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SI 4904: Conservation as a Base for New Discoveries

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Abstract: Book fragments in the Old Uyghur language, which constitute the major part of the Serindia Collection, currently undergo conservation and preservation procedures. The recent results of the conservation carried out in 2019 showed, that modern methods not only give new material life to ancient texts, but also contribute to the academic research. This article focuses on conservation procedures of the particular fragment SI 4904 from the Serindia Collection, as well as on subsequently made discoveries.

Key words: Serindia collection, conservation and preservation, Old Uyghur Buddhist books, Kokhanovsky collection

Until recently, SI 4904 (old call number: K/20) was just one of more than four thousand fragments in Old Uyghur language kept in the Serindia Collection of the IOM, RAS. The fragment belongs to the sub-collection of Aleksander Ivanovich Kokhanovskii, medical officer of the Consulate in Urumqi from 1903 to 1906 and participant of the Turfan expedition in 1906–1907.¹ A.I. Kokhanovskii acquired manuscript fragments from the local people, therefore their exact provenance is unknown. His sub-collection includes 520 items, 34 of which are fragments in the Old Uyghur language. The majority of them are of Buddhist content small size fragments. SI 4904 is of special interest for us as it has a fragment of a coloured image on recto side.

In the inventory book, compiled in 1929–1930 by Sergei F. Oldenburg, this item was described as “a fragment of the partially preserved image with

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¹ Birth and death dates unknown. More detailed information in POPOVA 2011.

Mongolian texts on the reverse, Turfan”.² Registered in the modern inventory book as “several manuscript fragments pasted together”, *SI 4904* was received to Conservation laboratory in June, 2019. During the preliminary examination it became obvious, that the layers of paper were glued together uniformly and were most probably pasted together on purpose to form a hardened base for the image. As reading and identification of the texts was almost impossible without disjoining, it was decided to separate the layers for further study.

For this purpose, we conducted the analysis of the fragment, and the microscopic examination revealed that the image (*SI 4904 recto*) was produced with the use of adhesive mineral dyes on a primed paper. Supposedly, the range of used pigments includes red lead (red colour), indigo (dark blue colour), azurite (blue colour), gamboge with indigo (light green colour, virtually flat layer). White primer is visible on the edges of the image (its composition can be established only by a chemical analysis). Contour lines of dark grey colour found in places of primer and paint loss indicate that a thin uneven layer of primer was applied to create a uniform surface. After drawing the outline, it protected the paper from absorption of paint binder and provided color intensity.

On the miniature one can see a buddha sitting in *padmāsana* on a lotus-throne with light blue and red petals. Preserved parts of the *dhōī* garment are decorated with geometrical ornament. Parts of mandorla of green hue and light halo are also visible. The absence of specific attributes and fragmentarity of the image (loss of colourful layer in the central part of the fragment) makes it impossible to identify the buddha.

Due to the multiple delaminations, losses and abrasion of the primer and paint layers, it was obvious that the conservation procedures aimed to preserve the image and fragments of manuscripts and block prints, used for hardening its base, should be conducted with great care. Firstly, dyes and ink underwent water resistance tests. It turned out that all of them were not water resistant and they were fixed with a 2% solution of Klucel G to avoid blurring during conservation procedures. The edges of losses and paint layer cracks were glued by a 5% wheat starch paste to exclude further destruction. It was decided to gradually separate paper layers on the reverse side of the image, therefore the entire surface of the paint layer was fixed with the use of equally strong paper with methylcellulose (MH 300p) solution. Separation was carried out in two stages. At first, the layers of pasted paper were evenly moistened through

² OLDENBURG 1930: f. 1v, No. 19.

the filter paper. Then the fragments of manuscripts and block prints were separated entirely with tweezers and a scalpel. Thick layers of dark brown glue were removed, while the residues (impossible to be extracted without damage) that penetrated deep into the paper structure were left. Tears were reinforced with the Japanese conservation paper (Awagami Papers, Shunyo SH-1, 19 g/m²).

As a result, six separate fragments were extracted, five in Old Uyghur script and one in Chinese. The reverse of the coloured image appeared to be the part of a Chinese scroll, its text corresponds to Taishō Tripiṭaka No. 211 (04.0590b01–19) with some variants.

One manuscript fragment of larger size (in calligraphic script on recto and cursive on verso side) and two, extremely small (severely damaged, text is illegible), include a part of the colophon to a prestigious Buddhist edition (according to the names of initiators mentioned³).

Two fragments used to be parts of block prints. One of them includes only two incomplete lines of dhāraṇī.⁴ The other, fragment of the block print edition of Sitaṭāpatrādhāraṇī sūtra,⁵ allows to speculate on the date when the fragments were pasted: one can suppose that the image could not be produced earlier than the second half of the 13th c.

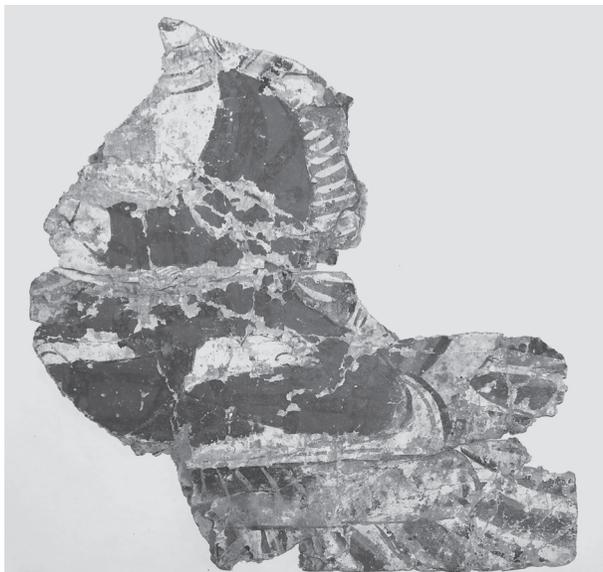
Thus, the conducted conservation procedures allowed to obtain unique Chinese and Old Uyghur texts that require further research. However, the function of the image still remains obscure. One may assume, although with a dose of skepticism, that it used to be a part of the deluxe Buddhist book cover.

³ No title is mentioned in the preserved part.

⁴ The dhāraṇī in Old Uyghur script is accompanied by glosses in Northern Turkestan Brāhmī. Most probably refers to Sitaṭāpatrādhāraṇī sūtra.

⁵ Paralell to T III M 182, preserved nowadays in the State Hermitage museum under call number BФ-531. Edited by RÖHRBÖRN & RÓNA-TAS 2004, 36 (lines 316–319).

Facsimile



SI 4904/recto: before conservation



SI 4904/verso: before conservation



SI 4904: after conservation

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