

The ECAI Silk Road Group: A View from Midstream

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Change of Topic.

The stated topic in the program was proposed by my colleague/co-editor of the Silk Road Group, Sanjyot Mehendale, and is based on her research. It is a topic I myself would also like to hear more about, but I don't have that paper.

The Silk Road Group: Background.

1. Sanjyot Mehendale and I started talking in the autumn of 1994 at the University of California, Berkeley about two main issues:
 - A. patterns we saw in Central Asia, from India through to China;
 - B. various people we knew who were working in isolation from/ignorance of other colleagues on campus, and who would benefit from cross-communication.
2. To initiate a forum to discuss issues and bring people together in the autumn of 1994 we applied to the Doreen Townsend Center for the Humanities to set up a Central Asia/Silk Road Working Group. This was approved and the group began operation in the spring semester of 1995.
3. When Prof. Lewis Lancaster was planning the inaugural meeting, held in February, 1997, at which the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative was formed, he asked Sanjyot Mehendale and I to attend as Co-editors of the Central Asia/Silk Road Region.
4. That spring, i.e., 1997, fresh from the ECAI meeting and "newly empowered", we applied for a grant of more than \$71, 000 from the Garrett W. McEnerney Fund at the University of California, Berkeley for a Central Asia/Silk Road Database Project. This project would hire about half a dozen graduate student researchers who would begin to compile data for a database on Central Asia and the Silk Road. Much to our surprise the application was approved for 1997-98 (and recently extended to June 1999. (More below))
5. Our Working Group has continued to promote its own activities at UCB. In December of 1997 we held an international conference at Berkeley entitled "The Silk Roads in Central Asia —Recent Research". This was held jointly with a UCB/CNRS workshop

we also sponsored on Central Asian archeology and the possibility of academic cooperation between UCB and CNRS. Currently Sanjyot Mehendale is negotiating with Temur Shirinov and his colleagues in Uzbekistan to undertake excavations at Padayatak-tepa, Uzun-kyr, and Sangyr-tepa, all in the Shahr-i Sabz region of Uzbekistan (on the border of ancient Sogdiana and Bactria). These negotiations have been greatly facilitated by the assistance of Dr. Frantz Grenet, Deirector of Research at the Centre d'archeologie, CNRS.

The Central Asia/Silk Road DB Project.

1. Shortly after we began this project, we were asked to give a presentation at the October 1997 EBTI meeting in Kyoto, Japan. The demo we gave was largely an early version of what we thought we were doing (what you see on the screen is part of that demo).
2. Our Sense of things a year later.

The first year of our project was a learning experience for us all -- productive but not without misques. Some of the issues we face(d):

- A. The practical problem of finding qualified graduate students (due in part by a sudden glut of graduate student funding at UCB in 1997-98). Once hired, supervising such a diverse group of students was much like herding cats.
- B. The technical problem of at least one of us getting some practical training on database (DB) use and design, and familiarizing ourselves with the basic issue of mapping and GIS. We are still both very much novices in these areas.
- C. The technical side of ECAI only really began (ECAI Tech) in the summer of 1998 at the Heidelberg meeting. Additionally, the organizational structure and scope of ECAI at Berkeley has been changing constantly and rapidly.

Result: We weren't sure what to do with the data we have been collecting. Discussions about (and developments in) TimeMap View software developed by Ian Johnson, metadata issues, and GIS v. digital cartography left us wondering whether an early committment to a particular DB design or application might necessitate wholesale revisions later.

It now seems that the technical discussions begun at the Heidelberg meeting are bearing real fruit, and that the organizational structure of ECAI is much better defined.

Current Problem: Implementing some of the ECAI Tech solutions (Training workshops), and developing a base map for the Silk Road that will allow us to plot and query our data spatially and temporally.

3. Layout of the DB Project.

A. The basic organizational schema of our DB is one of sites and nodes on the one hand and routes on the other. Each define the other.

Site = place where artifacts/finds are found;

Node = passes, forks in roads, etc.; these may not have artifacts

Routes = links among sites and nodes. Types (not exhaustive): trade, military, pilgrimage, as well as nomadic circuits. Directionality of a route important. Validation in the historical record needed, as well as on the ground through archeology or the use GPS devices.

B. The initial thrust of the project so far has been to collect positional and name data for as many sites as possible, from the Eastern Mediterranean to Chang'an in China (modern Xi'an). When opportunities arose we collected some bibliography, especially in Chinese and Japanese. One of our people was a geographer specializing in SE Asia, so we had him working on the early maritime routes.

Issues That Arose:

1. The positional data was not uniform. We thus had to document the sources of our positional data.
2. Name varieties/inconsistencies/changes:
 - a. Modern: spelling, name changes, different languages (official/unofficial);
 - b. Pre-modern: language (official/unofficial)(Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Prakrits (including Pali), Chinese, Iranian languages); romanization; time.
3. Routes
 - a. More routes than first thought.
 - b. More permutations among routes (e.g., rivers across the Taklamakan and the ways these link up with other routes and with each other).

- c. Local "nesting" of a route. The route looks simple in the large, but breaks up into a "nest" of local routes when one looks at it in detail (e.g., around the cities such as Kucha, Turfan, etc.).
- d. Mountain routes and valley systems. The recent research of Prof. Haruko Tsuchiya (Faculty of Comparative Culture, Sophia University, Japan) on the Gilgit/Hunza valley area and valley system is an important contribution. Her initial problem: what was the most likely route the Buddhist pilgrim Faxian took into, through, and out of this valley system?

Future Considerations: To the Next Bend in the River

1. Expansion of our "points":

A. Through reconstruction of a site through the literature, assisted, we hope, by a visit.

B. Through archeological excavations:

--Shahr-i Sabz sites in Uzbekistan we are now negotiating for;

--Kuh-e Khwaja in southeastern Seistan, Iran. A doctoral student in the Near Eastern Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley is involved in the excavation of this Parthian/Sassanian site and is in charge of the documentation. We are experimenting with how best to make this site known over the web.

(**Note:** We are also trying to compare the results of both of these approaches for the reconstruction of a site in order to see how the approach influences reconstruction.)

C. Through the formation of, or coordination with, research teams that focus on certain "points" or point clusters, e.g., Dunhuang (the British Library), the Kucha region, the Turfan region (Valerie Hansen and the Yale University Turfan Project).

Consideration: We need to recognize the importance of a site's layout and the coordination of different types of data for each site: topography, art, inscriptions, directionality, textual references and descriptions, etc.

2. The Formation of Research Teams to Focus on Thematic Issues:

A. Religion: Buddhism; Manicheism; Zoroastrianism; Eastern Christianity; Islam; etc.

B. Languages and linguistic distribution/spread over space and time

C. Coordinate with libraries/archives/archeologists to put up facsimile images of Manuscripts, e.g., the British Library and the International Dunhuang Project. Browsing such images over the internet may be facilitated by software utilized by Tom Duncan and the Museum Informatics Project at UCB that facilitates detailed inspection of large image files over the web.