowledged for conclusively adducing evidence

An excursus now is in order to highlight that Khotanese texts, constituting the core of Khotan Saka studies and so readily available from the 8th to 10th centuries, were previously our earliest linguistic evidence of a fully vocalised Iranian language. This must be revised in light of my teacher Nicholas Sims-Williams’s discovery and decipherment of the corpus of Bactrian legal documents.⁵⁴ Bactrian, like Khotanese, unlike Sogdian, Khwarezmian, Parthian or Pahlavi, is the only other vocalised Middle Iranian language. The earliest Bactrian documents, at the time of writing, are two purchase contracts of uncertain date and our oldest, extant, vocalised Middle Iranian samples.⁵⁵

None of our Khotanese texts employ the demonym Saka to describe themselves although its traces are found in some documents from the 7th–10th centuries.⁵⁶ The indigenous name for the people in Old Khotanese was *hvatana-*; their land was *hvatana-kṣīra* (Old Khotanese *hvatāna-*, Late Khotanese *hvaṃna-*, *hvana-*, *hvaṃ-*, Niyā Prākṛit *khotana*, Sogdian *γwδnyk*); and ‘[language] of Khotan’ (*hvatanaū*, *hvaṃno*, *hvatano* formed from *hvatāna-* plus adj. suffix *-aa-* < *-aka-*), Bailey.⁵⁷ It may well be a self-reference from *hvata* ‘self’ connoting ‘[rulers] themselves’ (cf. Avestan *xvatō*, Zoroastrian/Book Pahlavī *xvat*), an unconscious acknowledgment of ‘the Saka people who settled in Khotan before their record begins in the 2nd century BC in Chinese reports’.⁵⁸ A throwback to this peripatetic past and its spiritedness can be glimpsed when reading how the Chinese pilgrim Songyun (?–AD 528), sojourning through Khotan in the early 6th century, noticed Khotanese women wore girdles, vests and trousers, and regularly rode on horseback.⁵⁹ The Tibetans referred to Khotan as *li-yul* ‘li land’ whose etymology remains unexplained.⁶⁰ A *Volksetymologie* ascribes the name for Khotan to Old Indian *gostana* lit. ‘earth-breast’ (Buddhist Sanskrit *gostana-deśa*, Khotanese *gaustam*, Tibetan *sa-nu*), allusions to that Aśokan legend of a banished son whose ministers witnessed the earth rise in the form of a breast at the very location Khotan was established. Xuanzang gave

of Kuṣān authority over Khotan in the 1st century AD; summarised in Wang 2004: 37–38; Kumamoto 2009; Hansen 2017: 341; Benjamin 2018: 286.

⁵⁴ Sims-Williams 2000 [2001]–2012.

⁵⁵ Sims-Williams and de Blois (2018: 82), per their computation of the Bactrian era, posit ranging both of these undated, purchase contracts in fragmentary state (DOCS aa, ab) to AD 312–380. A well-preserved, complete and dateable polyandrous marriage contract (DOC A) is now known to have been written and notarised on 13th October 332. Our western Middle Iranian (Parthian) evidence is doubtless older but unvocalised, namely that Awrōmān land sale deed and those 2,500-plus formulaic ostraca of wine receipts from Nisā (2nd–1st centuries BC).

⁵⁶ Bailey 1958: 132; Emmerick 1968: 2.

⁵⁷ Bailey 1958: 131; 1983: 1232.

⁵⁸ Bailey 1982: 3.

⁵⁹ Mallory and Mair 2008: 79; Whitfield 2018: 142.

⁶⁰ Emmerick 1979 [1983]: 167; 1983a: 263 on the Tibetan text, *Li yul lurī-bstan-pa*, one of four foundation texts sourced to describe the origins of Khotan; Skjærvø 2003: lxvi; 2012: 109; Kumamoto 2009.

the country's official name as *kustana* 'earth-breast', which was neither in currency among the Khotanese or the Chinese (earliest attestation *yuzhi*, classical Chinese *yutian*, Modern Chinese *hetian*).⁶¹

Khotan, for the Chinese more so than Buddhism, conjures jade.⁶² It was a reputed centre for abundant jade stone as depicted in the official dynastic compilation, *Hanshu* or 'History of the Former Han' (206 BC–AD 8).⁶³ One recalls that the jade road was older than the silk one.⁶⁴ Khotan was *the* centre of silk production in the Tarim Basin and Sir Marc Aurel Stein opined that Khotan, not China, was the real Serindia ancient geographers had in mind.⁶⁵ And jade, like gold, conjures images of Sakan wealth.⁶⁶ Khotan was blessed with a superb supply of authentic jade, real nephrite, as the town was between the flowing Yöröng Kāsh ('white jade') and Qara qāsh ('black jade') streams flowing from the Qurum (Kunlun) mountains.⁶⁷ The river was known in Khotanese as *ranjāi ttāja*, 'river of precious stone';⁶⁸ the Khotanese *ira* 'jade' here substituted with the prestigious Indian lexeme *rana*- < older *ratna*-.

Khotan was strategically positioned on the edge of the Täklamakan, with vast distances between oases to the east such as Niyä,⁶⁹ and the only feasible route westward wound out of Xinjiang. Throughout the 1st millennium, down to the eventual collapse of the kingdom, it changed hands among Tibetan, Turkish and T'ang contenders. Khotan's shaky Tibetan interregnum covered two decades (AD 670–90).⁷⁰ The Chinese routinely subjugated or manipulated, as was their meddlesome wont, in the politics of all 'Silk Road' statelets or Western Regions, a practice prevalent down to the present. No mention of Khotan occurs in Chinese documents of the 9th century but our sources pick up a century later. A protracted struggle between Khotan and Qäsqär,⁷¹ at the western edge of the Täklamakan and terminus of the northern and southern 'Silk Road' tiers, was the beginning of the end. For taking advantage of this distraction, Khotan's last Buddhist ruler fell to the Qarākhānid Türks after a 24-year campaign despite being aided by

Tibetan and Buddhist Uyğur allies. By 1006, a certain Yūsuf Qadīr Khān had assumed the mantle and three years later, in 1009, Khotan was despatching tribute to the Chinese court under the name of a 'black khān' (Chinese *heihanwang*).⁷²

Firdausi, by 1010, was completing his Persian epic, the *Shāhnāma* 'Book of Kings', based on a now lost redaction of the Sasanian *Khwadāy-nāmag* 'Book of Lords'. Firdausi, when appropriating the heritage of Parthian minstrelsy and semi-legendary history in his national narrative, did not omit that Iranian Herakles, the very personification of Saka valour, 'a Saka hero, not a hero of the indigenous pre-Saka population of Seistan',⁷³ but that 'Saka hero of the *Shāh-nāme*, Rostam, who, rather than any king, is in many respects the real hero of the "Book of Kings"⁷⁴: Rustam (Old Iranian **rautastakhma*-Zoroastrian/Book Pahlavī *rōtastakhma* [apud Bailey]; Old Iranian **raudhastakhma*-, Zoroastrian/Book Pahlavī *rōdstakhm* [apud Christensen] 'mighty in bodily strength'), or Rustam the Sakan (New Persian *rustam-i sagzī*, Armenian *rōstom sagčik*).⁷⁵ Eight centuries later, in 1853, Matthew Arnold would recount him and his ill-fated son in *Sohrab and Rustum*.⁷⁶

In 1897, the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* (vol. 66) carried an extra number issue wherein

⁶¹ 'Cow-breast' apud Bailey 1982: 2–3; Emmerick 1983a: 266; 1990: 492; Skjærvø 1987: 784 details this legend and alternate versions at length; Mair and Skjærvø 1992: 465; Mallory and Mair 2008: 77–81; Skjærvø 2004: 34; 2012: 109.

⁶² Wood 2003: 26–28; Michaelsen 2004: 43–49; Higham 2004: 143; Skjærvø 2009; Hansen 2017: 435–36; Whitfield 2018: 25–28.

⁶³ Baumer 2014: 138.

⁶⁴ Mallory and Mair 2008: 78.

⁶⁵ Wood 2003: 43.

⁶⁶ Whitfield 2018: 141.

⁶⁷ Emmerick 1992: 1; Hansen 2017: 346; Whitfield 2018: 138.

⁶⁸ Bailey 1982: 1.

⁶⁹ Higham 2004: 242–44; Whitfield 2018: 139.

⁷⁰ Hinüber 1991: 102; Skjærvø 1991: 256; Mallory and Mair 2008: 80–81; Whitfield 2018: 142–43.

⁷¹ Higham 2004: 179–80; Mallory and Mair 2008: 69–71.

⁷² Samolin 1964: 80–82; Barthold 1977: 273, 281, n. 2; 1987: 969–70; Bailey 1982: 3; Hinüber 1991: 107; Skjærvø 2003: lxxv; 2004: 41; Kumamoto 2009; DeWeese 2011: 725; Xinjiang 2013: 131–32; Baumer 2014: 138; Walter 2014: 33; Hansen 2017: 368–70; Tao 2017: 124–26; Whitfield 2018: 144.

⁷³ Boyce 1955: 475.

⁷⁴ Russell 2004: 543.

⁷⁵ Bailey 1970: 69; 1971b: 19; 1976a: 8; 1978: 5; 1983: 1231–32; 1985b: 66; Alishan 1989: 17–23; Frye 1993: 219; Schwartz apud Davidson 2013: 105, n. 26 alternately proposed deriving it from Avestan **raotas-taxma* 'having the strength of a stream'. Yarshater (1983: 454–56) is the best synopsis which must be consulted for Elamite attestations of his name (*rašdama*, *rašdakma* < **rastu-taxma*), suggested by Ilya Gershevitch (Yarshater 1983: 456, n. 3); and, more importantly, highlighting how Nöldeke (1930: 13–14) was the first to propose that 'Rustam and Zal are localized most decidedly in Sistan (Drangiana) and Zābul (Arachosia)' and the Sistani-Sakan origins of Rustam. Melikian-Chirvani (1998 [2001]: 190, 198 n. 117) proposed that Hellenic-Scythian art is where one discerns the 'earliest representation of Herakles [= Rustam] found among the communities speaking Iranian languages'. See therein his evidential reference to the *Scythian Gold* catalogue edited by Ellen Reeder *et al.* which accompanied the exhibition of Ukrainian gold objects mounted at San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio; LACMA, Los Angeles; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore; Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; and the Grand Palais, Paris (November 2000–December 2001). Bivar (1983: 195) alerted one to the possibilities of parallels in Saka funerary tradition and the role of the horse with that of Rustam's last rites in the *Shāhnāma*.

⁷⁶ Pound 1906; Giles 1910; Javadi 2003 is a fulsome native assessment in recent Persian literature. A perceptive piece, Allott (1973), correctly attempts at dispelling Arnold's 'Scythian' in 'The Strayed Reveller' (line 162) as one for he could not have had those Scythians of Aeschylus, Pindar and Herodotus in mind when composing this verse when deploying 'what is now a confusing obsolete sense'. On Arnold's citing of Gibbon who too uses a loose descriptor, see *supra* Womersley ed. 2005: 1025, and Allott 1973: 164, n. 2, who contends Arnold was probably thinking of either Alans or Cumans.

Augustus Frederic Rudolph Hoernle (1841–1918), principal of the *Calcutta Madrassah*, published an article concerning an ‘unknown language’ which puzzled him after having come to his attention and described, in his November 1905 report to the Under Secretary to the Government of India, as ‘seem to prove clearly that the language of the documents is an Indo-Iranian dialect.’ Hoernle would become the decipherer of Khotanese.⁷⁷

His Persianist successor and principal of the *Calcutta Madrassah*, Sir E. Denison Ross, returned to England becoming the first director of the School of Oriental Studies (now SOAS) established a century ago in 1916.⁷⁸ One of Ross’s earliest appointees, Harold Walter Bailey, the Parsee Community Lecturer in Iranian Studies (1929–36), upon subsequent translation to Cambridge as Professor of Sanskrit (1936–67), would take up where Hoernle left off devoting a lifetime’s industry towards translating these Khotanese documents which Sir Aurel Stein collected during three of his four expeditions to central Asia (1900–1901, 1906–1908, 1913–16).⁷⁹ This entire tranche was deposited at the British Museum’s Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts and remained there until the British Library was constituted in 1973.

A milestone in Iranistics was reached when Sir Harold Bailey published his *Dictionary of Khotan Saka*.⁸⁰ The Sakas verily went *para darya* ‘beyond the sea’ when, to commemorate its publication, an *opus* planned ‘in 1934, forty-four years ago, to make available to Iranisants all Iranian material ... concerned with the one Saka dialect of North Iranian of which Ossetic (Arsia) in the Caucasus and Wakhi in Wakhān in the Pamirs are other branches’,⁸¹ Columbia University’s Centre for Iranian Studies invited Sir Harold to deliver a week-long series of lectures eventually published as the *Culture of the Sakas in Ancient Iranian Khotan*.⁸²

⁷⁷ Although A.F.R. Hoernle was its discoverer, Emmerick (1992: 6) points out that J. Kirste was the designator when he proposed the expression ‘khotanisch’ in his published 1912 article; Wood (2003: 192–93); Skjærvø (2003: xxvi, xxxviii–xlvi, lxix); Sims-Williams (2004: 418–20) is an authoritative survey of Hoernle; Maggi 2009: 331; Hansen 2017: 348–49.

⁷⁸ Ross 1943: 168.

⁷⁹ Skjærvø 2003: xlvii–xlix.

⁸⁰ Bailey 1979b.

⁸¹ Bailey 1979b: vii.

⁸² Bailey 1982; cf. Emmerick 2001: 44; 2002: 10. Also see foreword by Ehsan Yarshater, sponsor and organiser of the *Columbia Lectures in Iranian Studies* (Bailey 1982: vii). Russell (1983: 679–80), an *alumnus* and then lecturer at his *alma mater*, recalled these Columbia lectures in October 1979, the maiden in this series, ‘delivered over five consecutive days, with one hour allotted to each lecture; the latter, in fact, never lasted less than two hours, and at the end of each Prof. Bailey fielded questions from his weary and bedazzled listeners, without himself showing the slightest sign of fatigue. But for the firmness of the Columbia janitors and the departure of the audience, the lectures might have been thrice their present length. Asked by one listener for a concise statement of the general importance of Khotanese studies to the field of history in general, Bailey suggested

His seventh volume on *Khotanese Texts* appeared a decade before his demise.⁸³ The Khotanese Stein collection of approximately 50 scrolls, 2,000 paper fragments and 100 woodslips, under the aegis of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, was authoritatively deciphered, and translated by P. Oktor Skjærvø, as *Khotanese Manuscripts from Chinese Turkestan in The British Library*, 2002.⁸⁴ It was fitting what that recently deceased Indologist, Awadh Kishore Narain, stated when commissioned by *The Cambridge History* series towards the end of the previous century: ‘The variety of linguistic remains in the Saka language provides what amounts to a veritable index to the high civilization of the Sakas in Inner Asia.’⁸⁵

that here was a civilization whose language proved that, long before central Asia was Muslim or Turkic, great Iranian cultures thrived across its vast expanses.’ Bailey published extensively also on Ossetic (Sims-Williams and Hewitt 1997: 113; Emmerick 2001: 35; Sheldon 2002), a descendant of northeast Iranian or Scytho-Sarmatian dialects: Old Ossetic (Alanic) was spoken by the Alans, Sarmatian nomadic pastoralists, closely related to Scythians and also of Iranic stock, who migrated from central Asia to the Urals between the 6th and 4th centuries BC. Ossetic is, geographically, the westernmost of east Iranian languages spoken across the central Caucasus covering Georgia including the south Ossetia/Tskhinvali autonomous region and north Ossetia/Alania within today’s Russian federation. Ossetic is the sole surviving remnant of the Scytho-Sarmatian dialect group and actually the only Iranian language native to Europe. Bailey was known to have compiled his rhyming diaries into an epic running some 3,000 verses ‘in a private language concocted from classical Sarmatian inscriptions’, Rush (1996: 12). Also recalled by my senior SOAS colleague, Prof. B. George Hewitt, to whom I owe a copy of his transcript, ‘Reminiscences of Sir Harold’, read at his funeral service, 19th January 1996. He also lectured in both Ossetian dialects, Digoron and Iron, to his suitably impressed hosts during a visit to Soviet Georgia in 1966 (Bivar 1996: 408; Rush 1996: 12). Gershevitch (2002: 294), Bailey’s fellow Iranist colleague at Cambridge, recalled working on Ossetic with him when a native informant, Barasbi Baytugan, was employed as a lecturer in that language in 1948. Baytugan years later would fondly remember Bailey, ‘the world’s sole master of the long-forgotten Saka cousin of his mother tongue [and] referred to him as “the father of the Ossetic people”’.

⁸³ Bailey 1985b.

⁸⁴ Bailey 1968; also published by the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum* (CII), was a pioneering forerunner to this edition. Skjærvø (2003) jointly published by the CII and The British Library. This corrected imprint is now out of stock. The first edition, Skjærvø (2002) with *corrigenda* slips, as well as Bailey (1968) are available for sale from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library, London.

⁸⁵ Narain 1990: 174.