Gandhàran Manuscript Project

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This paper aims to introduce the work of the British Library/ University of Washington Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project, particularly the project's use of digital and electronic media as it relates to the preservation, study and publication of the British Library's collection of Gandhàran manuscripts.   This basically comprises the use of high quality images of the manuscripts - which are viewed and manipulated using Adobe Photoshop; and a database of Gàndhàrã words - for which we use ACI's 4D.

In September 1994 the British Library's Oriental and India Office Collections acquired a collection of twenty-nine birch bark scrolls containing texts in Gàndhàrã Prakrit and written in the Kharoùñhã script.   These are believed to have come from Eastern Afghanistan, although unfortunately the precise details of the find-spot are not known. After the delicate and painstaking work of unrolling the scrolls was completed, the British Library entered into an agreement with the University of Washington to promote the study, editing, and publication of the new manuscripts.

A preliminary study of this collection by Prof. Richard Salomon. *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhàra,* was published last year by the British Library and the University of Washington.   This volume outlines the contents of the collection as well as assigning an approximate date for the collection - which is believed to be the first half of the first century A.D.   This date is based on internal evidence, the inscriptions on the pots in which the scrolls were found, and paleographic data - hence they believed to be the oldest Buddhist manuscripts ever discovered.

The twenty-nine fragments themselves contain portions of about twenty separate original scrolls, ranging in size from a few words to several hundred lines of writing. The texts comprise a wide variety of Buddhist genres, including sutras, sutra commentaries, abhidharma treatises and other scholastic works, as well as a large number of avadanas (these are rebirth stories that illustrate the effects of karma - both good and bad) - Some texts for example the Khargaviùaõa or Rhinoceros såtra can be directly identified with texts extant in other languages, in this case Pali.   Other texts have been found to have parallels in Sanskrit and Chinese.   However at this time, most of the texts in this collection have no known parallels in any language.

The whole collection is now preserved in London in 57 glass frames.   Owing to their extreme fragility it is essential that they are disturbed as little as possible.   Hence the British Library is in the process of making a complete set of high quality digital images. These allow us to study the manuscripts in Seattle with only occasional trips to London to finalize particular readings.

The manuscripts have been scanned directly to digital format using a 4x5 camera fitted with a digital back.   The quality varies slightly according to the size of the piece being imaged, but the average is greater than 400 dpi, yielding an image size in the order of 100 MB.   At this scale it is possible not only to read the scripts with ease, but also to look deeper into the individual characters to determine paleographically significant details such as stroke order and direction.

The use of computer images also enables us to reconstruct damaged portions of the scrolls.   This often enables us to read portions of the manuscripts that would not have been on the originals.

The project is committed to publishing, in book form, editions of the manuscripts in the British Library's collection, as well as supplemental studies connected with this work, including ultimately the first Gàndhàrã dictionary.   In addition to this traditional scheme of publication, the project intends to make available, primarily through its web site (http://depts.washington.edu/ebmp) a number of Gàndhàrã related tools, texts and images.

At the present time the various fonts needed to display Gàndhàrã in transliteration and Kharoùñhã script are available from this site.   In future more fonts of the Kharoùñhã script will be added, each one representing a different scribe from the collection.

Also available now are a number of Gàndhàrã texts; these are editions of inscriptions from the epigraphic corpus of Gàndhàrã literature, including the A÷okan inscriptions from ShàhbàzgaŸhã and Mànsehrà.   In due course, ideally, all published Gàndhàrã inscriptions will be made available - though due to copyright concerns access to some of these materials may be limited.

The Gàndhàrã word database will be made available for custom searches, hopefully at some point in the not too distant future.   This will allow users to look up words starting from Gàndhàrã, Sanskrit, Pali, or English.   Other more complex searches may be possible, but as yet the database is very much in the process of development and its full potential may not be realized for some time to come.

Images of the British Library's manuscripts will be made available for download from the web site, following the publication of each text. Images of other Gàndhàrã texts, particularly inscriptions may also be posted.