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Diaspora, Trade, and Textual Mobility: Jewish Merchant Networks along the Silk Roads

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Jewish merchant diasporas within the circulation and transmission of texts across the interconnected trade networks of Central Eurasia between the sixth and thirteenth centuries CE. Moving beyond models that treat Silk Road exchange primarily in terms of commodity movement or state-sponsored communication, it proposes a framework of textual mobility grounded in the commercial, linguistic, and material ecology of long-distance trade. Rather than reconstructing a distinct Jewish trade network, the study demonstrates that Jewish merchants are most productively understood within the shared communicative, material, and documentary infrastructures of Central Eurasian commerce. Within these commercial environments, written communication constituted an integral component of long-distance exchange. Letters, accounts, and contractual documents functioned simultaneously as instruments of trade, mechanisms of coordination, and vehicles of information transfer. Although direct manuscript evidence for Jewish textual production in many regions of the Silk Roads remains fragmentary, comparative analysis of Central Asian commercial cultures suggests that multilingual scribal practices and adaptive documentary forms were widespread among merchant communities.

By situating Jewish diasporic activity within these broader structures, the article highlights the importance of multilingualism and material constraints in shaping textual transmission. It further demonstrates how texts, as physical objects, were embedded in processes of mobility, adaptation, and recontextualization across culturally diverse environments. Interreligious contact zones documented in manuscript environments such as Dunhuang and, in particular, Dandan-Uiliq provide an important comparative framework for understanding these dynamics. The article concludes that Jewish merchant diasporas are best understood as participants in, rather than exceptions to, the broader ecology of textual circulation in Central Eurasia. By shifting attention from isolated communities toward the mechanisms that sustained long-distance exchange, the study offers a materially grounded and network-oriented perspective on Jewish participation in Silk Road connectivity.

Keywords: merchant diasporas, textual mobility, Central Eurasia, multilingualism, manuscript culture, communication networks

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1. Introduction

The study of the Silk Road has undergone substantial historiographical revision in recent decades, shifting away from earlier linear or state-centered models of exchange toward network-based and mobility-oriented frameworks. Within this reconfiguration, trade is increasingly understood not merely as the movement of commodities, but as a broader vector of social, linguistic, and textual circulation. Yet, while the economic and material dimensions of Silk Road connectivity have been extensively explored, the role of merchant diasporas as agents of textual transmission remains comparatively underexamined, particularly in relation to Jewish communities operating within these transregional environments, not to be underestimated in modern times either.¹ In particular, works by Valerie Hansen (2012) and Étienne de la Vaissière (2005) have emphasized the importance of decentralized commercial actors and intermediary groups in structuring long-distance exchange across Eurasia. While scholarship on Jewish trade networks has been extensively developed for the Mediterranean context², their positioning within Silk Road systems has received less systematic treatment, especially from the perspective of manuscript culture and textual mobility. Important contributions also exist in Russian, Hebrew, Chinese, and other regional scholarly traditions, particularly concerning Central Asian history, Dunhuang studies³, and Jewish communities in Inner Asia, although the present study primarily engages with the Anglophone literature to develop a coherent analytical framework. Not to underestimate is their environment in the Central Asian states before, during and after the Soviet era. In 1168, the renowned medieval Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela wrote that 50,000 “Israelites” resided in Samarkand, and after 1991 most of them left the newly independent state of Uzbekistan.⁴

This article examines the role of Jewish merchant diasporas in the circulation and transmission of texts across Central Eurasian trade networks between the sixth and thirteenth centuries CE. More specifically, it asks how Jewish merchant communities contributed to the mobility of texts and what their documentary practices reveal about the relationship between commerce, multilingualism, and the circulation of knowledge across the Silk Roads. Rather than proposing a continuous or institutionally unified “Silk Road Judaism,” it adopts a fragmented and network-oriented approach that situates Jewish actors within broader commercial ecologies

¹ Kowner 2023.

² Goitein 1967–1993; Trivellato 2019.

³ Chunakova 2022; Rong 2026.

⁴ Cooper 2020. Regarding the long historical tradition of Jews in Central Asia: Shterenshis 2002; Elnazarov 2023, 48.

characterized by linguistic diversity and institutional plurality. The analytical focus of this study is textual mobility, understood as the movement, adaptation, and recontextualization of written materials across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This approach builds on recent developments in manuscript studies and material philology, which emphasize the embeddedness of texts within social and economic environments rather than treating them as autonomous carriers of meaning.⁵ Within this framework, written documents are not merely reflections of communication but active components of commercial practice. Rather than viewing textual mobility simply as a by-product of commerce, this article argues that written communication constituted one of the essential infrastructures through which long-distance exchange itself became possible. Jewish participation in these networks is approached through the lens of diasporic embeddedness in late antique and early medieval commercial systems, particularly those of the Parthian, the Sasanian, and post-Sasanian worlds.⁶ These environments were characterized by multilingual interaction, in which Aramaic-derived traditions, Middle Persian, Sogdian, and later Arabic coexisted as functional media of communication. In such contexts, textual practices were inherently adaptive and shaped by the pragmatic demands of trade and administration. In this context, the Sogdians proved to be particularly flexible and adaptable, which is also reflected in proper names that varied depending on the linguistic environment.⁷ The comparison with Sogdian merchant communities employed throughout this article therefore serves not as evidence of institutional equivalence but as a heuristic framework for identifying broader structural characteristics shared by long-distance merchant diasporas, including multilingual communication, documentary flexibility, and decentralized networks of trust.

Although direct written evidence for Jewish textual production in many regions of the Silk Roads remains fragmentary, comparative material from Central Asian commercial cultures suggests that multilingual scribal practices and documentary hybridity were widespread among merchant communities.⁸ This comparative framework allows for a cautious reconstruction of Jewish engagement with similar communicative environments, without assuming institutional continuity or uniformity. Methodologically, this comparative perspective allows the fragmentary Jewish evidence to be interpreted within wider structures of Eurasian connectivity while avoiding assumptions of ethnic uniformity or institutional continuity. The objective is

⁵ Bloom 2001; Khan 2013.

⁶ Daryaei 2009; Shaked 2003.

⁷ Lurie 2010, esp. 10–11.

⁸ de la Vaissière 2005; Skaff 2012.

therefore not to reconstruct a single Jewish trading network but to explore how documentary practices embedded within merchant diasporas contributed to broader systems of communication across the Silk Roads.

Finally, the absence of clearly identifiable Jewish texts in well-documented corpora such as in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang (Gansu Province in China)⁹ with few exceptions, underscores both the fragmentary nature of the surviving record and the importance of comparative analysis across adjacent manuscript cultures. Initially, there were some expectations, as the assumed Hebrew texts in Dunhuang called “prayer of repentance” (P. 1412) found by Pelliot.¹⁰ This paper fragment dated to the 8th–9th century CE consists of a *Seliḥa* prayer predominantly based on the Psalms, in an alphabetical acrostic structure, with 18 lines of text in Hebrew with vowel signs of the so-called Babylonian syllable system. These features are particularly noteworthy – on the one hand, the spread of Jewish writing traditions far east of the classical Jewish settlement area, and on the other hand, the aforementioned supralinear vowel signs, which originate from the Babylonian-Jewish tradition of Mesopotamia and differ from the later dominant Tiberian system.¹¹ This suggests a connection to Jewish scholarly networks in the Iranian-Mesopotamian region.¹² However, it turned out that some fragments from the Dunhuang collections, described as possibly Hebrew or Jewish, were inaccurate. Many fragments were tiny, and others entered collections in London, Paris, or St. Petersburg early on and were inadequately catalogued. Furthermore, fragments written in Semitic scripts, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, or certain Syriac scripts, can easily be confused. Therefore, some supposedly Jewish fragments were later re-evaluated or even discarded. Numerous documents, on the other hand, were attributed to the so-called Nestorian tradition, that is, the Church of the East (see FN 13). It used Syriac, which, like Hebrew, is a Semitic language and is written in a script that appears similar to non-specialists. In some early identifications, it later turned out that the pieces were more likely Christian Syriac than Jewish.¹³ Another discussion concerns possible Judeo-

⁹ Whitfield 2004; Rong 2013.

¹⁰ Doumy 2021, 9; Koller 2024; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Hébreu 1412 (formerly Pelliot hébreu 1. A photograph regarding the object: Collection object "Pelliot hébreu 1" • Juaeo-Persian document from Dunhuang – International Dunhuang Programme

¹¹ Khan 2021, 26–27.

¹² Chen 2012, 7; Pourshariati 2014.

¹³ Regarding Christian texts in the region of Turpan in Xinjiang: Dickens 2013, 5–8. Moreover, worth to mention is the famous so-called Nestorian stele, erected in 781 CE in the capital of the Tang Dynasty – Xi’an. It documents the history of the East Syriac (often referred to as “Nestorian”) Church in China since the arrival of the missionary Alopen in 635. The text is predominantly in Chinese, but also includes Syriac passages and lists of names, demonstrating the close connection between Chinese and Syriac Christian traditions. The stele is one of the most important sources for the so-called *Jingjiao* (“Luminous Religion”) in China. It shows how Christian terms and teachings were adapted to Chinese religious and philosophical concepts and provides valuable information about the cultural and linguistic exchange processes along the Silk Road. Johnson 2017.

Persian texts, being Persian written with Hebrew letters – thus not being a linguistic variety of Persian but different types of Persian language written in Jewish script.¹⁴ It should be noted that that early (pre-Mongol) Judeo-Persian¹⁵ differs significantly from Classical Persian and preserves important evidence for the development of Early New Persian as well as the history of Jewish communities in Iran and Afghanistan.¹⁶ Late (post-Mongol) Judeo-Persian, by contrast, is largely identical to Classical Persian apart from its use of the Hebrew script. Such texts are well known from Central Asia.

Worth to mention are generally the so-called “Judeo-Persian letters from Khotan”. They constitute a small and fragmentary corpus of early commercial documents from the southern Tarim Basin. Written in Hebrew script, these texts preserve an early form of Middle Iranian or incipient New Persian and display significant linguistic hybridity, including Sogdian lexical and structural influence. Yoshida interprets this phenomenon not as scribal inconsistency¹⁷, but as evidence of a multilingual mercantile environment in which Sogdian still functioned as a dominant lingua franca of Silk Road trade, even as early Persian varieties were beginning to emerge as written norms. The use of Hebrew script reflects a scribal convention of Jewish merchant communities operating within Iranian-speaking commercial networks, rather than the existence of a distinct Jewish spoken language. In this sense, the letters represent a transitional linguistic stage in the early eighth century, corresponding to both the gradual Persianization of Central Asia and the continued vitality of Sogdian as a trade language in long-distance exchange systems.¹⁸ One assumed example in the same region is a letter with 37 lines found by Aurel Stein in Dandan-Uiliq close to Khotan (BL OR 8212/166)¹⁹ and dated to 718 was in Persian language but written in Hebrew script, by a Jewish merchant who had gone bankrupt while doing business in Khotan. He addressed a friend in Tabaristan on the south end of the Caspian Sea, asking for his assistance in dealing with some inferior sheep which he had purchased.²⁰ Another very informative letter is the so-called Dandān-Uiliq II, probably written in the 8th or 9th century CE. It starts with greetings and then reports on a series of gifts, goods, and payments that have been sent to various individuals and officials. These items appear to include luxury goods, textiles, and other valuable commodities, suggesting the involvement of long-distance

¹⁴ Paul 2013; Asefi 2023, 50.

¹⁵ Regarding its different stages: Shaked 2019, 547–549.

¹⁶ Regarding the migration: Das et al. 2016.

¹⁷ Yoshida 2019, 392.

¹⁸ Zhang 2023.

¹⁹ British Library, BL OR 8212/166. Available online through the Princeton Geniza Project at <https://geniza.princeton.edu/documents/35176/> (accessed June 10, 2026).

²⁰ Margoliouth 1907, 570–574; Utas 1969; Lazard 1988; Zhang 2022.

trade networks. The letter also mentions several named people and discusses financial obligations and exchanges. Hereby, also the political circumstances can be observed: In a later section, the author advises the recipients to treat the daughter of a local landowner (a *dehqān*) kindly and respectfully. The letter then turns to political and military news from the region, especially concerning Kashgar and the conflict between local powers and the Tibetans. According to the report, the Tibetans had recently suffered a major defeat, with many being killed or captured. The author also mentions contributions made to support military activities. Because the end of the document is lost, the full purpose and conclusion of the letter remain unknown.²¹ Nevertheless, it provides valuable evidence about the economic life, social relations, and political circumstances of Silk Road communities, as well as the development of Persian during the transition from Middle Persian to New Persian. Rather than treating this absence as evidence of non-participation, it is interpreted here as a methodological constraint that necessitates indirect reconstruction through parallel textual environments. By situating Jewish merchant diasporas within these broader structures of Central Eurasian exchange, this article contributes to ongoing debates on diaspora as a historical category, the relationship between commerce and literacy, and the role of intermediary groups in premodern information networks.²² Against this background, the present study asks how documentary practices, multilingual communication, and material conditions shaped the circulation of texts within the commercial networks of Central Eurasia, and what this reveals about Silk Road connectivity through the activities of Jewish merchant diasporas. To answer this question, the contribution proceeds from the historical contexts of Jewish merchant activity to the communicative, linguistic, material, and interreligious conditions that collectively shaped textual mobility across Central Eurasia. Rather than treating these themes separately, each chapter examines one dimension of the broader infrastructures that enabled long-distance connectivity across the Silk Roads.

More broadly, the evidence discussed here suggests that Jewish merchant communities should not be understood merely as another commercial group operating along the Silk Roads. Rather, they provide a particularly valuable perspective from which to examine how information, trust, and written communication circulated within decentralized networks of long-distance exchange. The significance of the surviving sources therefore lies not only in documenting the presence of Jewish merchants across Central Eurasia, but also in illuminating the

²¹ Asefi 2023, 51–53. For both letters, see also: Zhang et al. 2008 and Zhang 2016.

²² Trivellato 2019.

communicative infrastructures that enabled trade itself. By focusing on textual mobility rather than solely on commercial activity, this article argues that merchant diasporas contributed to the circulation of knowledge as well as commodities, thereby refining current understandings of Silk Road connectivity beyond purely economic models.

2. Jewish Diasporas in the Commercial Networks of Central Eurasia

The historical conditions for Jewish participation in long-distance commercial exchange across Central Eurasia are most securely grounded in the social and economic structures of the late antique Near East, particularly within the Sasanian and post-Sasanian worlds. Scholarship on Sasanian Iran has emphasized the extent to which its imperial economy was characterized by interconnected urban centers, agricultural surplus systems, and long-distance trade routes linking Mesopotamia with the Iranian plateau and beyond.²³ Jewish communities in Mesopotamia and western Iran were embedded within these structures and participated in a variety of economic activities, including commerce, craft production, and administrative functions. While the sources do not support the reconstruction of a unified or institutionally coordinated “Jewish trade network,” rabbinic and documentary traditions nevertheless indicate the presence of mobile commercial actors operating within multilingual environments in which Aramaic and Middle Persian functioned as practical media of communication.²⁴ These western zones of Jewish settlement provided an important socio-economic background for later forms of diasporic mobility.²⁵ Rather than representing isolated enclaves, they should be understood as nodes within broader regional exchange systems that facilitated both local and long-distance trade. From the perspective of this study, the importance of these communities lies less in demonstrating the existence of a distinct Jewish commercial system than in identifying the social conditions under which documentary practices became embedded in long-distance exchange. Multilingual urban environments, commercial mobility, and the coexistence of different legal and administrative traditions created circumstances in which written communication became an increasingly important instrument for maintaining trust, transmitting information, and coordinating transactions across geographical distance. This socio-economic setting provides the essential background for the textual evidence discussed in the following sections.

²³ Daryaei 2009; Wiesehöfer 2010.

²⁴ Shaked 2003; Neusner 1970.

²⁵ Zand 1988.

Some historical accounts suggest that Jews arrived in the Caucasus following the Babylonian and Roman exiles, settling along the shores of the Black Sea, the Kolkhetian Valley, and migrating from Persian lands to North Caucasus and Central Asia.²⁶ Worth to mention is the Khazar Khaganate, a powerful semi-nomadic empire that dominated large parts of the Pontic–Caspian steppe between the seventh and tenth centuries CE.²⁷ Situated between the expanding Byzantine Empire to the west and the Abbasid Caliphate to the south, the Khazar state occupied a strategic position along major trade routes linking Northern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Near East. Its rulers developed a sophisticated political system that enabled the kingdom to serve as an intermediary between diverse cultural, religious, and economic spheres.²⁸ One of the most remarkable aspects of Khazar history is the reported conversion of the ruling elite – and possibly segments of the broader population – to Judaism, a process generally dated between the eighth and ninth centuries CE. Although the precise circumstances, extent, and chronology of this conversion remain subjects of scholarly debate, medieval Hebrew, Arabic, Byzantine, and Persian sources consistently attest that Judaism became associated with the Khazar ruling house. According to later traditions, its ruler chose Judaism after considering representatives of Christianity and Islam, thereby adopting a faith that allowed the kingdom to maintain political independence from both the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Muslim caliphates.²⁹ The conversion has often been interpreted as a diplomatic and ideological strategy that reinforced Khazar sovereignty while facilitating the integration of Jewish merchants and intellectual networks operating across Eurasia. The most famous source relating to this episode is the correspondence between Hasdai ibn Shaprut and Joseph of the Khazars, in which the Khazar king presents his realm as a Jewish kingdom. Although the Khazar state declined during the tenth century, particularly following campaigns by Sviatoslav I of Kyiv, its conversion to Judaism remains one of the most distinctive episodes in medieval Eurasian history. The conversion has often been interpreted as one possible diplomatic and ideological strategy that may have reinforced Khazar sovereignty while facilitating relations with Jewish merchants and wider intellectual networks operating across Eurasia. However, the extent to which religious affiliation directly influenced commercial activity remains difficult to assess and continues to be debated. For the purposes of this article, the significance of the Khazar example lies not primarily in the question of conversion itself but in illustrating how political intermediaries could create environments that facilitated long-distance interaction

²⁶ Hezser 2020, 24; Zeev 2025.

²⁷ Golden 2007; Olsson 2013.

²⁸ Aslan 2023.

²⁹ On the discussion of the historicity of this conversion: Stampfer 2013.

between otherwise distinct cultural spheres. Whether through diplomacy, commerce, or religious affiliation, such intermediary structures formed part of the wider communicative landscape within which Jewish merchants and their documentary practices operated.

Further east, the commercial environments of Transoxiana and Central Asia were generally dominated by highly mobile merchant groups, most prominently the Sogdians, whose trading activities extended from Iran to northwestern China. Sogdian mercantile practices have been extensively documented in both textual and archaeological sources, demonstrating the importance of multilingual competence, flexible commercial organization, and adaptive scribal practices in sustaining long-distance exchange.³⁰ Within this broader mercantile ecology, evidence for Jewish participation is significantly more fragmentary. Direct textual attestations remain limited, as the examples before confirmed, and the surviving record does not permit reconstruction of continuous settlement patterns. Nevertheless, indirect references preserved in later documentary traditions, alongside comparative evidence from Jewish diasporic contexts in adjacent regions, suggest that Jewish merchants may have operated within overlapping circuits of exchange, particularly in zones where Iranian, Sogdian, and Turkic commercial spheres intersected. An important find context is the Afghan Geniza³¹, containing hundreds of manuscripts from the 11th to 13th centuries in caves in northern and central Afghanistan.³² It represents the largest known collection of original Jewish documents from this region. Over 80% of the documents are administrative records and daily life: letters, promissory notes, contracts, ledgers, lists, and legal deeds. In addition, there are religious texts, prayers, biblical fragments, commentaries, and literature. The documents are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Persian, and Judeo-Persian. The collection therefore offers one of the rare contemporary insights into the everyday social, commercial, and documentary practices of a Jewish community operating within the wider Silk Road environment.³³ Also, at Bamiyan – famous for the Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban – Judeo-Persian letters were found.³⁴ Taken together, these materials illustrate that Jewish documentary culture along the Silk Roads extended far beyond religious literature. The predominance of letters, contracts, accounts, and legal documents demonstrates that written communication formed an integral component of everyday commercial life. Rather than merely recording exchange, these texts constituted practical instruments through which merchants negotiated obligations and coordinated

³⁰ de la Vaissière 2005; Skaff 2012.

³¹ A Geniza is a repository for discarded sacred texts. Yoeli-Tlalim 2021, 2.

³² Haim 2014, 2016, and 2017.

³³ Hunter 2010; Rapp 1965; Shaked 1999.

³⁴ Paul 2013, 101; Shaked 2019; Nikoghosyan 2025.

activities across geographically dispersed networks. The Afghan Geniza therefore provides one of the clearest windows into the documentary practices that underpinned Jewish participation in wider Eurasian exchange.

Methodologically, this situation requires a careful distinction between attested presence and structurally inferred participation. While Sogdian material provides a robust empirical foundation, Jewish engagement in similar environments must be approached through comparative reconstruction rather than direct documentary continuity. The Sogdian case is particularly valuable not as a direct analogue but as a comparative model for understanding the structure of merchant diasporas in Central Eurasia. Studies of Sogdian commercial activity demonstrate how long-distance trade relied on multilingual communication, decentralized trust networks, and the circulation of written documentation across culturally diverse environments.³⁵ Rather than assuming equivalence between different diasporic groups, this comparative approach highlights shared structural conditions of mercantile mobility. These include the necessity of written documentation for maintaining trust over distance, the pragmatic acquisition and adaptation of multiple languages,³⁶ and the integration of scribal practices into everyday commercial activity. Such conditions created environments in which textual production and circulation were inseparable from economic exchange. The comparison with Sogdian merchant communities is therefore heuristic rather than evidential. It is intended not to demonstrate identical institutions or commercial organizations, but to illuminate the shared communicative, documentary, and material conditions under which different merchant diasporas operated.

The extension of Jewish commercial activity toward the eastern reaches of the Silk Roads, including regions associated with later Chinese Jewish communities Youtai 犹太 (probably from “ye-hu-da” or “ya-hu-di”, a term introduced to China by Christian missionaries during the first half of the 19th century) such as Kaifeng, remains chronologically and structurally complex.³⁷ Although Jewish communities are securely attested in China from the Song period

³⁵ Vaissière 2005; Hansen 2012.

³⁶ King 1992.

³⁷ Urbach 2005, 67; Pan 2007; Chen 2012, 7. Regarding the so-called seven surnames Ai, Gao, Jin, Li, Shi, Zhang, and Zhao: Leslie 1998, 29; and on Matteo Ricci’s experience of equating Jewish and Christian faiths: Nissan 2020, 45. On contemporary studies in China: Song 2009. In this essay, the author examines the development of Jewish Studies in the People’s Republic of China since the 1980s and analyzes its institutional foundations, research priorities, and methodological challenges. He demonstrates that Chinese research on Jews and Judaism is frequently shaped by issues of modernization, minority politics, and Chinese perceptions of Jewish success, while simultaneously undergoing increasing internationalization and professionalization of the discipline. Bernstein (2016) analyzes the temporal and cultural overlap between the Jewish festival of Sukkot and the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival within the Kaifeng Jewish community, demonstrating both historical calendar structures and

onward, the available evidence does not support the reconstruction of a continuous eastward expansion of Jewish merchant networks from Mesopotamia through Central Asia into China.³⁸ Rather, the Kaifeng community should be understood within the broader context of multiple and overlapping processes of long-distance mobility, migration, and regional interaction, whose precise historical trajectories remain only partially recoverable. Accordingly, the eastern evidence is best interpreted not as proof of a single linear movement across Eurasia but as one possible outcome of the wider commercial and communicative environments that characterized the Silk Roads. The modest direct written evidence for Jewish textual activity in regions such as Dunhuang further underscores the fragmentary character of the surviving record. Rather than indicating the absence of Jewish participation, this uneven documentation highlights the methodological necessity of cautious comparative interpretation and reinforces the central argument of this study: that textual mobility along the Silk Roads can often be reconstructed only by combining direct documentary evidence with broader structural patterns of communication and exchange. What we do have, is the Staël-Holstein Manuscript dated to 925 CE, a scroll written in both Khotanese and in Tibetan, records names of the peoples occupying the area in the Western Corridor to the Tarim Basin, including the term *sahûtta* interpreted³⁹ as a Khotanese word for Jew⁴⁰; regarding Chinese terms for Jew transcribed from Arab-Persian names, *ibid.*). Taken as a whole, the evidence assembled here suggests that Jewish participation in the commercial world of Central Eurasia is best understood through patterns of embeddedness rather than through the reconstruction of a single, coherent trading network. Although the surviving documentation remains uneven, the available sources consistently point toward multilingual communication, documentary flexibility, and participation in wider commercial environments shared with other merchant diasporas. This historical context forms the basis for the following chapters, which examine how textual mobility emerged not as an incidental by-product of commerce but as one of the mechanisms through which long-distance exchange itself was sustained.

modern identity discourses concerning “Sino-Judaic culture.” The central question is whether such shared celebrations are an expression of authentic tradition or rather a modern cultural reconstruction and externalization of Jewish identity in China. Note.

³⁸ Xu 2003.

³⁹ In juxtaposition to Bailey 1951.

⁴⁰ Lin (trans. Dien) 2000, 171.

3. Trade and Mobility

Long-distance trade in Central Eurasia was not limited to the exchange of commodities but constituted a broader system of communication in which written materials played an integral role. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Silk Road trade should be understood as a networked process involving the simultaneous movement of goods, people, and information.⁴¹ Within this framework, textual production was not external to trade but structurally embedded in it. This part therefore shifts the focus from the historical presence of Jewish communities to the communicative mechanisms through which long-distance commerce was organized. Rather than treating texts merely as historical sources, it examines them as functional components of commercial practice. Correspondence, accounting practices, and contractual documentation accompanied economic transactions and enabled coordination across spatially dispersed networks. As has been shown in Silk Road historiography, these networks depended on decentralized mechanisms of communication that integrated written documentation into everyday commercial practice.⁴² Merchant communities in Central Eurasia operated within decentralized yet highly effective infrastructures of exchange. These networks relied heavily on interpersonal trust, reputation, and written verification rather than formal bureaucratic control. Literacy in such contexts extended beyond elite scribal cultures into pragmatic commercial usage, where writing functioned as an operational tool of trade.⁴³ Sogdian mercantile documentation demonstrates how multilingual competence and adaptive scribal practices were structurally integrated into commercial organization. Letters, contracts, and memoranda were routinely produced in forms that reflected both regional conditions and transactional needs.⁴⁴ This indicates a flexible scribal environment in which textual production was shaped by economic necessity rather than institutional standardization.

The significance of these observations extends beyond the history of literacy itself. They demonstrate that written communication was not an auxiliary feature of Silk Road commerce but one of the practical mechanisms through which geographically dispersed exchange became possible. Documentary practices reduced uncertainty, facilitated coordination, and created durable commercial relationships across political, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. The value of this comparison lies not in demonstrating that Jewish and Sogdian merchants behaved identically, but in identifying the structural mechanisms through which documentary practices

⁴¹ Hansen 2012; de la Vaissière 2005.

⁴² Hansen 2012, 64–71.

⁴³ de la Vaissière 2005, 118–126; Skaff 2012, 143–149.

⁴⁴ de la Vaissière 2005, 152–160.

sustained long-distance commerce across different merchant communities. The comparison therefore shifts attention from ethnic or religious distinctions toward the communicative conditions that made Silk Road exchange possible. This perspective encourages a shift away from viewing Silk Road exchange primarily through the movement of commodities toward understanding communication itself as a fundamental component of long-distance connectivity.

One of the central challenges of long-distance trade was the maintenance of trust across geographic and cultural distance. Written documentation functioned as a stabilizing mechanism for commercial relationships that could not be verified through direct interaction. Letters, receipts, and contracts served as instruments of accountability and continuity across extended spatial frameworks. This documentary logic is particularly evident in Central Asian mercantile contexts, where written correspondence was essential for sustaining long-distance trade relations and coordinating dispersed commercial activity.⁴⁵ Comparable mechanisms of documentary mediation can be inferred for other merchant groups operating under similar structural conditions, although direct evidence for Jewish commercial documentation in these regions remains limited. Written documents circulating along trade routes should be understood as mobile material objects rather than static carriers of fixed meaning. Manuscripts were frequently transported across vast distances, changing hands multiple times and being adapted to new communicative contexts. These processes included copying, abbreviation, translation, and annotation, producing layered textual artefacts that reflect successive stages of use. The material conditions of writing were significantly affected by the increasing availability of paper, which provided a lighter and more flexible medium than parchment or other traditional materials. Its diffusion across Central Eurasia contributed to a broader expansion of documentary practices and facilitated more frequent written communication across commercial networks.⁴⁶ Taken together, these developments illustrate that the circulation of manuscripts cannot be separated from the circulation of commodities. Commercial exchange generated its own documentary culture, within which letters, contracts, and accounts became mobile artefacts that travelled alongside merchants and goods, continuously adapting to new social and linguistic environments.

Not to be underestimated are Jewish tombs and artifacts that have been unearthed in Dunhuang, Luoyang, Beijing, Hangzhou and Quanzhou. All of them have been important commercial

⁴⁵ Hansen 2012, 88–96.

⁴⁶ Bloom 2001, 41–55.

cities; it is highly likely that Jews were present in other commercial cities as well.⁴⁷ Therefore, Jewish communities participated in urban environments closely associated with long-distance commerce. Although these finds do not in themselves document commercial activity, they reinforce the broader picture of Jewish integration into the urban landscapes through which Silk Road exchange operated. Within this broader framework, Jewish merchant participation along the Silk Road must be understood as structurally embedded in the same commercial and documentary systems that governed other mercantile communities. Although direct manuscript evidence remains fragmentary, the organizational logic of long-distance trade suggests that Jewish merchants would have operated within comparable regimes of written communication, multilingual interaction, and documentary mediation. To the most important textual sources belongs the Muslim geographer and administrator Ibn Khordadbeh, who, around 870 CE, describes Jewish long-distance traders in his work *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik* (“Book of Roads and Kingdoms”). Written within the administrative and geographical traditions of the Abbasid Caliphate, Ibn Khordadbeh’s account reflects both practical knowledge of commercial routes and the intellectual conventions of the intended audience. It therefore requires interpretation not simply as a record of historical fact, but as a situated representation of long-distance commerce. His descriptions in Arabic are counted as the earliest written sources that mention Jews in China,⁴⁸ naming them Radhānites. Therefore, Ibn Khordadbeh’s narrative is particularly significant not because it documents a uniquely Jewish trading system, but because it illustrates the multilingual and transregional environments within which Jewish merchants operated. He portrays them as multilingual merchants who traveled between Christian, Islamic, and Asian regions and explicitly as far as China. Rather than positing discrete or institutionally bounded “Jewish trade networks,” it is more analytically productive to situate Jewish actors within shared infrastructures of exchange characterized by fluid linguistic boundaries and adaptive scribal practices. This structural perspective aligns with broader models of Silk Road connectivity that emphasize systems rather than ethnic or religious units as primary analytical categories.⁴⁹

Consequently, the surviving Jewish evidence is most productively interpreted not in isolation but within the wider communicative environment of Central Eurasian commerce. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from identifying exclusively Jewish institutions toward understanding how merchant diasporas participated in shared systems of documentation,

⁴⁷ Chen 2012, 7.

⁴⁸ Leslie 1998, 49–51.

⁴⁹ de la Vaissière 2005, 201–208; Hansen 2012, 102–110.

multilingual communication, and the circulation of trust. The following chapter therefore turns from these structural conditions to the surviving manuscript evidence itself, examining how such documentary practices can be observed in the preserved textual record.

4. Multilingualism and Scribal Exchange

If documentary practices constituted one operational foundation of Silk Road commerce, multilingual competence represented the communicative condition that made such practices possible across culturally diverse environments. The commercial landscapes of Central Eurasia between Late Antiquity and the early medieval period were characterized by sustained linguistic plurality. Merchants operating across regions such as Mesopotamia, Iran, Transoxiana, and northwestern China encountered environments in which no single language functioned as a universal medium of exchange. Instead, commercial interaction depended upon flexible multilingual competence shaped by regional circumstance and practical necessity.⁵⁰ Within these environments, written communication adapted to diverse linguistic settings that included Aramaic-derived traditions, Middle Persian, Sogdian, Turkic languages, and later Arabic. The resulting documentary culture was therefore not standardized across Eurasia but structurally heterogeneous, reflecting the decentralized nature of Silk Road exchange systems.⁵¹ Jewish communities participating in these broader commercial networks operated within established textual traditions grounded primarily in Hebrew and Aramaic. However, diasporic conditions required sustained interaction with surrounding linguistic environments, particularly within Sasanian and post-Sasanian administrative spheres dominated by Iranian languages and, later, Arabic documentary practices.⁵² A defining characteristic of Jewish scribal culture in such contexts was its adaptability. While Hebrew retained liturgical and scholarly prestige, practical communication frequently involved additional language registers suited to commercial and administrative interaction. This adaptability later became especially visible in Judeo-Persian textual traditions, which demonstrate the integration of Persian linguistic material into Hebrew-script documentary frameworks.⁵³ Such polyglot adaptation should not be understood as evidence of cultural dissolution, but rather as a pragmatic response to participation in commercially and linguistically diverse environments. From the perspective of long-distance commerce, multilingualism was not simply a cultural attribute but an operational necessity. The

⁵⁰ de la Vaissière 2005, 118–126; Skaff 2012, 143–149.

⁵¹ Hansen 2012, 64–71.

⁵² Shaked 2003, 15–28.

⁵³ Lazard 1968; Khan 2013, 7–12.

ability to navigate different linguistic environments enabled merchants to participate in multiple legal, administrative, and commercial spheres simultaneously. Scribal adaptability therefore constituted an essential component of commercial resilience, allowing documentary practices to remain effective despite constantly changing political and linguistic contexts. Consequently, multilingualism emerges not merely as a cultural consequence of Silk Road interaction but as one of the structural conditions that enabled connectivity across politically and linguistically fragmented regions.

Trade routes across Central Eurasia functioned as sustained contact zones in which scribal traditions interacted continuously. In these environments, writing systems were not static cultural markers but practical instruments shaped by mobility, commerce, and mediation. Sogdian commercial documentation in particular demonstrates the extent to which multilingual and multiscript practices were embedded in mercantile organization.⁵⁴ Jewish merchant communities operating within adjacent commercial spheres would almost certainly have encountered comparable pressures of adaptation. These may have included the need to recognize multiple scripts, employ local commercial terminology, or engage intermediaries for translation and documentary mediation. Comparable patterns of scribal flexibility are observable across other diasporic merchant communities operating under similar conditions of long-distance exchange.⁵⁵ Importantly, such adaptations did not necessarily erase communal or religious distinctions. Rather, they demonstrate how textual practices could remain internally differentiated while simultaneously participating in broader systems of economic communication. This observation has broader implications for understanding merchant diasporas along the Silk Roads. Rather than preserving isolated textual traditions, commercial communities continuously negotiated between internal cultural continuity and external communicative demands. Scribal flexibility thus emerged not as an exception but as one of the normal conditions of transregional exchange.

The emergence of Judeo-Persian textual traditions provides important evidence for the long-term adaptability of Jewish scribal culture within Iranian-speaking environments. Although most surviving Judeo-Persian materials derive from the Islamic period, they nevertheless illustrate how Hebrew script could function as a flexible vehicle for documenting local linguistic realities.⁵⁶ These texts reveal the existence of hybrid documentary cultures in which

⁵⁴ de la Vaissière 2005, 152–160.

⁵⁵ Trivellato 2019, 54–67.

⁵⁶ Shaked 2003, 41–52.

systems intersected in highly pragmatic ways. At the same time, caution is necessary when projecting later Judeo-Persian evidence backward into earlier Silk Road contexts. The survival of such materials is uneven and shaped heavily by the contingencies of preservation, particularly in arid manuscript environments of Central Asia. Accordingly, Judeo-Persian evidence should be understood not as direct proof for earlier Jewish documentary systems across the Silk Roads, but as an indicator of broader capacities for scribal adaptation within diasporic Jewish communities. Accordingly, the significance of Judeo-Persian lies less in demonstrating a specifically Silk Road phenomenon than in illustrating the remarkable capacity of Jewish documentary culture to adapt to changing linguistic environments while maintaining internal textual traditions. This adaptive quality is likely to have characterized earlier, less well-preserved phases of Jewish commercial activity as well. The coexistence of multiple linguistic systems within Central Eurasian trade environments created conditions in which translation, mediation, and documentary adaptation became structurally necessary. Texts frequently moved across regions in which linguistic continuity could not be assumed, requiring processes of transcription, abbreviation, annotation, or reinterpretation. Within such systems, merchants functioned not merely as carriers of commodities but also as intermediaries of written information. Jewish merchants participating in these environments would therefore have operated within broader ecologies of polyglot communication shaped by practical necessity rather than literary standardization. In this sense, multilingualism was not peripheral to Silk Road exchange but constituted one of the structural preconditions of long-distance exchange.⁵⁷ Multilingualism should therefore be regarded not merely as a background characteristic of Silk Road society but as one of the communicative mechanisms that enabled long-distance exchange to function. The continual movement of texts across linguistic boundaries required processes of translation, interpretation, and documentary adaptation that were as essential to commercial success as the movement of goods themselves. In this respect, textual mobility was inseparable from linguistic mobility, both of which formed integral components of the wider communicative infrastructures that connected Central Eurasia.

5. Materiality, Manuscripts, and Mercantile Exchange

If the previous chapters examined the communicative and linguistic conditions of long-distance exchange, the present chapter turns to the material dimension of textual mobility by considering the physical characteristics of manuscripts and documentary media that enabled written

⁵⁷ Skaff 2012, 211–218.

communication to circulate across Eurasia. The circulation of texts across the trade networks of Central Eurasia cannot be understood independently of their material form. Written documents in premodern Eurasia were not abstract repositories of written communication, but physical artefacts embedded in systems of production, transport, storage, and reuse. Their mobility depended upon practical considerations such as durability, portability, and reproducibility. In commercial environments shaped by long-distance exchange, documentary forms were often optimized for functional mobility. Letters, account records, inventories, and contractual memoranda were typically concise and materially adaptable, enabling merchants to transport and consult written information across extensive geographic distances. Such documentary practices reveal that textual transmission was inseparable from the logistical realities of trade itself.⁵⁸ From the perspective of this study, the materiality of manuscripts is not merely an archaeological concern but an essential component of textual mobility. The physical properties of documents determined how information could be transported, preserved, reused, and circulated within merchant networks. Material history and communication history were therefore inseparable dimensions of Silk Road exchange. Accordingly, the material history of manuscripts becomes integral to the history of Silk Road connectivity, demonstrating that infrastructures of communication were as important as the infrastructures that transported people and goods.

One of the most significant developments affecting textual mobility in Central Eurasia was the gradual diffusion of paper technologies westward from China. Compared with parchment and other writing surfaces, paper offered substantial advantages in terms of weight, flexibility, and production cost. Its wider adoption contributed to a marked expansion in documentary production and facilitated more sustained written communication across commercial networks.⁵⁹ The spread of paper should not be understood merely as a technological innovation but as a transformation in the material infrastructure of communication. Lower production costs enabled greater documentary density within commercial systems, including the increased use of correspondence, account keeping, and transactional records. Such developments were particularly important in decentralized trade environments where written communication functioned as a substitute for direct oversight. The diffusion of paper thus altered not only the economics of writing but also the organizational possibilities of long-distance commerce. More frequent correspondence, more detailed accounting, and a greater density of documentary

⁵⁸ Hansen 2012, 88–96.

⁵⁹ Bloom 2001, 41–55.

exchange fundamentally expanded the capacity of merchants to coordinate activities across dispersed commercial networks. Accordingly, the material history of manuscripts should be regarded as an essential component of Silk Road connectivity rather than as a secondary aspect of textual culture.

Documents circulating along Silk Road trade routes frequently existed within conditions of continuous mobility and reuse. Rather than remaining static artefacts, documents were copied, excerpted, annotated, abbreviated, and repurposed according to changing practical needs. These layered textual forms reflect the cumulative effects of movement across multiple linguistic and social environments. Comparable developments may also be observed in studies of Georgian Jewish merchant communities, which likewise illustrate the close relationship between documentary practice, mobility, and commercial exchange.⁶⁰ Comparative manuscript evidence from Central Asia demonstrates that documentary practices were often highly pragmatic and materially adaptive. Sogdian letters and administrative documents, for example, reveal flexible approaches to layout, multilingual notation, and textual reuse shaped by commercial necessity.⁶¹ Such evidence suggests that manuscript culture in mercantile contexts was fundamentally dynamic rather than fixed. The initially mentioned text discoveries from Dunhuang provide one of the richest surviving archives for the study of textual culture along the eastern Silk Roads.⁶² The corpus includes Buddhist, Daoist, Manichaean, administrative, and vernacular documents preserved under unusually favorable climatic conditions.⁶³ Although explicitly identifiable Jewish manuscript materials are rather sparse in the Dunhuang archive, the site remains critically important as a comparative framework for understanding the broader ecology of textual circulation in Central Eurasia. The coexistence of multiple religious and linguistic traditions within a single documentary environment demonstrates the extent to which text production along the Silk Roads was embedded in plural and overlapping systems of communication.⁶⁴ Recent scholarship has further emphasized that Dunhuang manuscripts should not be interpreted solely within local Chinese contexts, but as evidence of transregional interaction shaped by mobility, trade, and multilingual exchange.⁶⁵ This broader interpretive framework is particularly relevant for reconstructing less well-preserved textual communities whose documentary traces survive only fragmentarily. The significance of Dunhuang therefore

⁶⁰ Enoch & Lomtadze 2016; on their cryptolanguage: Pourtskhvanidze & Tskhvediani 2021, 3–5.

⁶¹ de la Vaissière 2005, 152–160.

⁶² Wang 2018.

⁶³ Whitfield 2004, 217–245; Rong 2013.

⁶⁴ Reck 2010.

⁶⁵ Rong 2023, 71–95.

extends beyond the specific communities represented within its caves.⁶⁶ As one of the richest surviving manuscript environments of Eurasia, it provides an exceptional comparative framework for reconstructing broader patterns of textual circulation, multilingual communication, and documentary practice that almost certainly characterized many less well-preserved merchant communities as well.

Within this broader material environment, Jewish merchant textual practices must be approached through the constraints and affordances shared by other mobile mercantile communities. The transferability of documentary formats, the availability of paper, and the practical demands of multilingual trade all shaped the conditions under which Jewish merchants may have produced, transported, or transmitted written materials.

The fragmentary survival of Jewish documentary evidence in Central Eurasia should therefore not be interpreted as evidence for absence of participation, but as a reflection of the uneven preservation patterns that characterize Silk Road manuscript history more generally. As repeatedly demonstrated, its survival is heavily conditioned by environmental and archival contingencies rather than by proportional historical presence.⁶⁷ The available evidence therefore allows us to reconstruct broader documentary environments and communicative practices, but not complete Jewish commercial networks or continuous patterns of textual transmission. Distinguishing between what the evidence demonstrates and what remains hypothetical is essential for interpreting fragmentary manuscript traditions. Accordingly, Jewish merchant textuality is best understood not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of a broader material ecology of documentary exchange extending across Central Eurasian trade systems. This perspective has important methodological implications. Rather than interpreting the surviving Jewish manuscripts as isolated witnesses, they should be situated within the wider material history of documentary exchange across Eurasia. Doing so shifts attention from the quantity of preserved texts to the communicative functions they fulfilled, thereby reinforcing the central argument of this study that textual mobility constituted an integral dimension of long-distance commerce rather than a secondary consequence of it.

⁶⁶ As Sogdian sources: Livshits 2015; Chunakova 2022.

⁶⁷ Whitfield 2004, 12–18.

6. Interreligious Contact and Cultural Transmission

The trade networks of Central Eurasia facilitated not only commercial exchange but also sustained interaction among diverse religious and intellectual traditions.⁶⁸ Urban centers, caravan hubs, and administrative corridors along the Silk Roads functioned as contact zones in which Buddhist, Manichaean, Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and later Islamic communities coexisted within overlapping social and economic environments.⁶⁹ Within these settings, interaction did not necessarily imply doctrinal synthesis or direct theological exchange. Rather, religious traditions encountered one another through practical forms of coexistence shaped by commerce, mobility, and shared documentary infrastructures. Textual circulation therefore occurred within environments characterized by multilingual communication and overlapping scribal systems rather than isolated confessional spheres. These interactions unfolded simultaneously on religious, linguistic, and documentary levels. While all three dimensions formed part of the historical reality of Silk Road exchange, the surviving evidence most clearly illuminates linguistic and documentary practices, which therefore constitute the principal analytical focus of this chapter. Jewish textual traditions operating within Central Eurasian trade environments existed alongside a wide range of neighboring manuscript cultures. As highlighted before, in Sasanian and post-Sasanian contexts, Jewish communities interacted with Iranian administrative systems, Christian textual cultures, and later Islamic documentary practices, all of which contributed to highly plural communicative environments.⁷⁰ For merchant communities in particular, these interactions were often mediated through practical economic activity rather than formal religious discourse. Commercial correspondence, contracts, and transactional documentation constituted shared arenas in which multiple linguistic and scribal traditions intersected. The resulting forms of contact were therefore primarily functional and documentary rather than theological. This distinction is central to the present study. Rather than interpreting Silk Road connectivity primarily through the transmission of religious ideas, the evidence suggests that commercial interaction first created durable communicative environments within which texts, languages, and documentary practices circulated. Religious traditions participated in these shared communicative spaces while largely maintaining their own intellectual and confessional identities. This suggests that Silk Road connectivity is best understood not simply as interaction between separate traditions, but as the emergence of shared communicative environments within which diverse

⁶⁸ Conrad 2021, 9–10.

⁶⁹ Whitfield 2004, 217–245; Hansen 2012, 102–110.

⁷⁰ Shaked 2003, 15–28.

communities participated while preserving distinct characteristics. Consequently, the significance of these interactions lies less in religious convergence than in the emergence of shared communicative environments that connected otherwise distinct communities through common documentary practices.

This distinction is important methodologically, since the surviving evidence does not support broad claims of direct religious borrowing or systematic intellectual exchange between Jewish and other Silk Road communities. Instead, the evidence points toward parallel participation within shared infrastructures of communication. The coexistence of multiple religious communities within Silk Road environments created conditions in which translation, transcription, and scribal mediation became structurally necessary. Written communication often crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries through intermediaries capable of navigating multiple documentary systems. Comparative evidence from Sogdian and Central Asian manuscript traditions demonstrates the importance of such mediating practices in sustaining transregional communication.⁷¹ Merchants and scribes functioned as practical intermediaries within systems where multilingual literacy was economically advantageous and often operationally necessary. Jewish merchants participating in these exchange networks necessarily operated within similar communicative environments and can therefore reasonably be expected to have encountered comparable pressures toward documentary flexibility and scribal adaptation. However, such adaptation should not be interpreted as evidence of cultural homogenization. Rather, it reflects the pragmatic requirements of communication within commercially interconnected but religiously plural environments. Accordingly, interreligious contact should not be understood primarily as a process of theological convergence but as the outcome of repeated practical interaction within common commercial environments. The documentary record reflects this shared communicative sphere far more clearly than it does direct religious exchange, thereby offering a more robust basis for historical interpretation.

The manuscript environment of Dunhuang offers one of the clearest surviving examples of the coexistence of multiple textual and religious traditions within a single Silk Road archive. Buddhist sutras, administrative records, vernacular writings, and Manichaean materials collectively illustrate the density and diversity of textual production in eastern Central Eurasia.⁷² Although Jewish text materials are absent from the extant Dunhuang corpus, the archive nevertheless provides an important comparative horizon for understanding the broader

⁷¹ de la Vaissière 2005, 152–160.

⁷² Rong 2013, 41–67; Whitfield 2004, 217–245.

conditions under which textual transmission occurred across the Silk Roads. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Dunhuang should be interpreted not as an isolated regional archive but as part of wider transregional networks of mobility and communication.⁷³ Its importance therefore lies not only in the texts it preserves, but also in the exceptional insight it provides into the mechanisms through which multilingual manuscript cultures functioned within wider Eurasian exchange systems. From this perspective, Dunhuang functions less as evidence for a particular religious community than as an exceptional comparative archive illustrating the communicative ecology of the Silk Roads. Its manuscript diversity demonstrates the extent to which mobility, multilingualism, and documentary interaction formed the normal conditions of textual transmission across Central Eurasia.

Within this comparative framework, the absence of surviving Jewish materials should be approached cautiously. Manuscript preservation along the Silk Roads was highly uneven and dependent upon environmental conditions, archival practices, and historical contingencies rather than proportional representation of historical populations. Textual transmission across Central Eurasia did not occur through a single unified system but through overlapping and partially connected communicative spheres. Religious identity constituted one factor within these systems, but commercial necessity, linguistic adaptability, and material constraints often shaped documentary practice more directly than doctrinal affiliation. Jewish merchant diasporas participated in this broader ecology of exchange insofar as they operated within the same infrastructures of mobility that facilitated the circulation of texts across linguistic and religious boundaries.⁷⁴ Their role in textual transmission should therefore be understood not as exceptional or isolated, but as structurally embedded within wider patterns of mercantile communication and manuscript mobility characteristic of the Silk Roads as a whole.⁷⁵ The evidence examined throughout this chapter therefore supports a broader interpretation of Jewish participation in Silk Road exchange. Rather than emphasizing exceptional Jewish networks or uniquely Jewish mechanisms of transmission, the surviving sources indicate that Jewish merchants operated within the same communicative environments, documentary practices, and multilingual conditions that structured long-distance commerce more generally. Their significance lies not in their separateness but in demonstrating how diasporic communities

⁷³ Rong 2023, 71–95.

⁷⁴ Regarding their role and activity in Asia: Harris 2012.

⁷⁵ Hansen 2012, 88–96; Trivellato 2019, 54–67.

participated in – and contributed to – the wider circulation of texts, information, and commercial trust across Eurasia.

Conclusion

The evidence examined throughout this study demonstrates that the circulation of texts across Central Eurasia can best be understood through the shared communicative, linguistic, and material infrastructures that sustained long-distance commerce. The movement of texts across the Silk Roads was inseparable from the broader structures of mobility that connected Central Eurasia between Late Antiquity and the medieval period. Trade networks facilitated not only the circulation of commodities but also the transmission of documentary practices, linguistic forms, and written communication across geographically dispersed regions. Jewish merchant communities should be understood within these wider systems of exchange rather than as isolated or institutionally unified networks. Although direct manuscript evidence for Jewish textual activity in many parts of Central Eurasia remains fragmentary, comparative analysis demonstrates that the structural conditions of long-distance commerce necessitated forms of multilingual communication, documentary mediation, and scribal adaptability comparable to those attested among other mercantile groups such as the Sogdians. The study has further emphasized the importance of material and infrastructural perspectives for understanding textual transmission. The spread of paper technologies, the portability of documentary formats, and the decentralized nature of Silk Road commerce created environments in which written communication became increasingly embedded in everyday mercantile activity. In such contexts, texts functioned not merely as repositories of religious or literary content but as practical instruments of coordination, trust, and exchange. Taken together, these observations suggest that textual mobility should be regarded as a constitutive element of Silk Road exchange rather than as a secondary consequence of commercial activity. Writing did not merely accompany trade; it enabled merchants to maintain relationships, coordinate transactions, and negotiate linguistic and cultural diversity across vast geographical distances. The circulation of texts and the circulation of goods therefore formed mutually reinforcing dimensions of long-distance connectivity.

At the same time, the article has stressed the methodological necessity of caution. The uneven survival of written evidence across Central Eurasia limits the possibility of reconstructing continuous Jewish textual networks extending across the Silk Roads. Sites such as Dunhuang remain invaluable not because they provide direct evidence for Jewish communities, but

because they illuminate the wider manuscript ecologies within which long-distance communication unfolded. As comparative archives, they enable the reconstruction of broader documentary environments that also shaped communities whose textual remains have survived only fragmentarily. Rather than proposing a singular “Silk Road Judaism,” this study therefore advocates a network-oriented and materially grounded approach to Jewish participation in Central Eurasian exchange systems. More broadly, this approach suggests that Silk Road connectivity itself is best understood through the interaction of documentary, linguistic, material, and social infrastructures rather than through the movement of commodities alone. Accordingly, the principal contribution of the present study lies not in reconstructing a previously unknown Jewish trade network, but in demonstrating that Jewish merchants are most productively understood within the shared communicative, material, and documentary infrastructures of Central Eurasian commerce. This perspective shifts attention from isolated communities toward the mechanisms that enabled transregional interaction across linguistic, political, and religious boundaries.

Beyond the documentary evidence discussed here, future interdisciplinary research – including archaeogenetics, isotope analysis, and mobility studies – may further illuminate patterns of movement and interaction that cannot be reconstructed from textual evidence alone.⁷⁶ All those approaches allow Jewish merchant diasporas to be situated within broader histories of mobility, multilingualism, and documentary circulation while avoiding overly deterministic or teleological models of cultural transmission. Future research may further refine these questions through comparative text analysis, documentary archaeology, and the continued study of multilingual commercial archives from Central Asia and western China. In particular, advances in manuscript studies and material philology may provide new opportunities to reconstruct fragmentary textual environments that have thus far remained only partially visible within Silk Road historiography. At the same time, the exceptional preservation of the Dunhuang archive reflects highly specific environmental and archival circumstances. It provides an unparalleled comparative corpus, but not a statistically representative picture of manuscript production across Central Eurasia. More broadly, the approach adopted here may also prove useful for the study of other diasporic merchant communities whose documentary record is similarly fragmentary. By integrating manuscript studies, material history, and the archaeology of communication, future research can move beyond isolated textual discoveries toward a more

⁷⁶ Tian et al. 2015.

comprehensive understanding of how mobility, multilingualism, and documentary practice collectively sustained the interconnected societies of premodern Eurasia.

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