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A ROAD LESS TAKEN?

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Edvard V[asil'evich] Rtveladze. *Velikii indiiskii put': iz istorii vazhneishikh torgovykh dorog Evrazii / The Great Indian Road: from the history of the most important trade routes of Eurasia*. Sankt-Peterburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2012. 296 pp + ill. ISBN 978-5-90598-793-9.

One opens a new book, especially one with such an intriguing title, by Edvard Rtveladze with great anticipation. He is a well-known archaeologist, for years the director of the important excavations at Kampyrtepa in southern Uzbekistan, author of a great many studies, and a serious student of numismatics. The range of his expertise on the early history of Eurasian exchange can be seen in his *Great Silk Road: An Encyclopedic Guide. Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tashkent, 1999), a popular illustrated book that deserves to be imitated by an equivalent for audiences who cannot read its Russian.

In his new volume, which was previewed in an article in *Anabasis* (Vol. 1) in 2010, Rtveladze wishes to convince his readers that there was a major trans-continental route of exchange (Fig. 1) which came into being and flourished in the centuries just before the opening of the "Silk Road" and then overlapping into the period when that more famous route was established. The center from which its connections ex-

tended was India, and it involved both land and water communications. While his main focus is on the routes that led west to the Black Sea, he notes at least briefly the evidence for an eastern extension up through northern Burma into southern China. He recognizes that there were other routes connecting India to the outside world but deliberately focuses on this northern one. While many kinds of "goods" traveled the route, instead of silk, the main valuable commodity was elephant ivory (a subject, I would note, which he never really develops). On the face of it, his scheme might seem to require that we re-think much of what we thought we knew about patterns and routes of interaction across Eurasia, but once one examines the details here, it turns out that the whole scheme has less to offer than author advertises.

On the positive side, the book relies on his extensive knowledge of the archaeology of Central Asia, at times to the extent of providing the reader with great (and not necessarily always very useful) detail. In fact,

to a degree, it seems, the whole purpose of the book is to underscore the significance of the work he has done in the area of the upper Oxus (Amu Darya) we know as northern Bactria. This, rather than India, is the real center of his "Indian Road" and gets most of the attention here, with an understandable emphasis on the site with which he has been intimately associated, Kampyrtepa, located on the river 30 km west of Termez. A lot of this evidence has been available in print for some time; so in many ways, for those who have studied the extension of

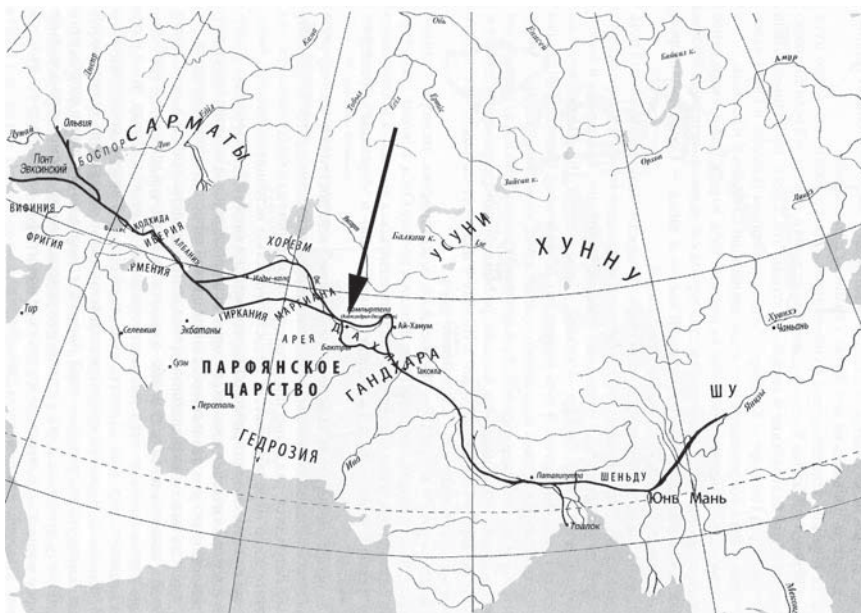


Fig. 1. Rtveladze's Great Indian Road (p. 8). The arrow points to the location of Kampyrtepa.

Hellenism or the spread of Buddhism into Bactria, there are few surprises, even if some of Rtveladze's datings may raise some eyebrows as may also his confidence in his identification of certain sites with ones presumed founded or visited by Alexander the Great. He devotes considerable attention to Alexander's march, primarily in order to show that he knew of and followed this Great Indian Road. It is not without interest to compare Rtveladze's discussion of the Hellenistic sites with the treatment by Getzel Cohen in his new reference volume on them (see the review note elsewhere in this volume of *The Silk Road*). Cohen always leans on the side of caution concerning conflicting claims about the identities of certain settlements with ones mentioned in the Classical texts.

The problems with Rtveladze's book arise not so much on the Bactrian end, but rather as one moves on west, where his archaeological evidence thins out, there are often major gaps, and where speculation becomes a substitute for solid argument. To fill the lacunae, he repeats almost ad nauseum the cryptic information of a certain Pseudo-Scymnos (second half of the second century BCE) – brought to his attention by Pierre Leriche – regarding the presence in Phasis, the main city of Colchis on the Black Sea, of Bactrians and Indians who Rtveladze assumes must have been merchants (pp. 8, 17, 48, 129-30, 185, 188, 225, 242). For Rtveladze, this proves that the Great Indian Road functioned prior to the second century BCE, wending its way from India to Bactria, then to the Caspian, then across the Caucasus to the Black Sea. Of course that one text proves little, especially since the Indians and Bactrians are lumped under the designation "barbarians" and the implication seems to be that they were

simply examples of the exotic "other" as far as the author was concerned.

Yes, there is archaeological evidence along the way, but whether it really demonstrates the existence of a major trade route is a good question, and the author himself admits that in various periods, only parts of this great highway could be traversed, given local political conditions. In his discussion of the various kinds of hard evidence concerning objects of distant origin – e.g., from the Hellenistic world of the Eastern Mediterranean, from Egypt or from other parts of the Roman Empire – the author continually uses the expression "it is not excluded that" (*ne iskliucheno*) to introduce what for him is the likelihood that products traveled on his Great Indian Road, even if for any of those objects there is no evidence they actually did. In support of such hypotheses, he continually reminds us that his route is the shortest and easiest one to the West from India and Bactria. Ergo, it must have been the preferred one. One of the problematic parts of such arguments is the assumption that hostile relations between the Parthians and their neighbors often blocked any meaningful exchange that might have gone through Parthian territory. To be sure, there is some textual evidence that was the case, but we do need to keep in mind that historically, bad political relations did not necessarily prevent commercial exchange across borders.

Of particular concern here is to establish the exact path of this Indian Road through Central Asia. There certainly is plenty of evidence in the upper Oxus region regarding important settlements, in which there is abundant material from the Graeco-Bactrian and Kushan periods, and where one can with some confidence assert that there were active connections with India. Once there, however, how does one travel westwards? Rtveladze rejects the idea that going down the Oxus to Khwarezm was in the earliest centuries the main option that was chosen, in part because there is so little archaeologically documented coin evidence of the kind one finds in Bactria. Rather, he argues, the Kelif Uzboi (called the Oks in the ancient sources, which sometimes confused it with the Oxus), a tributary of the Oxus, provided the most direct route to Margiana, and from there one could travel directly west



Fig. 2. Plan of the structures of the fortress at Kampyrtepa, drawn by I. Lun'kova and E. Kurkina (p. 197).

to the shore of the Caspian. The route then took to the sea, boats traveling around to the River Kura, which led into the interior of the Caucasus and allowed one to cross over to the Black Sea.

Some of his discussion here is certainly intriguing: where were the river crossings, where were the fortified sites created to defend those crossings? How long did it take to travel specific segments of the routes? Kampyrtepa (which he confidently argues in some detail is the Pandacheion of the Greek sources, a view others do not share) was one such site, and, whatever else one may say, clearly was important (Fig. 2). Moreover, he takes pains to establish that shipping on these Inner Asian rivers was common even way back in antiquity, which is one reason this “Indian Road” was important, travel on the water being much faster and easier than that on land. Unfortunately, the arguments here about the capacity of the locals as boatmen is at best shaky, since much is based on analogies from far outside the region or from later periods.

And how one might interpret the evidence from within is open to dispute. A sealing found at Karatepa with a depiction of an oared boat (p. 170) similar to those known to have existed in Mesopotamia is not necessarily a depiction of a local boat any more than the famous mural of the Chinese princess at Afrasiab from the 7th century CE can be said to depict a boat of a type used in Central Asia (pp. 171, 180). And to entertain us with accounts of how Sogdian merchants were known to have engaged in maritime trade hardly proves that they themselves were the mariners, even if that is what Rtveladze clearly wishes us to believe (pp. 181–85). Neither their history in maritime trade nor details about boat travel by a Russian military contingent in 1878 (pp. 174–76) can necessarily be used to extrapolate back anywhere from several centuries to two thousand years earlier.... Linguists will probably have a field day with his attempt to connect the “komar” people mentioned by Ptolemy as a living in Bactria with Strabo’s use of the term to designate boats on the Black Sea and the boat terms (*keme/kema*) documented by 19th-century Russian explorers in Central Asia (pp. 172–74). My skepticism about his use of evidence aside, I readily admit that it is highly probable the rivers were used for transport, and that it is at least reasonable to posit that certain traditional kinds of water transport continued to be used with little change down through the centuries. Yet, granting the possibility for this means of communication falls short of demonstrating its actual use in early times.

One of the weaknesses of his argument lies in his treatment of the routes through the Caucasus. Indeed they seem to have been important, but evidence concerning that is rather summarily treated here. We

know a lot from the Roman period, but what about earlier times? What Rtveladze gives us is primarily the terminus on the Black Sea (those couple of lines from Pseudo-Scymnos) with all too little in between, and rather vague information about travel by boat along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. There are significant gaps needing to be filled here, and much more evidence required to document the degree to which the routes through the Caucasus were actually used.

The skeptic might also wish to question his interpretation of the archaeological material. At times he seems certain of dates where the stratigraphy is problematic or the objects were collected rather than carefully excavated (pp. 99–101). He seems to believe that objects identified with some distant culture for the most part must have ended up in another location through the agency of individuals from that culture who traveled and settled there. In too many cases, this is a bold assumption without any proof; such association of objects with specific ethnic or linguistic groups is a feature of old school archaeology that has come under question.

That there are some cryptic Kharoshthi alphabet inscriptions and strikingly some papyrus fragments with Brahmi inscriptions found at Kampyrtepa is important, of course, but for the former there would seem to be problems with the stratigraphy that might cast doubt on how early they are. According to the author, the papyri are the oldest Bactrian manuscripts found in Central Asia as a whole, dating to the first half of the 2nd century CE. These are the earliest finds of papyrus east of the Mediterranean and evidence of the use of papyrus by the Kushans (pp. 237–38). Are we to be sure though that those who knew the languages involved necessarily were transplants from India, any more than can we be sure that the papyrus must have come all the way from Egypt? This example of the papyrus illustrates his approach to the trade routes — he is aware of the extensive Indian Ocean trade connecting India with Egypt but dismisses that route, asserting instead that for Bactria the more likely route (much shorter and faster) which the papyrus would have traveled is through the Black Sea where it entered the “traditional route,” the Great Indian Road at Phasis (“...ne tol’ko ne iskliucheno, no i eshche bolee veroiatno, chto eti papirusy dostavalis’ iz Aleksandrii v Egipte cherez Sredizemnoe in Chernoe moria v Fasis, a uzhe ottuda traditsionnoi trassoi Velikogo indiiskogo puti v Baktriiu.” — p. 240). Given the mention by Dio Chrisostom that Bactrians were to be encountered in Alexandria, naturally they too most likely got there via the same route (p. 188 — “ne menee veroiatno i to, chto barktriiitsy pronikali v Egipet po Velikomou indisskoi puti...”)

As if to prove the Roman period connection along the Indian Road, Rtveladze then discusses a cryptic Latin-letter inscription found in a cave at a site known as Kara-Kamar (pp. 242–53). Most experts, among them Frantz Grenet, have asserted this is a modern fabrication. Rtveladze argues at great length that the inscription is ancient and that the cave, furthermore, was a Mithraeum, presumably to be connected with the remains of one of those Roman legions defeated by the Parthians. Part of the “proof” here is to invoke Homer Dubs’s well-known theory about the Roman legionnaires having made it all the way to China. To top off this argument, Rtveladze speculates that the “Tit” (Titus) named on one of the murals at Miran (which he erroneously sites in the Turfan Oasis) might well be a descendant of one of those legionnaires (p. 252)..

A significant section of the book concerns the spread of Buddhism, regarding which, of course, there is considerable archaeological material from Bactria and points west. Given what we know about the numerous “capillary” routes where there is evidence of a Buddhist presence, we might wonder whether his “Great Indian Road” was in fact the main highway for the spread of Buddhism north. Rtveladze argues that Buddhism must have been known in northern Bactria at least as early as the second to first century BCE, even if its real spread dates later. He admits though that there is but little evidence for that earliest phase. In reviewing the evidence about the Buddhist temple excavated at Ayirtam, he suggests (“ne iskliucheno”) that it may be the earliest Buddhist structure in northern Bactria (p. 214). He believes that terracotta statues of the Buddha found both at Kampyrtepa and Old Termez are the oldest Buddhist statuary found anywhere in Bactria and perhaps the oldest anywhere (pp. 210–11). The problems of the stratigraphy where the statue from Kampyrtepa was found may cast some doubt on this assertion though.

The book is attractively presented, with lots of maps and illustrations, though the images are not always clearly integrated with any discussion in the text, nor have the maps all been drawn specifically for their use here. In at least a couple of cases, the images are misidentified (on p. 104, the reconstruction drawing is not Seleucia on the Tigris but Dura Europos; the famous statue of the “Parthian Prince from Shami (Syria)” on p. 151 was actually found in Khuzestan province in Iran). There is also a section of good quality color plates with images mainly from the excavation at Kampyrtepa and including several dozen Graeco-Bactrian coins found there. The book has a bibliography, rather disappointing indexes of personal/ethnic and geographical names, and a brief summary in English.

There is much here to draw our interest, even if one is forced to conclude that his main thesis remains unproven. Is one to conclude that the whole venture here was the result of some perhaps misguided inspiration taken from the painter and mystical venturer into Tibet, Nikolai Roerich? The epigram on the opening page of the book quotes Roerich (“Alluring is the Great Indian Road”), who surely had in mind something different from Rtveladze, and whose painting of Viking ships (“Merchants from overseas”) reproduced on that same page undoubtedly illustrates the Scandinavians’ penetration of the Russian river networks. For those who are not familiar with the archaeological sites Rtveladze knows so well, the book will certainly open new doors (it already sent me to examining earlier excavation summaries). I doubt though that the “Great Indian Road” will acquire the currency the “Silk Road” has, even as we should readily admit that the latter too conceals more than it reveals about the early history of Eurasian exchange.