

# *Life along the Late Antique and Early Medieval Silk Road*

*Niya of the 3rd and 4th centuries  
in the light of archaeological finds and written sources*

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The town of Niya, excavated by Sir Aurel Stein, is an exciting territory of Inner Asia of the 3rd and 4th centuries. The legacy of the settlement once belonging to the so-called Kingdom of Shanshan, and situated on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, on one of the lines of the Silk Road connecting Rome and China, consists of written sources (a significant amount of documents written in Prakrit, in Kharoṣṭhī writing, and much fewer Chinese documents), and archaeological finds of unique richness. This legacy requires an interdisciplinary approach. In the past hundred years Stein himself, and those following in his footsteps, have dealt with several minor issues involving Niya, but the comprehensive geographic, epigraphic, linguistic, and, most of all, historic analysis of the complete material, and its comparison to archaeological finds have been awaited.

Thus, after more than a hundred years, we can really repay a debt by a modern, unifying analysis striving to elaborate the totality of available sources of the archaeological site. Therefore, my aim is to lay the foundations of a complex investigation and assessment. I have intended to do this work based on historical and archaeological points of view. At the same time, I cannot ignore certain important geographic, palaeographic, linguistic, or religious historical questions.

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In the longer, general, and methodological part of my thesis, I discuss the major features of the Silk Road first, since one of my aims is to put the role of the town of Niya in the history of the Silk Road into a broader context. To achieve this aim, I have found it necessary to review the most important characteristics of the Silk Road, and to enumerate the possibilities of new approaches at the very beginning of my paper.

Today it is becoming more and more obvious that the more we know about the Silk Road, the more complex and complicated the picture we can paint about it becomes. The question of what methods can help us gain a better insight in the ongoing processes of the time arises, of course. I reckon that we

must grab the essence of the Silk Road to a lesser extent from the perspective of high politics, diplomacy, or macroeconomics, but rather, we should hold the imaginary magnifier closer, and concentrate on a smaller community, a territorial unit, or a single town only. Since the network was operated by people and their communities living here, (and in the lack of a real, "paved" road, the line of settlements was the "road" itself in the semantic sense), I believe that a thorough understanding of these communities' life can significantly contribute to the exploration of the factors and systems of rules definitive in the history of the Silk Road. Eventually, all this makes possible to write a novel history of the Silk Road, which, besides emphasizing the effects of high politics and diplomacy, can be created through discovering the everyday life of smaller communities, that is, through a number of micro-historical investigations, and which may provide a picture more complex than ever, but closer to the reality of the time.

As the aim of my dissertation is to lay the foundations of a micro-historical analysis based on the approach mentioned above, I consider necessary to briefly summarize the theoretical background and methodology of micro-historical analyses in order to understand the methodological background of my paper, since, besides *new cultural history*, micro-history is one of the leading international trends in social studies, although still little known in Hungary. The aim of micro-history is "the narrative display of historical depiction narrowed down to small social units, sometimes to individuals, that are exact in time and space". That is, micro-history means an intensive historical investigation of smaller and well-defined historical or sociological units.

However, the bases of a micro-historical examination can be created only through the most extensive expansion of spatial and chronological context. Because of this, corresponding with the main objective of the present paper, I find it necessary to show the geographical environment of Niya as thoroughly as possible, and to define the historical and cultural historical coordinates of the archaeological site. This series of chapters is followed by the history of the discovery and exploration of the area, and by an overview of earlier examinations, that is, by the actual research history.

I consider the most detailed overview, analysis, and assessment of the archaeological phenomena and finds excavated on the site as an essential step taken towards a later monographic micro-historical analysis. In one of the longest parts of the present dissertation, after the presentation of the general archaeological characteristics of the site, I discuss the site phenomena, the religious and residential buildings, the office and economic complexes of Niya in detail, as well as the footbridge excavated in the settlement. I also investigated and analysed the burials, the phenomena and archaeological material found and observed in the graves excavated by Stein, and by the Chinese-Japanese expeditions also excavating in the archaeological site. A whole line of conclusions drawn from the archaeological finds, for example, the assessment of the chronological problems of Niya, closes this major section. In these chapters I have managed to unfold the problems arising from the inaccurate and erroneous documentation of Stein's excavations, and the reconstruction of the inside chronology of the settlement has become possible using the <sup>14</sup>C examinations. Furthermore,

I have attempted to outline some new structural and functional, etc., interpretations in more occasions.

The most comprehensive examination of written sources found at the site is also inevitable for the micro-historical analysis. This chapter is one of the main chapters due to its length and the number of issues discussed in it. It treats the exact circumstances of finding and publishing the Kharoṣṭhī documents, the language and writing, the raw material (among others, wood, paper, silk and hide used as raw materials), the world of forms, the authentication process, and the special seal prints found on the documents, which reflect the joint influence of the classical Greco-Roman civilization, the Indian, and the Chinese cultures. That is, this definitive and major chapter is about several palaeographic, epigraphic, and diplomatic questions: this is how I have managed to refine the chronology of the Inner Asian spread of paper of Chinese origin, or to point out several exciting problems of the written wooden tablets, such as the correlations of the world of forms and the content, or correlations of the location of different document types inside the settlement. (For example, I could separate the operational sites of administration with the help of these.)

Only after all these have I been able to outline the directions of a complete micro-historical analysis going beyond the length of the present paper, through a special case study. The "Life of *cojho* Somjaka, an official of Niya" is a micro-historical case study focusing on reconstructing Somjaka's life, who frequently was mentioned in the documents, was a member of the local aristocracy, and he could be considered an administrative leader. The study is not only dedicated to showing Somjaka's everyday life at the turn of the third and fourth centuries, (among others, I managed to identify his signature, the seal used by him, and I also attempted to locate the house that could be his home/office, and I even managed to partly identify his family members), but it also gives an insight into the structure of the society of Niya, and the everyday operation of the legal system, and the administration. We get to know the problems of the local irrigation, the issue of land use, or the women's situation, and the families' functioning. In one word, I have attempted to show the everyday life of people of the time through the case study, apart from the above mentioned archaeological, palaeographic, etc., chapters.

There is a series of archaeological, historical, cultural historical problems in connection to the archaeological site of Niya, that's why, unfortunately, I cannot discuss each issue in the frame of the present paper, no matter how voluminous it is. An investigation of the type would exceed the limits of the present dissertation, voluminous already, many times. Apart from the discussion of the above mentioned problems and the synthesis of results, I have strived to create a diversified database that may provide a basis for further research, not only in the theoretical and methodological sense, but also in the practical sense. The circumstantialities of working with the enormous corpus including almost 800 documents have revealed that, apart from preparing the dissertation, there is a need to create a database where the whole corpus of texts, the photos taken in Niya, and the objects excavated on the site would be accessible in one place. All this would not only make the work of the author of the present paper easier with

the finds and the documents, (since one could look up words, a single name, or even a single sound in the corpus), but the material, if available on the internet, would be accessible and researchable for anybody.

Thus, I have been doing two work processes at the same time in the past years: on one hand, the scientific processing of the documents and the relating material, on the other hand, I have been typing the rewritten documents, and I have been collecting and organizing the relevant photocopies.

One of the results of the work done in this way is a digital corpus of more than 700,000 *n* (keystrokes). It is based on the publications of texts mentioned, however, my paper is a little bit more, because I have modified the texts in certain places due to the results published after the publications of texts, and I have had to modify the original formal definition of the tables more times.

My thesis includes two picture volumes apart from the text and corpus volumes mentioned. My purpose is to create a photo and picture database more complete than any other earlier, by collecting all the pictures taken of the archaeological site, the finds, or the drawings and layouts, etc., prepared there. Two picture databases, each one more than 300 pages, have been compiled with nearly 2,000 photographs, drawings, and figures. While Picture volume III/1. includes the maps, the photographs and drawings of the archaeological site, of certain properties in the field of ruins, and of some objects found, I have placed all the available photographs of the Kharoṣṭhī and Chinese documents in Picture volume III/2. This is how the dissertation of four volumes, 1200 pages altogether, has been compiled.