

J. HARMATTA

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE DATE OF THE SOGDIAN «ANCIENT LETTERS»

The Sogdian «Ancient Letters» can be regarded without doubt as valuable historical sources for the history of Ancient Central Asia.¹ Their testimony cannot be used, however, as historical evidence without the exact knowledge of their chronological position. It is, therefore, easy to understand when the date of the «Ancient Letters» aroused a keen interest among Iranian scholars of late years. The historical value of these Sogdian texts was clearly recognized by Sir Aurel Stein, the discoverer of them, already before their decipherment and publication. Without any knowledge of their contents, he thought of two possibilities: (1) either they testify to the presence of an Iranian element in the indigenous population of the Tun-huang Limes — (2) or they may emanate from Sogdian traders travelling along the «Silk Route» between China and the Sogdian land.²

It is interesting to note that Sir Aurel Stein himself did not raise the question of the date of the «Ancient Letters». His only aim was to establish certain chronological limits for the use of the paper on which the letters were written. He referred to the invention dated from 105 A. D. of the paper in China on the one hand, and to the latest Chinese documents, dated from 137 A. D. and 153 A. D. respectively, found on the Tun-huang Limes, on the other hand. On the basis of this and other archaeological evidence he concluded «that the garrisoning of the stations of the Limes must have ceased some time in the second century A. D.»³ From this statement it becomes perfectly clear that he put the writing of these paper documents roughly between 105 A. D. and the end of the second century A. D. Unfortunately, Sir Aurel Stein's views concerning the composing of the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» were misunderstood and misinterpreted by H. Reichelt when he published these documents for the first time. He ascribed to him the view that the letters were written between 105 A. D. and 137/153 A. D., *i.e.* between the invention of the paper and the

¹ Cf. their appreciation by W. B. HENNING: *The Date of the Sogdian Ancient Letters*. BSOAS 12 (1948) 602.

² SIR AUREL STEIN: *Serindia*. II. Oxford 1921. 676, 752.

³ *Serindia*. II. 673.

supposed withdrawal of the Chinese garrisons from the Limes.⁴ It is, however, perfectly clear from the text quoted above that Sir Aurel Stein carefully dated the abandoning of the military stations on the Tun-huang Limes to «some time in the second century A. D.».

It is to be regretted that W. B. Henning was also misled by Reichelt. Thus, he too, ascribed to Sir Aurel Stein the view that the «Ancient Letters» are to be dated between 105 A. D. and 137/153 A. D. He also wanted to refute this theory, ascribed erroneously to Sir Aurel Stein, even by archaeological arguments, placed at his disposal by G. Haloun. Unfortunately, Henning had no acquaintance either with archaeological methodology or with the archaeological finds of the Tun-huang Limes. Thus the essence of the arguments put forward by Sir Aurel Stein totally escaped his attention. Moreover, he supposed that the «Ancient Letters» were found together with about seven hundred Chinese documents.⁵ Accordingly, he believed that the main argument used by Stein for a date between 105 A. D. and 137/153 A. D. was the joint occurrence of the «Ancient Letters» and the dated Chinese documents. Now, Haloun composed a table⁶ for him which shows that while 78 Chinese documents are dated between 98 B. C. and 39 B. C. and 30 pieces between 1 A. D. and 94 A. D., only one document can be dated to 137 A. D. and another doubtful one to 153 A. D. On the basis of these data Henning wrote that it is perilous «to argue that the Sogdian Letters must belong to a year in which occupation of the site is attested by the presence of a Chinese document» because «Chinese paper documents, too, some (three) from the second (?) century, but most of them (eleven) from T'ang times, probably the *eight century*, were found in the same area».⁷

The archaeological facts are, however, the followings. The Tun-huang Limes represents a fortification system extending more than 70 miles in length.⁸ Behind the wall rose a chain of watch-towers. The distance of these from each other varied between 3/4 of a mile and 4 1/2 miles. The overwhelming majority of the finds unearthed by Sir Aurel Stein came to light in the ruins of buildings adjoining to the watch-towers and in refuse-heaps situated in or around them. That means that we have to do not with one but with many archaeological

⁴ H. REICHELT: Die soghdischen Handschriftenreste des Britischen Museums. II Heidelberg 1931. 6.

⁵ HENNING: BSOAS 12 (1948) 602 «The Sogdian Letters were found together with a large number (about seven hundred) of Chinese documents».

⁶ HALOUN compiled his table on the basis of the table published by E. CHAVANNES (Les documents chinois découverts par Aurel Stein. Oxford 1913. III), containing the dates occurring in the Chinese documents. However, he abridged CHAVANNES' table arbitrarily by contracting the evidence into two aggregate groups and contrasting them with the two latest dates. This manipulation is inadmissible because one could contrast any year attested only by one document and separated by a chronological gap from the other years with the total of the other dates. As we show below, most of the dates are recorded in only one document. Had HENNING himself consulted CHAVANNES' book, he would have spared himself a series of misunderstandings and mistakes.

⁷ W. B. HENNING: BSOAS 12 (1948) 601–602.

⁸ SIR AUREL STEIN: Serindia. II. 735.

sites on the Tun-huang Limes inasmuch as each watch-tower represents a separate site lying often at a distance of 3—4 miles from the next. On the basis of a thorough study of the archaeological finds and the Chinese documents discovered at the separate sites, Sir Aurel Stein succeeded in elucidating the historical fate of several watch-towers. Each of them had its own individual fate: they were built at different times as the construction of the Limes advanced westwards; they were used for various purposes, garrisoned or abandoned and reoccupied again from time to time.

It would be quite incorrect, therefore, to say that the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» «were found together with a large number (about seven hundred) of Chinese documents» because this is the total number of the Chinese documents found along the Tun-huang Limes at 30 or more sites (708 were published by E. Chavannes, to which 62 published later by H. Maspero can be added). We must not, however, forget either that the finds came to light in several places within one and the same site. Thus the 770 documents were actually found in 67 different places. This was also the case at watch-tower T. XII. a where the «Ancient Letters» were unearthed: here, too, finds were made at several places. It turns out that the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» were found together with only two complete Chinese slips (documents Nos. 607, 609) and a fragmentary one,⁹ *i.e.* instead of about seven hundred Chinese documents with only two ones. It becomes clear that archaeological finds, used with the method applied by Haloun and Henning, will be of no use in determining the date of the «Ancient Letters».

Fortunately, this does not exhaust the possibilities furnished by the archaeological finds of the Tun-huang Limes for establishing the date of the «Ancient Letters». The above given characterization of the archaeological material and its distribution shows that we have two ways of approach in solving the problem. The Chinese documents and the other finds enable us both to elaborate the general history of the Tun-huang Limes, already outlined by Sir Aurel Stein,¹⁰ and to elucidate the fate of the «Ancient Letters» within the history of the site, *i.e.* the watch-tower T. XII. a.

For the first way of approach it is necessary to examine the distribution of the dated Chinese documents along the Tun-huang Limes as well as the chronological limits of the garrisoning of the different watch-towers inasmuch as they can be established on the basis of the dated Chinese slips. For this purpose I compiled two tables, the first showing all occurring dates and their connections with the watch-towers, the second presenting the attested dates for the separate watch-towers and finding places respectively.

⁹ SIR AUREL STEIN: *Serindia*. II. 669. The fragmentary slip is not included among the documents published by E. CHAVANNES and the inventory number of No. 609 (T. XII. a. II) is obviously incorrect (the serial number of the find is missing).

¹⁰ SIR AUREL STEIN: *Serindia*. II. 721—766.

Table I¹¹

Date	Serial number of the documents ¹²	Inventory number of the documents ¹³
98 B.C.	No. 271	T. XXI. c. 22
96 B.C.	No. 304	T. XIV. III. 67
	No. 308	T. XIV. III. 20
95 B.C.	No. 306	T. XIV. III. 6
	No. 309 (?)	T. XIV. III. 64
94 B.C.	No. 305	T. XIV. III. 15
	No. 430 ¹⁴	T. IV. b. II. 1
68 B.C.	No. 255	T. VI. b. II. 6
65 B.C.	No. 37	T. VI. b. I. 49. a
	No. 256 (?)	T. VI. b. II. 4
64 B.C.	No. 262 (?)	T. VI. b. IV. 2
63 B.C.	Nos. 9-24	T. VI. b. I. 220, 238, 128+203, 135, 50, 104+95, 254+92, 207, 8+39, T. VI. b. 003, T. VI. b. I. 186+283, 240, 273, 48, 58+ +215, 204
		No. 39 ¹⁵
61 B.C.	No. 38	T. VI. b. I. 208
	No. 40	T. VI. b. I. 10
	No. 447 (?)	T. XV. a. III. 42
60 B.C.	No. 42	T. VI. b. I. 42
	No. 43	T. VI. b. I. 191
	No. 181 (?)	T. VI. b. I. 2
59 B.C.	Nos. 25-35	T. VI. b. I. 104+40, 201, 105, 36, 25, 63, 133, 234, 69, 86+148, 84
		No. 41
	No. 44	T. VI. b. I. 236

¹¹ The tables were composed on the basis of the works by E. CHAVANNES: *Les documents chinois découverts par Aurel Stein*. Oxford 1913., by H. MASPERO: *Les documents chinois de la troisième expedition de Sir Aurel Stein en Asie Centrale*. London 1953., by SIR AUREL STEIN: *Serindia. II*. Oxford 1921., and with the help of the corrections written by STEIN in his copy of CHAVANNES' book. The table compiled by CHAVANNES is incomplete: it does not contain every date occurring in the Chinese documents published by him and does not give any reference to their finding places. The latter defectiveness of the table was clearly felt by STEIN who wrote in by hand the references to the sites in his copy of the book. In general, studying CHAVANNES' book one must constantly consult SIR AUREL STEIN's *Serindia*.

¹² The serial numbers represent those of the documents published by CHAVANNES while the letter M after the numbers marks the serial numbers of the documents published by MASPERO. A question-mark after the serial number means that the date of the document cannot be established with absolute certainty.

¹³ The inventory numbers of the documents contain firstly the sign of the watch-towers consisting of the capital letter T, a Roman numeral (= serial number of the watch-tower) and sometimes also a minuscule letter, while the second Roman numeral indicates the different refuse-heaps or other finding places within the same site. Lastly, the Arabic numerals mark the serial numbers of the finds unearthed at the indicated finding place. Thus *e.g.* the inventory number T. XV. a. III. 27 is to be explained as follows: T. XV. a = sign of the watch-tower, III = indication of the finding place within the site T. XV. a, 27 = serial number of the find discovered at the finding place III.

The meaning of the inventory numbers became clear even for CHAVANNES only after SIR AUREL STEIN had called his attention to the significance of their different components (cf. his remarks in the Errata of his book, p. 230).

¹⁴ SIR AUREL STEIN had convincingly shown (*Serindia. II. 636*) that of the two theoretically possible dates proposed by CHAVANNES, only 94 B. C. can be taken into account from a historical view-point.

¹⁵ This document contains two dates: 63 B. C. and 58 B. C. (Cf. also 58 B. C.)

Table I. (cont.)

Date	Serial number of the documents ¹⁸	Inventory number of the documents ¹⁸	
58 B.C.	No. 39 ¹⁶	T. VI. b. I. 1	
	No. 45	T. VI. b. I. 305	
	No. 46	T. VI. b. I. 176	
	No. 87 (?)	T. VI. b. I. 223	
	No. 158	T. VI. b. I. 206	
	No. 159	T. VI. b. I. 14	
	No. 160	T. VI. b. I. 9	
	No. 392	T. XVII. 2	
	58/56 B.C. 58 or 54	No. 140 ¹⁷	T. VI. b. I. 35
		No. 138 ¹⁸	T. VI. b. I. 19
57 B.C.	No. 36	T. VI. b. I. 192	
	No. 47	T. VI. b. I. 49	
	No. 48	T. VI. b. I. 3	
	No. 49	T. VI. b. I. 91	
	No. 50	T. VI. b. I. 38	
	No. 51	T. VI. b. I. 213	
	No. 52	T. VI. b. I. 199	
	No. 53	T. VI. b. I. 210	
	No. 54	T. VI. b. I. 78	
	No. 55	T. VI. b. I. 45	
	No. 56	T. VI. b. I. 143	
	No. 57	T. VI. b. I. 287	
	No. 91	T. VI. b. I. 89	
	No. 92	T. VI. b. I. 188	
	No. 93	T. VI. b. I. 94	
	56 B.C.	No. 58	T. VI. b. I. 156
No. 399		T. XIII. I. 8	
53 B.C.	No. 446	T. XV. a. III. 13	
52 B.C.	No. 413	T. XVIII. I. 40	
	No. 414	T. XVIII. III. 6	
48 B.C.	No. 338 (?)	T. XIV. II. 14	
45 B.C.	No. 339 (?)	T. XIV. II. 15 ¹⁹	
39 B.C.	No. 428	T. V. 2	
	No. 429	T. V. 4	
34 B.C.	No. 84 ²⁰	T. VI. b. I. 298	
17 B.C.	No. 6. M. (?)	T. XXIII. c. 023; T. XXIII. I. II. 013	
		T. XII. a. II. 9	
1 A.D.	No. 593 (?)	T. XIV. IV. 3	
4 A.D.	No. 355 ²¹	T. XIII. III. 4	
5 A.D.	No. 400	T. VIII. II. 2	
8 A.D.	No. 585	T. VIII. II. 2	
9 A.D.	No. 585	T. XXII. b. 9	
12 A.D.	No. 272	T. XIV. III. 25	
14 A.D.	No. 307	T. XIV. I. 30	
14—19 A.D.	No. 371	T. XIV. I. 8	
	No. 372		

¹⁶ This document contains two dates: 58 B. C. and 63 B. C. (Cf. also 63 B. C. above.)

¹⁷ Cf. MASPERO: *op. cit.* 41.

¹⁸ Cf. MASPERO: *op. cit.* 9, n. 6.

¹⁹ The inventory number T. IV. II. 15 in CHAVANNES: *op. cit.* p. 77 is obviously a misprint and should read T. XIV. II. 15 (not corrected by him in the Errata), cf. STEIN: Serindia. 688.

²⁰ Cf. MASPERO: *op. cit.* 6, n. 7.

²¹ This document is not included in the table compiled by CHAVANNES; cf. STEIN: Serindia. 686.

Table I. (cont.)

Date	Serial number of the documents ¹⁸	Inventory number of the documents ¹⁹
15 A.D.	No. 356 (?) No. 482	T. XIV. VII. 8 T. XV. a. II. 49
17 A.D.	No. 368 No. 369	T. XIV. I. (well) T. XIV. I. (cave)
20–21 A.D.	No. 592	T. XII. a. 3
35 A.D.	No. 562	T. XXVII. 6
43 A.D.	No. 483	T. XV. a. II. 22
46 A.D.	No. 484	T. XV. a. II. 9
47 A.D.	No. 31. M.	T. XXII. d. 015
50 A.D.	No. 563 No. 564	T. XXVII. 3 T. XXVII. 2
53 A.D.	No. 565	T. XXVII. 13
55 A.D.	No. 485	T. XV. (a. II.) 41
56 A.D.	No. 486	T. XV. a. II. 38
61 A.D.	No. 566	T. XXVII. 5
63 A.D.	No. 34. M.	T. XXI. d. 019
64 A.D.	No. 33. M.	T. XXII. d. 018
67 A.D.	No. 535	T. XV. a. I. 12
68 A.D.	No. 579	T. XVI. 4
75 A.D.	No. 613 No. 614	T. XXVIII. 8 T. XXVIII. 54
77 A.D.	No. 580	T. XVI. 3
87 A.D.	No. 390	T. XIV. a. I. 1
92 A.D.	No. 60. M.	T. XXIII. I. 02
94 A.D.	No. 537	T. XV. a. I. 1
115 A.D.	No. 41. M. ²²	T. XXII. d. 024
137 A.D.	No. 536	T. XV. a. I. 6
153 A.D.	No. 680 ²³	T. XI. II. 6
205 A.D.	No. 5. M. ²⁴	T. XXII. f. 1

On the basis of Table I we can state that there exists no contrast between the two documents containing the dates 137 A. D. and 153 A. D., and the rest of the documents concerning their chronological evidence and the chronological gap between them, as was supposed by Haloun and Henning. At the outset, it must be stressed that we have evidence (= a dated document) for altogether

²² Cf. MASPERO : *op. cit.* 26. He proposed two alternative dates for this document : 10 B. C. and 115 A. D. As we have dated documents at watch-tower T. XXII.d only from 47 A. D. on, we must regard 115 A. D. as the only possible date.

²³ E. CHAVANNES : *op. cit.* 145 determined the date of this document by the following argumentation. The slip, representing part of a calendar, belongs to a group of documents which includes, among others, a slip analogous to those containing parts of the *Chi chiu chang* written between 48–33 B. C. Knowledge of this work on the Tun-huang Limes can probably be assumed in his opinion in the Ist and IInd centuries A. D. In this case the date of No. 680 can only be 153 A. D. If we take into consideration that a fragment of the *Chi chiu chang* (No. 4 = T. XV. a. I. 5) was found together with a slip (T. XV. a. I. 12) dated from 67 A. D., this conclusion is obviously inevitable.

²⁴ Cf. MASPERO : *op. cit.* 16–19. The indications of this calendar satisfy two years : 13 B. C. and 205 A. D. MASPERO himself adopted the former date. It must not be forgotten, however, that the series of watch-towers marked with XXII produced evidence for only one date from the early Ist century B. C. (98 B. C.); all other dates occurring in the documents found at these watch-towers belong to the Ist and IInd centuries A. D. It seems, therefore, more reasonable to refer the data of No. 5. M to the end of the Later Han Dynasty rather than to the intermediate period before the usurper Wang Mang.

54 years (even if we include some doubtful cases) from the 303 years between 98 B. C. and 205 A. D. *i.e.* for only 17,8% of the whole period of time. Then we must state that we have only one item of evidence for 39 years, *i.e.* 72,2% of the 54 attested years and two items of evidence for 13 years, *i.e.* 24% of the total. It follows that 82,2 % of the years from 98 B. C. to 205 B. C. are not attested by dated Chinese documents at all and 96,2% of the 54 years recorded are only attested by one — in a few cases by two — documents. Finally, as regards the chronological gaps, the relevant data are as follows: we have one gap of 51 years once and also gaps of 25, 21, 20, 17, 15, 14, 12, 9, 7, 5 years, each occurring once. That means that 11 chronological gaps span 196 years, *i.e.* the average length of these gaps is 17,8 years. Besides, 25 short gaps span 53 years, the average being 2,1 years.

These data prevent us from devaluating the testimony of the Chinese documents dated from 137 A.D. and 153 A. D. respectively. The overwhelming majority (72,2%) of the years attested between 98 B. C. and 205 A. D. are only represented by one dated document. It seldom occurs that the dated documents form coherent chronological series as Henning would have us believe²⁵ and even in these few cases the series are very short; we find only 3 series consisting of 3 successive or more years: 96—95—94 B. C., 65—64—63 B. C., and 61—60—59—58—57—56 B. C. On the contrary, the 54 attested years are as a rule separated from each other by longer chronological gaps, in 11 cases, of an average 18 years, and by shorter gaps of an average two years in 25 cases. Accordingly, the two documents under discussion fit well into the system of occurrence and chronology of the dated Chinese documents found on the Tun-huang Limes and from a historical view-point their testimony cannot be devaluated or neglected.

Table II

Sites/Finding Places ²⁶	Dates ²⁷
T. IV. b. II	94 B.C.
T. V	39 B.C.
T. VI. b	63 B.C.
T. VI. b. I	65 B.C., 63 B.C., 61 B.C., 60 B.C., 59 B.C., 58 B.C., 58 or 54 B.C., 57 B.C., 56 B.C., 34 B.C.
T. VI. b. II	68 B.C., 65 B.C. (?)
T. VI. b. IV	64 B.C.
T. VIII. II	8 A.D.
T. XI. II	153 A.D.
T. XII. a	20—21 A.D.
T. XII. a. II	1 A.D. (?)
T. XIII. I	56 B.C.
T. XIII III.	5 A.D.

²⁵ BSOAS 12 (1948) 601, n. 2.

Table II. (cont.)

Sites/Finding Places ²⁶	Dates ²⁷
T. XIV. I	9 A.D., 14–19 A.D., 17 A.D.
T. XIV. II	48 B.C. (?), 45 B.C.
T. XIV. III	96 B.C., 95 B.C., 94 B.C., 14 A.D.
T. XIV. IV	4 A.D.
T. XIV. VII	15 A.D.
T. XIV. a. I	87 A.D.
T. XV. a. I	67 A.D., 94 A.D., 137 A.D.
T. XV. a. II	15 A.D., 43 A.D., 46 A.D., 55 A.D., 56 A.D.
T. XV. a. III	61 B.C., 53 B.C.
T. XVI	68 A.D., 77 A.D.
T. XVII	58 B.C.
T. XVIII. I	52 B.C.
T. XVIII. III	52 B.C.
T. XXII. b	12 A.D., 35 A.D.
T. XXII. c	98 B.C.
T. XXII. d	47 A.D., 63 A.D., 64 A.D., 115 A.D.
T. XXII. f	13 A.D., 17 A.D., 205 A.D.
T. XXIII. c	17 B.C. (?)
T. XXIII. I	92 A.D.
T. XXVII	35 A.D., 50 A.D., 53 A.D., 61 A.D.
T. XXVIII	75 A.D.

Table II elucidates the connection between the sites (and finding places) and the dates recorded in the Chinese documents as well as the distribution of the occurring dates among the finding places. Dated Chinese documents came to light at 21 watch-towers, *i.e.* 68% of all watch-towers where Chinese documents were found. The 21 watch-towers provided 33 finding places, *i.e.* 49% of all finding places where Chinese documents were unearthed. It follows that we have dates for roughly three-quarters of the watch-towers and for half of the finding places where Chinese slips were found. The distribution of the dates among the finding places is again very interesting. At 19 finding places (*i.e.* 57% of the total) we have evidence for 1 year, at 6 finding places for 2 years, at 3 finding places for 3 years, at 3 finding places for 4 years, at 1 finding place for 5 years and at 1 finding place for 10 years. That means that from the period spanning 303 years between 98 B. C. and 205 A. D. we have chronological evidence for the garrisoning of a watch-tower only during 3,3% of this period of time even in the most favourable case.

We cannot, of course, neglect to mention the obvious fact that this source material is relatively scanty. This fact did not escape the attention of Sir Aurel Stein either who himself emphasized: «It is impossible to expect that,

²⁶ The watch-towers are regarded as sites here, the refuse-heaps, dustbins, and living quarters at the watch-towers as finding places. The signs for the finding places are indented.

²⁷ Each year is quoted only once, even if it occurs in several documents.

with such scattered and often incomplete materials as our documents from the watch-posts of the Tun-huang Limes are, we should be able with certainty to reconstitute all essential details.»²⁸ In spite of the obvious difficulties resulting from the scantiness of the evidence concerning the history of the Tun-huang Limes, it must not be dismissed in our attempts to elucidate the date of the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» because this evidence — be it ever so scanty — does exist and neglecting it would be to commit a serious methodological error.

At first, we have to establish how this scattered written evidence came into being and what its relation is to the original mass of documents produced by the Chinese military administration on the Tunhuang Limes. The Chinese documents prove that a written system of administration existed at the greater part of the watch-towers where Chinese troops were permanently stationed. The written documents comprised calendars, registers of official letters received, official orders, military and economic documents, private records etc. Surely, we have to reckon at least with one calendar and several dated official letters at each watch-post every year. Consequently, it becomes obvious that the original mass of Chinese documents at the watch-towers must have been considerably greater than the number actually found by Sir Aurel Stein. We may even regard his finds as a very small fraction of all written documents produced.

The documents were obviously preserved for several years. On the basis of the «small official archive — thrown down together on the rubbish-strewn slope»²⁹ found at watch-tower T. VI. b and containing documents dated from 65 B. C. to 56 B. C., we can even presume that they were kept for a decade. Thereafter they were thrown on the refuse-heap or as more frequently happened, repeatedly scraped clear and used as palimpsest writing material³⁰ or simply used as matchwood and fuel for heating.³¹ Leaving the station the garrison evidently took the archive of the last few years along. Accordingly, unless the watch-tower suffered destruction, we must assume that the occupation of a watch-tower lasted 5—10 years beyond the last date of the Chinese documents found on the refuse-heaps there. On this basis we must regard the testimony of the Chinese documents found by Sir Aurel Stein at the Tun-huang Limes as providing minimum information on the history of this fortification system and not maximum information as was done by Haloun and Henning.

Now, on the basis of these facts and considerations, we can draw some important conclusions as regards the history of the Tun-huang Limes and the

²⁸ Serindia. II. 744.

²⁹ Serindia. II. 645.

³⁰ SIR AUREL STEIN: On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks. (Hung. ed.) Budapest 1934. 97, 123; Serindia. II. 646, 685, 714.

³¹ SIR AUREL STEIN: On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks. 97.

general testimony of its Chinese documents. Table II enables us to draw the following sketchy picture of the stationing of Chinese troops at the watch-towers :

1st epoch 98 B. C.—34 B. C.

T. IV	94 B. C.
T. V	39 B. C.
T. VI. b	68 B. C.—34 B. C.
T. XIII	56 B. C.
T. XIV	96 B. C.—45 B. C.
T. XV. a. III	61 B. C.—53 B. C.
T. XVII	58 B. C.
T. XVIII	52 B. C.
T. XXII. c	98 B. C.

Intermediate epoch 34 B. C.—1 A. D.

T. XXIII. c	17 B. C. (?)
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2nd epoch 1 A. D.—205 A. D.

T. VIII	8—9 A. D.
T. XI	153 A. D.
T. XII. a	1 A. D.—20—21 A. D.
T. XIII	5 A. D.
T. XIV	4 A. D.—19 A. D.
T. XIV. a	87 A. D.
T. XV. a. II	17 A. D.—56 A. D.
T. XV. a. I	67 A. D.—137 A. D.
T. XVI	68 A. D.—77 A. D.
T. XXII. b	12 A. D.—35 A. D.
T. XXII. d	47 A. D.—115 A. D.
T. XXII. f	13 A. D.—205 A. D.
T. XXIII. 1	92 A. D.
T. XXVII	35 A. D.—61 A. D.
T. XXVIII	75 A. D.

Defective though this evidence is, it clearly proves that the history of the Tun-huang Limes falls into two periods : one beginning with the creation of the Limes and lasting up to the thirties of the 1st century B. C., the other comprising practically the whole of the 1st and 2nd centuries A. D. It would appear that the military occupation of the Limes was not quite the same in

these two epochs. In the first half of the Ist century B. C. greater importance was ascribed to the westernmost section of the Limes where between the watch-towers T. IV.a and T. IV.b a fortified camp as a bridge-head for western expeditions was established and at watch-tower T. VI.b a great centre of military administration existed. About the thirties of the Ist century B. C., however, the westernmost section of the Limes was apparently abandoned. However, abundant finds of Chinese documents prove beyond any doubt that the greater part of the Limes was also garrisoned during the Later Han Dynasty. And even though we have practically no dated documents after the middle of the IInd century A. D., there can be hardly any doubt that the Tun-huang Limes preserved its significance even during the second half of the IInd century A. D., indeed after the loss of the Western Countries in 153 A. D. its importance as a frontier line and border land became even greater. The scantiness of dated Chinese documents from the second half of the IInd century A. D. can probably be explained by the circumstance that it is always the uppermost layer exposed to erosion, climate and human destruction which disappears or suffers essential damage.

We must, however, emphasize that there exists no evidence for the stationing of troops at the Tun-huang Limes during the IIIrd and IVth centuries A. D. This fact cannot be explained by the same causes as the almost total absence of Chinese documents dated from the end of the Later Han Dynasty because Sir Aurel Stein did find numerous Chinese documents dated from the IIIrd century and the beginning of the IVth century A. D. at the Lou-lan site which was equally exposed to wind and erosion. The total absence of finds later than those from the Later Han Age can only be caused by the abandoning of the whole Tun-huang Limes which obviously lost both its military and administrative importance during the IIIrd century A. D.

From the view-point of the date of the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» it is, therefore, a fact of decisive importance that only documents and other finds dating exclusively from the Han Age were found at the sites and finding places of the Tun-huang Limes. This fact renders the conclusion inevitable that the Sogdian «Ancient Letters», too, could be written only within the same time limits. Accordingly, they cannot be dated from a time later than the end of the IInd century A. D. It was a regrettable mistake on Henning's part when he argued that the find of eleven Chinese paper documents from T'ang times «in the same area» deprives the archaeological arguments (which were misunderstood and misinterpreted by him) of any validity.³² He did not recognize

³² Cf. W. B. HENNING: BSOAS 12 (1948) 602. Nobody — and least of all SIR AUREL STEIN — asserted that «the Sogdian Letters must belong to a year in which occupation of the site is attested by the presence of a Chinese document, or to a year *earlier* than that» (HENNING: *op. cit.* 601).

that these Chinese paper documents from the T'ang Age were found not at a site or finding place belonging to the Tun-huang Limes of the Han Age but in the remains of a modest Buddhist shrine, built, according to the testimony of the Chinese coins found there, in the T'ang Age. The stratigraphic position of the shrine is absolutely clear because it was built above a refuse heap of the Han Age.³³ Accordingly, the find of the Chinese paper documents of the T'ang Age in the vicinity of watch-tower T. XIV does not alter the fact at all that at the sites and finding places of the Tun-huang Limes only documents and other finds of the Han Age, and no other, were unearthed. As a final conclusion, on the basis of the archaeological finds of the Tun-huang Limes, we must put the date of the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» necessarily between the time limits of the Han Age.

Now we can proceed to the other task, *viz.* to elucidate the fate of the «Ancient Letters» within the scope of the history of the site, the watch-tower T. XII. a and the finding place T. XII. a. II respectively. At first, we have to understand the character of the distribution of documents and other finds among the watch-towers. As was stated above, only a part of the watch-towers had a garrison. In the Chinese document No. 617³⁴ an order is said «to be sent to the commandants of watch-posts and to the company residences. . .». On the basis of this text we can assume that the Limes was divided into sections and in each section a company was stationed. The companies each had their headquarters at a watch-tower where a system of written administration and an official archive existed. The companies sent smaller detachments on patrol, for signal service and supervision of the traffic to other watch-towers without a permanent garrison. This system explains the abundance of written documents and debris at some watch-towers and their scantiness or total absence at other watch-posts. The division into sections of the Limes, the number of companies and the dislocation of their detachments could vary from time to time.

The Sogdian «Ancient Letters» were found at watch-tower T. XII. a and the circumstances of their discovery are described by Sir Aurel Stein³⁵ as follows :

«Immediately against the south face of the tower was a space about 4 feet wide, which seemed to have been filled up on purpose with broken bricks and loose earth. Next to this came a still narrower passage (marked II in plan), only 1'10" wide, enclosed between walls of single bricks and divided by an equally thin partition into two little compartments, each about 11 feet in length. A thick layer of straw and stable refuse covered this passage as well

³³ Cf. SIR AUREL STEIN : *Serindia*. II. 687.

³⁴ CHAVANNES : *op. ci.* 136 ; SIR AUREL STEIN : *Serindia*. II. 749, n. 35a.

³⁵ *Serindia*. II. 669 foll.

as a little room, measuring only 5 by 6 feet, which adjoined it and the southwest corner of the tower. The passage, as I convinced myself by subsequent inspection, had its walls still standing to a height of over 4 feet.

Refuse of all kinds had completely filled the passage, and within it was found embedded the remarkable collection of Early Sogdian documents on paper, T. XII.—a. II. 1—8... According to the Naik's statement, which I have every reason to accept as accurate, their position was about 3 feet above the floor. In the refuse below them there turned up three Chinese slips, among them two complete ones, Doc. 607, 609. From the little room adjoining westwards came five more Chinese records on wood, also marked T. XII. a. II, among them one, Doc. 593... bearing a date which, taken by itself, could safely be read on the spot as corresponding to A. D. 1...».

From this description it becomes clear that the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» were found in a well defined cultural layer of the Han Age which was more than 4 feet thick in the passage where these documents were discovered. On the basis of the Chinese documents found below them and in other finding places of the site, a general outline of the history of watch-towers T. XII. a and T. XII, situated on the same oblong and narrow plateau, can be drawn.

It seems certain that the most intensive military occupation of watch-towers T. XII. a and T. XII occurred during the period of Wang Mang, when T. XII. a must for a time have been a company residence. Comparing the Chinese documents Nos. 596, 597, 598, 599 and 587, we can presume that T. XII. a went through three stages of military occupation during this epoch. At first, the headquarters of the *Kuang-hsin* company were at *Yü-men* and only a detachment of it was stationed at T. XII. a. Later on, the headquarters of this company were transferred to watch-tower T. XII. a. In the third stage, the *Kunag-hsin* company was followed by the *Hsien-ming* company who had been stationed formerly at *Yü-men*. At the same time a detachment of the latter company was in charge of the signal service at watch-tower T. XII. Being stationed formerly at *Yü-men*, the same company had a detachment at watch-tower T. VIII. These three stages can clearly be distinguished but their sequence cannot be established with certainty; it might even have been in the inverse order. The dislocation at the watch-towers or the concentration in *Yü-men* of the companies obviously depended on strategic necessities. In any case, watch-tower T. XII was subordinated to T. XII. a, being a company residence at that time.

Neither the Chinese documents nor the other finds discovered in the dustbin T. XII. a. II furnish any basis for the assumption that T. XII. a would have had a permanent garrison already during the Former Han Dynasty. Signal service or supervision of the traffic were probably managed by small patrols and guards sent to these watch-towers from time to time. Thus the rise of the dustbin T. XII. a. II can be connected in all probability with the epoch

of Wang Mang. The Chinese documents of this period were thrown on the rubbish at the time when the permanent garrisons of the watch-towers west of T. XIV were withdrawn to *Yü-men*. In the thirties or forties of the 1st century A. D. After this event, however, a rather long period must have been passed before the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» were thrown into the dustbin T. XII. a. II. They were found 3 feet above the floor and about 1 foot below the surface of the dustbin. This stratigraphic position clearly indicates a point in time towards the end of the Han Age. Thus a further question arises: what could have been the function of watch-tower T. XII. a after the withdrawal of the permanent garrison?

There exists some evidence (mainly documents) which suggests that watch-towers T. VI. c, T. XI, T. XII and T. XII. a were kept in use even after the abandoning of the military occupation of the western part of the Tun-huang Limes. This can be explained by the topographic position of the watch-towers listed above. As Sir Aurel Stein pointed out,³⁶ watch-tower T. XI lying a days march from T. XV. a and being the last station where drinkable water was obtainable on the route westwards, offered a convenient intermediate halting-place. Similarly, according to his description³⁷ watch-tower T. VI. c occupied «an ideal position on the flat top of a small and completely isolated clay terrace. This rises as a conspicuous landmark to a height of fully 150 feet above the surrounding low ground... Its top completely overlooks the great basin...». Lastly, as regards watch-tower T. XII, Sir Aurel Stein drew attention to the fact that «... a post maintained at T. XII was excellently placed for guarding the ancient route and watching the traffic passing along it... The purpose of T. XII was to serve as a road-side post for what I may call the police control of the border as distinct from its military defense... In the same way a preliminary watch could be kept here upon travellers, etc. coming from the Western Regions... the system of 'double check' here assumed could be paralleled... by plentiful earlier historical evidence...».³⁸

On the basis of these observations it becomes clear that watch-towers T. VI. c, T. XI and T. XII were obviously used as «police» posts for controlling the traffic coming from or going to the Western Regions. Because of its excellent topographical location, watch-tower T. XII. a, lying on the same oblong and narrow plateau as T. XII and providing limited accomodation, could probably have served with its quarters as the base for the patrols and guards sent to the near-by control post T. XII for the purpose of supervising the traffic. The thick layer of straw and stable refuse in the passage and in the little room at T. XII. a suggests that mounted patrols stayed here from time to time.

³⁶ Serindia. II. 699.

³⁷ Serindia. II. 651.

³⁸ Serindia. II. 679.

According to the Chinese document No. 150, one of the main tasks of the frontier guards was to control «the men, domestic animals, carts, and arms which leave or enter through the pass».³⁹ Another Chinese document (No. 379) prescribes to prohibit the persons transporting objects other than those of ordinary use from departing from the pass.⁴⁰ Obviously, control was extended over a wider range of objects than those mentioned in the two documents. Without doubt, among the things controlled at the frontier posts letters were considered of special significance at all times. In this context the finding of the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» in the dustbin T. XII. a. II also becomes understandable. During internal troubles all governments strive to prevent the dissemination abroad of news and information concerning the internal state of the country. This may also have been the case at the end of the Later Han Dynasty in China. The Sogdians living and trading in China corresponded with their families, relatives or lords in Sogdiana and informed them about conditions and events in China. The Sogdian «Ancient Letters», too, contained just such information. On the basis of the above considerations, it now seems very probable that the «Ancient Letters» were seized by Chinese frontier guards at watch-tower T. XII who investigated the caravan transporting the letters as it passed through the second set of controls. The letters were confiscated and brought by them to their base, established at watch-tower T. XII. a and later thrown into the dustbin.

An exact parallel to the fate of the «Ancient Letters» is offered by another Sogdian document found by Sir Aurel Stein at watch-tower T. VI. c. This was a «wooden tablet with Early Sogdian script» (Inv. No. T. VI. c. II. 1),⁴¹ taken by Stein for a sign of the presence of Iranian auxiliaries and considered by him a tally.⁴² Actually, however, the document was obviously a letter, written on a wooden tablet, the text of which can be read as follows :

line 1	<i>MN nypδ ' [</i>	«From the humble A[
2	<i>βrysk k[</i>	you/he should bring (it) wh[en
3	<i>'kškšw ' ' [</i>	having done it .[
4	<i>'sknym]</i>	I (shall) note (it)»

³⁹ CHAVANNES : *op. cit.* 45 ; SIR AUREL STEIN : *Serindia*. II. 756.

⁴⁰ CHAVANNES : *op. cit.* 84.

⁴¹ *Serindia*. II. 652. The description of the tablet (*Serindia*. II. 770) runs as follows : «Early Sogdian wooden doc. ; slip trimmed down R. side, broken away down L., inscr. at with 4 ll. Sogdian and one char. (5th l.) and rectilinear diagram below.»

⁴² STEIN (*Serindia*. II. 654) supposed «that the tablet was cut into two exact halves» but the contents of the Sogdian text prove that such an assumption is impossible. The preserved part may constitute only one fifth or one sixth of the original. Of course, even though the original form of the tablet might have been different from the one supposed by Stein, this fact does not exclude the possibility that the Chinese soldiers used a part of it as tally.

Remarks on the interpretation

nypδ: the meaning 'humble' can be assumed on the basis of B. Sogdian *nypδ*- 'lie down'. Line 1 probably contained the name of the writer and that of the addressee and the beginnings of the text.

βry may be either 2nd Sing. Pres. or Fut. Indicative, Imperfect or Optative or 3rd Sing. Optative.

sk: durative particle, *βrysk* may be «you are bringing».

'ktk: cf. B. Sogdian *'krt'k* 'done'. *šw* = enclitic personal pronoun 3rd Sing. Acc.

'sknym: cf. B. Sogdian *skn-* 'engrave', *'sk'n* 'sign, sculpture, image', Anc. Lett. *sk''nk* 'note, record'.

This Sogdian letter, too, was obviously seized by the Chinese frontier guards at the second control post and perhaps used by them for some purpose of their own. Below the Sogdian text a Chinese character was written which can be read tentatively as 𠄎 *ch'i*. Unfortunately, this word has many meanings and without a context its sense here cannot be unambiguously established. If we assume the meaning 'to permit; to transport, to export' here, the character may represent a note made by the Chinese frontier guards at the first control at the Jade Gate. It may have been inscribed, however, also after the tablet was seized at the second control.

To sum up, the archaeological finds of the Tun-huang Limes and primarily the Chinese documents among them prove beyond any doubt that the Sogdian «Ancient Letters» were written at the end of the Han Age, *i.e.* in the second half or towards the end of the IInd century A. D. This result harmonizes perfectly with the fact that the paper of the «Ancient Letters» does not yet show any trace of the «sizing» with storch which already appears in a Chinese document from *Lou-lan*, dated 312 A. D. (No. 912, Inv. No. L. A. VI. II. 0230).⁴³ Finally, as I have shown elsewhere,⁴⁴ the contents of Letter II reflect events connected with the decline and fall of the Later Han Dynasty at the end of the IInd century A. D.

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⁴³ SIR AUREL STEIN: *Serindia*. II. 674.

⁴⁴ J. HARMATTA: *Eine neue Quelle zur Geschichte der Seidenstrasse*. *Jb. f. Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1971) 135 foll.