

## **Conservation of Tangut documents from Kharakhoto**

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The Tangut documents from the British Library's Stein Collection were recovered by Aurel Stein in 1914, during his Third Expedition to Central Asia (1913–1916). They were unearthed from the grounds of the ancient city of Kharakhoto, a major centre of the Tangut Empire (also known as Eastern Xia or Xi Xia Empire) located in the Gobi Desert, just inside the present-day Chinese border with Mongolia.

The Tanguts established their own kingdom between the 10th-13th centuries. Their language was in the Sino-Tibetan group, closer to Tibetan. They subsequently invented their own script, based on Chinese, and translated the whole of the Buddhist canon. They were annihilated by the Mongol conquerors in 1227 and the spoken language disappeared completely. The Tangut material held at the British Library therefore constitutes a unique source of information on the Tangut people.

Although conservation work has already been carried out on a significant part of it, which now forms the Or.12380 sequence, many fragments were deemed 'unrecoverable' in the past and had remained untouched since their discovery. They were stored as bundles, placed inside wrappers or envelopes, without Pressmarks and associated records. Over a century later, financial support from the Ningxia Archives in China, has finally made possible treatment on some of the remaining Tangut documents.

Full access to this material both physically and through digitisation would allow a reappraisal and full exposition of the historical legacy of the Tanguts from primary sources, as opposed to the more subjective secondary sources of neighbouring peoples. However, such a project posed various challenges in terms of documentation and conservation. It dealt with current subjects of debate in the field of manuscript preservation and collection care.

Surviving in fragmentary state, the documents have been treated with the final goal of digitisation. While extensive interventive treatment was necessary, contextual evidence needed to be recorded, such as the way items were buried and sampling of debris found between the folds of paper. This represented difficulties, due to the large quantity of material and unknown number of items, which were mostly in vulnerable condition and in need of stabilisation within a short time-frame.

Repair solutions were adapted from conservation of archaeological manuscripts, relying on minimal intervention and reversibility. This was done through using a similar method used to repair papyrus, which enables stabilisation whilst providing discrete support. Cleaning was one of the main obstacles, as all sand from excavation had to be removed beforehand, or else it would sink into the paper fibres and permanently obscure the text.

Conservation took place as part of the International Dunhuang Project (IDP)'s activities at the British Library, complementing its large existing database of digital images of items from the Silk Road. The advice and support from IDP curators was invaluable through the decision making process; during the project,

various ways were explored on how to record data and describe documents, detailing their characteristics on the IDP's database to support scholars with contextual information.

So far, over one thousand documents have been recovered from clusters of compressed material from various excavation points on the archaeological site.

With many housed in spot welded polyester sleeves, ready to be digitised, the database continues to grow, detailing document formats, pigments and dyes.

Hopefully, making these items accessible will help unfold more secrets about the Tangut Empire which only existed from 1038 to 1227