A wooden document with Kharoshthi inscription
Gandhari language in Kharoshthi script
China, Niya, c. 300 CE

Two and a half lines of script on the base plate of a 'wedge tablet'
(kilamudra), with part of hole remaining at the tapered end,
22 cm long, tapering from 2.5 to 4.5 cm wide.

This is the bottom half of a
wedge-shaped wooden
document that would
originally have been sealed in a
similar fashion to the previous
document and also belongs to
the oasis-state of Niya. It
would have been attached to
the top half by a string running
through the hole at the tapered
end. The document is an
imperial address to two high
officials of the kingdom of
Kroraina, which by the fourth
century had brought most of
the oases of the Southern
Route under its dominion.
Like the previous item, it is a
classic example of a wooden
document written in the
Gandhari language and
Kharoshthi script, and is of the
same type as the tablets
discovered in Niya and
Loulan by the famous explorer
Aurel Stein in the early
twentieth century.

The officials in the document
hear the names Sothamga
Lyipeya and Ogu
Dharmasena. The former was
the son of another high official
Lepata, whose name appears
in other documents, and is
known to have been in office
from year 21 of the reign
of King Mahiri to year 7 of
the reign of the following
king, Vamana, which would
place this document
around 300 CE.

For examples of similar
documents among Stein’s
discoveries, see The Silk Road:
Trade, Travel, War and Faith,
p. 174-5; nos. 74 & 75, and
“Photographs in the British
Library of documents and
manuscripts from Sir Aurel
Stein’s fourth Central Asian
expedition”, The British
Library Journal, vol. 24,
Number 1, Spring 1998,
pp. 23-75.
A Dunhuang scroll concerning the Buddha’s nirvana
China, Dunhuang
Tang dynasty, 7th-8th century

Scroll (juanzi), manuscript, black ink on mulberry paper, 4 sheets, each sheet 50 x 26.3 cm, total length 190 cm, 28 columns of fine Chinese kaishu script to each page, 17 characters per column, each column 20 x 1.8 cm, columns finely scored in lead.

This document is a section of a long sutra scroll of a Chinese version of the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, which constitutes a detailed discussion of the Buddha’s nirvana. The format and high quality of the manuscript are consistent with other Dunhuang manuscripts of the Tang dynasty, a period of great prosperity and internal stability for both China and the Silk Road in general.

Great effort went into the preparation of paper for manuscripts like this one. The strong mulberry paper was dried yellow to prevent insect damage, and the surface was waxed to ease writing.

The calligraphy on this manuscript is also of an extremely high quality, and suggests the hand of one of the master sutra-copyers of Dunhuang. The script is a carefully modulated kaishu (regular) and is tightly arranged to give the entire composition a sense of uniformity.

As is the case for most of the highest quality Dunhuang scrolls of the Tang period, the paper for this manuscript was probably imported from Central China. After the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang in 786 CE links with China were severed and the practice discontinued.

For an illustration of the colophon to a slightly earlier Dunhuang manuscript of the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, see The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith, p. 73, fig. 1.
光

亦不可思議今時世尊大悲導師為何閣世
王八月睡三睡入三睡已放大導明其光清
涼往照王身身澄即愈鬱蒸除城王覺澄愈
身體清涼語者婆言曾聞人說劫將欲盡三
月並現當今之時一切眾生患苦除時既
未至此光何來照觸吾身身澄除惡身得安
樂者婆言此非劫盡三月並照亦非大日
A Dunhuang scroll on the Medicine Buddha
China, Dunhuang
Tang dynasty, 8th century CE

Scroll (juanzi), manuscript, black ink on mulberry paper, 2 sheets, each sheet 48 x 26.5 cm, 24 columns of Chinese kaishu script to each page, 17 characters per column, each column 19.6 x 1.6 cm, columns finely scored in lead.

This section belongs to a Chinese translation from Sanskrit of the most important sutra on the Medicine Buddha, the Bhaisajyaguru-vaidurya-prabha (Ch. Foshuo yaoshi ruilai benyuan gengdie jing). In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition the Medicine Buddha plays an important role as the healer of physical and mental afflictions and as the Buddha of wisdom. In East Asia the Medicine Buddha acquired a particular importance and was normally represented as one of the three greatest Buddhas of the Buddhist pantheon.

The sutra contains twelve vows made by the Medicine Buddha, a description of the attributes of the Medicine Buddha, and a guide for the devout on entering the Medicine Buddha’s paradise. This section goes from the beginning of the sutra to the eighth vow in which the Medicine Buddha promises to let women tired of their afflictions be reborn as men. For an illuminating discussion of the cult of the Medicine Buddha, see the article by Paul Pelliot, “Bhaiṣajyaguru”, Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient, vol. III, Paris, 1903, pp. 33-7.

A depiction of the Medicine Buddha’s paradise from a Dunhuang silk painting can be seen in The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith, p. 320, no. 277.

Like the previous manuscript, this section is made from high quality paper, probably imported from Central China. The script is a neat but energetic kaishu (regular) and shows some Southern Chinese influences. The calligraphy is of a type in vogue after the seventh century CE, while the superior quality of the paper suggests a date before the Tibetan occupation of 786 CE.
A Dunhuang scroll of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*
China, Dunhuang
Tang dynasty, 8th century CE

Scroll (juanzi), manuscript, black ink on mulberry paper, Chinese kaishu script, 17 characters per column, end of scroll date corresponding to the second year of the Zhenguai era (628 CE) and signature of calligrapher Fan Yingze, both of which are likely spurious additions, 26 x 798 cm.

This large scroll, almost eight metres in length, constitutes the first part of the third book of the massive *Mahāprajñāparamitā*, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Verses*. One of the central texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* is in the form of dialogues between the Buddha and his disciples. The work expounds the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and outlines the states of perfection attained by the Bodhisattva, the ideal being who seeks enlightenment for all others rather than for himself alone.

Along with other key Mahayana texts, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Verses* was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese by the Buddhist scholar Kumārajīva (d. 413 CE). A member of the royal family of Kuča, a city-state along the Silk Road and one of the earliest centres of Buddhism in the Tarim Basin, Kumārajīva was captured and taken to the court of the Chin in Chang’an where he taught and translated Buddhist scriptures. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* quickly gained popularity in China, and this finely executed manuscript is a classic of its type.

For another Dunhuang scroll of the *Mahāprajñāparamitā*, see *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, p. 215, no. 157.
出息随念散随念死随念身随念是诸随念
不可得故诸菩萨摩诃萨安住般若波罗蜜
多以无所得而为方便应圆满十想谓无常
想者想无我想不净想死想一切世间的不
想者想无我想不净想死想一切世间的不
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A Dunhuang scroll concerning the life of the Buddha
China, Dunhuang

Five dynasties or early Song dynasty, 10th century CE

Scroll (juanzi), manuscript, 16-17 characters per column, black ink
on hemp paper, 26.5 x 47cm.

This section belongs to Jñānagupta’s Chinese translation of the
Buddhacarita, an early Sanskrit text on the life of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni.
The work consists of sixty chapters, relating the Buddha’s previous and
present lives, and contains material of invaluable interest for the history of ancient Indian society and Buddhism in general. Jñānagupta was a Buddhist monk from Gandhara who towards the end of the sixth century CE travelled to China, where he was commissioned by the Emperor of the Sui dynasty to translate important Sanskrit texts into Chinese.

The paper is typical of Dunhuang scroll production in the period following the Tibetan occupation (786-848 CE). Unlike the dyed mulberry paper imported from China in the period before the occupation, the paper is made from hemp and was probably of local manufacture.

By the time Dunhuang was restored to Chinese control in 848 CE the paper industry in Dunhuang was well established and local paper continued to be widely used.

The text was written in a casual xinshu (semi-cursive) script, typical of manuscripts of the tenth century. Changes in the style and format of manuscripts from this period are probably related to the political turmoil that followed the fall of the Tang dynasty.
非常抱歉，但我不认识这个字符。
Silver panels inscribed with the seventeenth chapter of Guliang’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals
China
Tang dynasty, 9th century CE

In the form of twenty-seven inscribed silver rectangular hinged panels, 12 characters per column, overall 21 x 46 cm.

These highly unusual silver panels were clearly meant to emulate the format of Chinese books written on strips of bamboo or wood. Due to the lack of domestic mines, silver was by far the most precious and rare metal in China, and was on the whole reserved for the ornamentation of luxury objects. Very few examples of Chinese silver documents survive, and the sheer expense of producing such an object suggests that these panels belonged to a person of imperial or the highest courtly rank. The panels are associated with a sutra container made in the same fashion and with the same type of silver hinges, containing a Buddhist text dated 868 CE; see Sotheby’s London, 13th November 2009, lot 47.

This places the document in the Tang period, when great efforts were made to increase supplies of silver both through improving mining and refining techniques and by increasing the flow of silver along the Silk Road. Despite these efforts, however, silver remained extremely expensive and in short supply until the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE). The text engraved on these silver panels is one of the earliest witnesses to one of China’s most important historical classics, the Chunqiu Guliang zhuang, or Guliang’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals. Guliang’s Commentary is one of the three main commentaries to the Chunqiu, or the Spring and Autumn Annals, a chronicle of the reigns of the twelve dukes of the State of Lu (722-481 BCE). The text here constitutes the seventeenth chapter of Guliang’s Commentary and relates the events of the reign of Duke Min the Grievable (660-661 BCE). The short reign of Duke Min was typical of the Spring and Autumn period, which was marked by decentralized power and feudal infighting. The document predates by over 600 years the next extant copy of the same text, a seventeenth-century edition prepared in the late Ming period. Two fragments from 663 CE were discovered by Pelliot at Dunhuang (BuF, Pelliot chinois 2536 and National Library of China BD15345) and are the only older extant witnesses to any part of the work.
