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Safarali Shomakhmadov

## **Five Years of the Serindica Laboratory in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS: Results and Prospects**

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*Abstract:* The article presents a review of the main results achieved in the first five years by the Serindica Laboratory at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The author points out that initial planning of the Laboratory's work made it possible to implement a cross-regional approach to the study of Central Asian manuscripts. This article also examines the prospects for further research to be conducted by members of the Laboratory.

*Key words:* Written heritage, Central Asian manuscripts, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Serindia Collection, Serindica Laboratory

The Serindica Laboratory at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences started its work at the end of 2018. It was created as part of the project “New Laboratories” launched by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. The Laboratory aimed at restoration, digital cataloguing, research and publication of the manuscript heritage of the Serindia Collection kept at the IOM, RAS.

At the start, the Laboratory team consisted of 9 people (researchers and technical staff) working together on the project “Administrative management, language and cultural situation on the borders of medieval empires in Central Asia (based on the materials of Serindia, Dunhuang and Tangut Collections of the IOM, RAS).” As the title suggests, the Laboratory's work was planned so that it could be expanded to include new members working on related topics. In this way, working within a single research framework, members of the Laboratory have the opportunity to present results of their research in accordance with the comprehensive approach to the study of the ancient and early medieval manuscript heritage of the entire Central Asian region.

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© Safarali Haibulloevich Shomakhmadov, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences (safaralihshom@mail.ru)

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Initially, the Laboratory focused on the Sanskrit,<sup>1</sup> Old Uyghur, Tibetan and Tokharian sub-collections of the Serindia Collection of the IOM, RAS. In 2022, Kirill M. Bogdanov, who is engaged in research on the Tangut Collection of the IOM, RAS, joined the project as the head of the Laboratory. Currently, research on the Tangut Collection is focused on preliminary cataloguing of manuscripts that are not described in existing catalogues. This work includes, in particular, textual research with the aim of identifying manuscripts, selecting texts that need restoration, and making digital photocopies of the most valuable documents. At the same time, K. Bogdanov works on creating electronic resources that contain entries of all Tangut manuscripts with brief catalogue descriptions. Since the Tangut Collection of the IOM, RAS is the world's largest archive of manuscripts and books in the 'dead' Tangut language (about 10,000 items), and Russian Tangutology has given rise to all fundamental research in this field of Oriental Studies, it is important to continue the study of Tangut manuscripts at the IOM, RAS in order to preserve the academic tradition, which began at the beginning of the 20th c.

In 2023, Viacheslav P. Zaytsev became a new member of the Laboratory and the study of the Khitan script was added to the main tasks of the Laboratory's team. V. Zaytsev also carries out historico-philological and linguistic studies of unique Khitan and Jurchen materials kept at the IOM, RAS. Since 1968 fragments of manuscripts written using the Jurchen script in the 'dead' Jurchen language have been discovered in the Tangut Collection. In 2010, the only extant manuscript book written in the undeciphered Large Khitan script in the 'dead' Khitan language was identified in the IOM, RAS Collection (now in the *Nova* Collection). This book, which contains the most extensive texts in the Large Khitan script known to date, gave a new impetus to research (interrupted in the 1990s) on sources in the Large and Small Khitan scripts in Russia, thereby helping to preserve continuity of the Russian academic school of Khitan studies.

In the same year, research on the Sogdian part of the Serindia manuscript Collection was reinforced when Olga M. Chunakova, the leading specialist in Sogdian manuscripts at the IOM, joined the project. Thus, by 2023 the Serindia Laboratory has reached the initially stated goal of conducting comprehensive research on the manuscript heritage of Central Asia — Serindia and neighboring regions. O. Chunakova works on Iranian-language manuscripts of the Serindia and Dunhuang Collections. First results of her work were published in the monograph *Manichaean manuscripts from Eastern Turkestan. Middle Persian and Parthian fragments* [Манихейские

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<sup>1</sup> MESHEZNIKOV & SHOMAKHMADOV 2020.

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рукописи из Восточного Туркестана. Среднеперсидские и парфянские фрагменты] (Moscow, 2011) that includes 80 previously published and newly discovered fragments in the Middle Persian and Parthian languages. Later, continuing to work with Middle Persian and Parthian manuscripts, O. Chunakova began to explore Sogdian manuscripts, too. The results of this work are published in the monograph *Manuscripts from Eastern Turkestan. Middle Persian, Parthian and Sogdian fragments in the Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts* [Рукописи из Восточного Туркестана. Среднеперсидские, парфянские и согдийские фрагменты в собрании Института восточных рукописей] (St. Petersburg, 2019) that includes 14 manuscripts from the Serindia Collection (6 Middle Persian and Parthian manuscripts, and 8 Sogdian ones) and 10 Sogdian fragments from the Dunhuang Collection, not published previously. In terms of content, Iranian-language manuscripts are divided into three categories: Manichaean (hymns, dogmatic treatises, parables), Buddhist (translations of Buddhist writings) and secular (letters, lists, etc.).

In its first five years of work, the Serindica Laboratory has achieved important results. More than 1,000 items, manuscripts and fragments, were restored (by Kristina V. Korosteleva). Also, since the Laboratory's foundation, digital photocopying of more than 4,000 manuscript fragments has been carried out (by Mark A. Kozintsev, Artiom V. Mesheznikov).

In our view, creation of the electronic database of manuscripts and fragments of the IOM, RAS Serindia Collection by the Serindica Laboratory team deserves special attention. This painstaking and time-consuming work has been carried out since the early days of the Laboratory. The main challenge lies in the difficult task faced by the Laboratory team to develop universal criteria for describing different manuscript collections, which are very heterogeneous in composition, content, peculiarities of paleographic and codicological description. Well-known foreign and domestic databases of manuscript collections have their specifics for Sanskrit, Tokharian, Chinese, etc. Working on creating the database, members of the Laboratory studied the experience of Austrian colleagues ("A Comprehensive Edition of Tocharian Manuscripts" (CEToM), German specialists in the Turfan Studies ("Turfanforschung"), and colleagues from "The International Dunhuang Project" that combines data on manuscripts from Dunhuang stored in Oriental studies centers around the world.

The Serindica Laboratory team also gained experience by examining the creation of a manuscript database by an international team of scholars working on the project "The Schøyen Collection: Manuscripts from around the world spanning 5000 years of human culture and civilization." The

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peculiarity of this collection of manuscripts and old printed books owned by the private collector Martin Schøyen lies in the fact that it contains written sources in different languages (Oriental as well as European), different formats and on different materials (paper, wood, palm leaves, birch bark, clay, etc.).<sup>2</sup> Thus, approaches used to create this database, as well as methods of describing very different written artifacts, are potentially highly useful for the creation of the IOM, RAS Serindia Collection database. It is expected that principles for creating the digital database will be finalized in the near future.

Importantly, the process of describing the manuscripts of the Serindia Collection has been active since the Laboratory's foundation. Data gathered in the course of this work will form the basis of the future digital database. During the five years of the Laboratory's functioning, more than 600 Sanskrit written sources of the Serindia Collection were described (by Artiom V. Meshezhnikov, Elena V. Tanonova, Safarali H. Shomakhmadov). One of the peculiarities of describing Sanskrit manuscripts is that in the process of identifying separate fragments originally inventoried under different shelf numbers, it is possible to find that they represent parts of the same leaf or manuscript. In this case, fragments have to be grouped under a single shelf number.

Moreover, A.V. Meshezhnikov and S.H. Shomakhmadov began to examine manuscript fragments in Indian scripts from the Dunhuang Collection of the IOM, RAS, once again demonstrating the integrated approach to research in the Serindica Laboratory.

In addition to examining Sanskrit manuscripts from the Serindia Collection during five years, members of the Laboratory created inventories of Sogdian (119 items), Old Uyghur (500 items), Tibetan (54 items), Tokharian (200 items) and Khotanese (200 items) manuscripts. The Laboratory team has prepared a complete bibliographical description and inventory of the collection of Central Asian and Siberian prints that includes 788 items (stone steles, rock inscriptions) in 11 languages (Old Turkic, Arabic, Bulgar-Tatar, Syriac, Manchu, Chinese, Sogdian, Turkic, Tibetan, Mongolian and Sanskrit).

A relatively small collection of forgeries (100 items described) is of particular interest. During excavations of archaeological artifacts in Serindia oases, expedition participants extracted manuscripts in languages and scripts which were unknown at that time. Taking advantage of this situation, unscrupulous 'manuscript dealers' actively made forgeries in order to sell them to researchers. In this case, the materials and techniques used to create such 'manuscripts/books' may be of some academic interest (such as paper format, binding, type of writing imitated by 'dealers'). For example, there

<sup>2</sup> SHOMAKHMADOV 2014.

are some forged manuscripts that imitate the Indian (Brāhmī) script, but the binding type is more in line with the Chinese book tradition.

The Serindica Laboratory members actively present their research results to the academic community. More than 60 articles were published during the five years of the Laboratory's work. In addition, the first volume of "The Catalogue of the Old Uyghur Manuscripts and Blockprints in the Serindia Collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, RAS" was published (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 2021). The Catalogue includes fragments in the Old Uyghur language studied by Russian and international scholars over the past 100 years. The Catalogue is the first published volume with the Old Uyghur fragments from the Serindia Collection. It is a compilation of all the information scattered in various publications that are often difficult to access.

Moreover, over the past five years, members of the Laboratory have given more than 90 presentations at conferences of various types, mainly international ones. In their reports, our researchers highlighted interim results of the Laboratory's work and prospects for further research. Organization of annual international conferences is a significant achievement that makes it possible to present activities of the Serindica Laboratory to the international academic community.

The First International Academic Conference "Oriental Manuscript Book: Codicology and Conservation Issues" was held between December 4–6, 2019 at the IOM, RAS<sup>3</sup> with thirty-one speakers. The Second International Codicological Conference "Oriental Manuscripts: Scriptoria, Monastic Libraries and Workshops in the Medieval East") took place between November 15–17, 2021 at the IOM, RAS with 30 participants. Another conference, "The Written Heritage of the Orient," came to be organized annually and immediately gained popularity among the international specialists in the Oriental manuscript studies. Each annual Conference is dedicated to one of the outstanding Orientalists and manuscript scholars — Buddhologists, Tibetologists, Indologists, specialists in Mongolian studies, Arabic studies, etc. Moreover, the Conference is meant to bring together manuscript researchers as well as specialists in epigraphy, blockprints, numismatics, etc. The First Conference,<sup>4</sup> originally conceived as the All-Russian (The First All-Russian Academic Conference "The Written Heritage of the Orient"), in fact, immediately gained the international status. A third of 33 participants were foreign speakers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> TURANSKAIA 2020.

<sup>4</sup> The First All-Russian Academic Conference "The Written Heritage of the Orient" was dedicated to the memory of the outstanding Sanskrit manuscript expert, researcher of manuscripts from the Serindia Collection, Margarita I. Vorobiova-Desiatovskaia (1933–2021).

<sup>5</sup> SHOMAKHMADOV 2022.

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The Second Academic Conference, held as an international one, was dedicated to the 160th Anniversary of Piotr K. Kozlov (1863–1935), an outstanding traveler, geographer, ethnologist, archaeologist, researcher of Central Asia. The name of P.K. Kozlov is inextricably linked with the history of the discovery of the “dead city” of Khara-Khoto (“The Black Town”) and the lost Tangut culture of the Xi Xia (West Xia) state. The conference was attended by 41 scholars, including 19 foreign participants.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, during its first five years of intensive activity, the Serindica Laboratory has widened its research scope and made significant progress in academic studies. The Laboratory has attracted new members capable to handle a variety of complex tasks. New results of research on the manuscript heritage of the Serindia Collection and future research perspectives are actively and regularly presented to the international academic community in publications and conferences.

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<sup>6</sup> SHOMAKHMADOV 2023.