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THE PAINTED SCROLL OF ALTAN KHAN AS A MATERIAL OBJECT: PROVENANCE, STATE OF PRESERVATION, CODICOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

[St.Petersburg] Natalia Yampolskaya Liubov Kriakina

The Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences, preserves an unusual specimen of a Chinese-Mongolian document that goes back to late Ming dynasty — an illustrated scroll that contains the text of a vassal letter (Chin. *piao* 表) written by Altan Khan to the Emperor Wanli in 1580 concerning the presentation of annual tribute. The letter is bilingual, the Mongolian text being a translation from Chinese. The scroll is over nine metres in length, and its largest part is occupied by a painting that depicts the journey of the tribute-bearers from Guihuacheng (Chin. 歸化城; Mong. *Kökeqota*) to the Forbidden City.

This document is relatively well known in international academia, the text of the letter has been published and interpreted several times. The painting was published only once, in 1895, in small scale and poor quality. One aspect that has not yet been discussed in detail is that of the material characteristics of the scroll. That said, the combination of the text of the vassal letter with a large painting makes it a unique document, as other scrolls of similar content and layout have not been discovered. This study aims to address the very aspect that has been neglected so far and provide a description of the construction and state of preservation of the scroll. The observations made in the course of this study will provide new data that may give ground to reconsider the origin and history of the document. The study itself is preceded by a review of the provenance of the scroll and a summary of academic publications that deal with its text.

PROVENANCE AND STATE OF RESEARCH

The scroll became part of the fund of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (at the time — the Institute of Oriental Studies) in 1937. It was listed in the inventory book as

belonging to the *Mongolica Nova* collection, under the shelfmark *M. Nova, 483* (the shelfmark has since been changed to *Mong. Fol. 6*). This collection started forming in 1926 and comprised items of various origins, including both newly acquired materials (hence its title) and manuscripts that had been preserved at the Institute without being listed. There are reasons to assume that the scroll, too, had been stored at the Institute for several years before it was registered in the inventory book. Previously it had been kept in the possession of the Russian scholar Aleksey Pozdneev (1851–1920) whose private collection is known to have been granted to the Institute (at the time — the Asiatic Museum) after the scholar's death, in the 1920s (the exact date has not been established).[1]

The scroll was acquired by Pozdneev during his visit to Beijing in 1893, and two years later he published an article that described the circumstances in which the document was purchased.[2] In January 1893 he was informed that a certain Tumed lama from Yonghegong (雍和宫) owned an antique Mongolian document from the late Ming period that he was willing to sell, and the very next day the scroll came into the scholar's possession. The said lama claimed that the artefact had been kept in their family for over 200 years, and that it was bought by his great-grandfather in Beijing at the time (the seventeenth century) when plenty of documents from the Ming dynasty period circulated among the people being neglected by the new Qing administration. Pozdneev conjectured that the scroll was valued by the family of that lama as a memorabilium of the Mongolian khans' relations with China.[3]

Apart from the story of the acquisition of the scroll, the article published by Pozdneev in 1895 included a description of its appearance and construction (will be discussed in detail below), a translation of its text, and a commentary interpreting the painting. A monochrome facsimile of the text and painting was published in the appendix.

In the end of the nineteenth century, European scholarship lacked sufficient knowledge of certain areas of Ming bureaucracy, and some of the assumptions made by Pozdneev concerning the origin of the document were misleading. Pozdneev stated that the Mongolian text was but a word-for-word rendition of the Chinese: almost one third of the

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[1] On these collections, see: Сазыкин А. Г. Каталог монгольских рукописей и ксилографов Института востоковедения Академии Наук СССР. Том I. Ответственный редактор Д. Кара. М.: «Наука» ГРВЛ, 1988. Pp. 13, 15–16.

[2] Новооткрытый памятникъ монгольской письменности времен династіи Минъ // Восточныя замѣтки. Сборник статей и изслѣдованій профессоровъ и преподавателей Императорскаго С.-Петербургскаго университета. Санктпетербургъ: Типографія Императорской Академіи Наукъ, 1895. P. 367–386.

[3] Ibid., P. 374.

characters were simply transcribed in the Mongolian script, and the rest of the text, according to Pozdneev, was translated by copying the first meaning given in a certain Chinese-Mongolian lexicon without changing its form, which resulted in a "chaotic combination of Mongolian words arranged with no coherence whatsoever".[1] This led Pozdneev to believe that the text of the letter was initially written in Chinese and later translated into Mongolian. He explained this point of view suggesting that the text was written either by one of the Chinese deserters who lived at the court of Altan Khan as advisors, or by a Mongol who had lived in China for a long time — in other words, a person literate in the Chinese language, but not very well educated. Pozdneev elaborated this argument and presumed that even at the court of Altan Khan there was not a single literate person who could write a coherent text in the Mongolian language, concluding that the document revealed the decay of literary activity among the Mongols in the sixteenth century. The idea of a "dark age" of Mongolian literacy that followed the fall of the Yuan (1368) and lasted until mid-sixteenth century is primarily based on the lack of written sources from that period. Today this concept is considered to be debatable.[2]

The 1895 publication made the text of the letter accessible to scholars. The same cannot be said about the painting, as the quality and size of the facsimile allowed to get an overall impression of its layout, but not to see the details. For this reason all the academic works that came out in the following years dealt exclusively with the text.

In 1896, the French sinologist Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918) wrote a review in which he summarised Pozdneev's article and translated the text of the letter into French.[3] In his review Chavannes stressed the importance of making this rare document known to

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[1] Ibid., P. 376–377, 386. Pozdneev compared the text to an extract from a Chinese-Mongolian lexicon compiled during the reign of the Emperor Hongwu (朱元璋, 1328–1398) that was gifted to him by a member of the Hanlin Academy (翰林院) and discovered that all the forms used in the letter coincided with the ones given there, suggesting that the translator used this lexicon mechanically substituting the words that he could find there and transcribing the ones he could not find. The lexicon he referred to was probably the Beilu Yiyu (北虜譯語), also known as Dada Yu (韃靼語) — the Chinese-Mongolian glossary compiled in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century (on the dates of its compilation see: Рыкин П. О. О времени и месте составления Китайско-монгольского словаря Дада юй/Бэйлу июй // Acta Linguistica Petropolitana. Труды института лингвистических исследований, vol. IX, no. 3, 2013, P. 189–217). This lexicon was published by Pozdneev in his "Lectures on Mongolian Literature". See: Позднеев, А. М. Лекции по истории монгольской литературы, читанные в 1897/98 акад. году / Зап. и изд. Г. В. Подставиным, Г. Ц. Цыбиковым. Т. 3. Владивосток: Типолитогр. при Вост. Ин-те, 1908. P. 8–39.

[2] On this topic, see: Serruys, H. Early Lamaism in Mongolia // Oriens Extremus. Vol. 10, No. 2 (1963). P. 181–216; Dumas, D. The Mongols and Buddhism in 1368–1578: Facts — Stereotypes — Prejudices // Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher. 2005. 19. P. 167–221.

[3] Chavannes, Éd. A. Pozdnéief. — Sur un monument nouvellement découvert de la littérature mongole au temps de la dynastie Ming // Journal Asiatique, Vol. 7. P.173–179.

the public and made sure to render the main ideas proposed by Pozdneev without questioning them in any way.

The document soon acquired a fixed position in the history of the Mongolian language and writing as the last among the few surviving monuments from the pre-classic period, and was listed in a number of anthologies and works on Mongolian grammar. In 1907, the German orientalist Berthold Laufer (1874–1934) mentioned it in his *Sketch of Mongolian Literature* as a rare specimen of Mongolian writing from the Ming dynasty giving a brief summary of Pozdneev's work.[1] In his *Comparative Grammar of Written Mongolian* (originally published in 1929), the Russian scholar Boris Vladimirtsov (1884–1931) listed the "Charter of Altan Khan" among Mongolian texts of the middle period without giving a detailed commentary. He stated that the letter must be a copy or draft of the original document referring only to the work of Pozdneev.[2] In 1945, the "Charter" appeared in the appendix to the Grammar of written Mongolian by the French orientalist Louis Hambis (1906–1978) as the last on the list of outstanding monuments of old Mongolian writing, without any commentary.[3] In 1959, a re-print of the facsimile was published by the Japanese historian Wada Sei (1890–1863) in a volume of collected essays on Mongolian history.[4] In 1965, the Hungarian scholar Lajos Ligeti (1902–1987) published a transcription of the Mongolian text of the letter in an anthology of pre-classic Mongolian literature, without a commentary or translation.[5] In 1983, the Chinese scholar Dobu included the letter of Altan Khan in another anthology of Mongolian texts.[6] This publication consisted of a short foreword (based on Pozdneev's work), a re-print of the facsimile, an additional version in which the lines of the original handwritten Mongolian text are imitated and re-arranged to be read from left to right for the sake of convenience, the same text typed in a modern Mongolian font, and a word-for-word commentary that explains the correlation between Chinese and Mongolian. In his 2005 book on pre-classic

[1] The work of Berthold Laufer was originally published in German as *Skizze der mongolischen Literatur* // Revue orientate, Vol. VIII, 1907, P. 165–261. We refer to the Russian translation: Лауфер, Б. Очерк монгольской литературы. Пер. В. А. Казакевича; Под ред. и с предисл. Б. Я. Владимирцова. Ленинград, 1927. P. 10–11.

[2] Владимирцов Б. Я. Сравнительная грамматика монгольского письменного языка и халхаского наречия. Введение и фонетика. Издание 2-е. Москва, 1989. P. 37.

[3] Hambis, L. Grammaire de la langue mongole écrite. Première partie. Paris, 1945. P. 92.

[4] Wada, Sei 和田清. Tōashi kenkyū Mōkohen 東亞史研究蒙古篇 [Studies on the History of Far East (Mongolia)]. Tokyo: Tōyō bunko, 1959. Plates 3–6.

[5] Ligeti, L. Preklasszikus emlékek 2. XIII–XVI. szazad és a XVII. szazad eleje. Budapest, 1965. P. 86–90.

[6] Uyiγurǰin mongγol üsüg-ün durasγaltu bičig-üd. Dobu emkedgeǰü odo-yin mongγol üsüg-iyer baγulγan tayilburi kibe. B. Baγan-a kinaba. Ündüsüten-ü keblel-ün quriy-a, 1983. P. 477–500.

specimens of Mongolian writing, the Mongolian scholar Yo. Janchiv dedicated a short passage to the letter of Altan Khan.[1] A brief review of its provenance and content was included into the volume that commemorates the 200-year anniversary of the Asiatic Museum (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts) where the scroll was described as one of the treasures of the Mongolian collection.[2]

All the researchers who commented on the text of the letter agreed with the opinion proposed by Pozdneev: the document could hardly be considered an original specimen of the Mongolian language and literature, as there is very little Mongolian in this text. The Belgian orientalist Henry Serruys (1911–1983) was the only one to explain the phenomenon behind the letter of Altan Khan. In 1967, he published an in-depth historical study of tribute relations between China and the Mongols during the Ming dedicating a whole chapter to the phenomenon of vassal letters. In the section devoted to Altan Khan, Serruys gave a full translation of the vassal letter written in 1580 accompanied by a detailed commentary. Within the framework of this fundamental study, the letter of Altan Khan was finally placed into context, and its origin and functions were unambiguously explained. Although this work is undoubtedly the most significant one on the subject since the original publication of Pozdneev, it appears to be little known and has not been referred to by other scholars who wrote about the scroll. Below, we have summed those points from the study of Henry Serruys that are crucial for our codicological study.

During the Ming period, a vassal letter (Chin. *piao* 表) was a document that accompanied an act of tribute.[3] These letters were written by tributary rulers to the Emperor and sent along with the embassy. The letters were always written in the native languages of the vassal rulers and stamped with their seals. The Chinese ceremonial rule prescribed a ritual that involved handing the letter over to the envoy at the headquarters of the vassal ruler. The beauty of presentation was of some importance here: *piao* letters were meant to be wrapped in yellow fabric and placed in special cases. When the embassy reached the border, the *piao* letter and the tribute articles were inspected by representatives of the Ming administration. In the times of Altan Khan, a translator was sent to the border

[1] Жанчив, Ё. Сонгодог монгол бичгийн өмнөх үеийн дурсгалууд, Улаанбаатар, 2005. P. 37.

[2] Сизова А. А. Fol. 6. Иллюстрированная грамота-свиток Алтан-хана Тумэтского // Азиатский Музей — Институт восточных рукописей РАН: путеводитель / Ответственный редактор И. Ф. Попова. М.: Изд-во восточной литературы, 2018. С. 323–324.

[3] Henceforward we refer to the study of Henry Serruys who dedicated a chapter of his book on Sino-Mongol diplomatic missions during the Ming to the phenomenon of vassal letters. See: Serruys, H. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions (1400–1600). Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming, Vol. II. Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques, Vol. XIV. Bruxelles, 1967. P. 443–475.

every year to fulfil this task.[1] However, the official written translation was carried out at the capital. As of 1407, the translation of foreign documents and letters was officially handled by a special bureau — *Siyi Guan* (四夷館) which worked under the supervision of the Hanlin Academy (翰林院). Serruys notes that, despite the presence of bilingual Mongols at Chinese service, in time the translations at the Mongolian bureau of *Siyi Guan* were mostly handled by Chinese natives.[2] In most cases these translations were summaries that followed a strict formal pattern reduced to the name of the vassal prince and the gist of the original letter. These summarised versions were then mechanically translated back to the language of origin, closely following the Chinese pattern and disregarding the rules of the target language. This procedure was aimed at creating a text that would fit the protocol. Unlike the original *piao* letters, the translated summaries were not stamped with the seals of the vassal princes, but they were used in the tribute presentation ceremony held at the Temple of Heaven. As part of this ritual, the vassal letters were handed by the envoys to the official who placed them on a special table on top of the Vermillion Steps. The table was later carried inside the pavilion where the letters in the Chinese translation were read out to the Emperor. The sources that describe the ceremony do not specify whether the original letters were used in it.[3]

None of the original Mongolian vassal letters are known to have reached our time, but eight re-translations are preserved among the "Documents of the Tartar department" *Dada guan lai wen* (韃靼館來文).[4] These texts come from an earlier period (fifteenth — early sixteenth century), they are very short and consist of standard clichés. However, another document that dates back to the rule of Altan Khan shows that this strict pattern was not always followed: it is a vassal letter from 1571 which has come down in the Chinese translation. According to Serruys, this letter was translated not in Beijing, but at the border point of entry, which explains its length and detailed content: the text was not reduced to a short formula, but the style of the Chinese translation suggests that it was edited to fit the

[1] Ibid., p. 449–450.
[2] Ibid., p. 447.
[3] According to Serruys, an account of a Persian embassy suggests that the original were presented at the ceremony as well, and were probably returned to the embassy. However, there are no sources that describe this part of the procedure at the time of Altan Khan. For a detailed description of the ceremony see: Ibid., 476–481.
[4] These documents were published by Lajos Ligeti. See: Ligeti, L. Documents sino-ouigours du bureau des traducteurs // Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1967). P. 253–306 Ligeti, L. Documents sino-ouigours du bureau des traducteurs // Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1968). P. 45–108. Henry Serruys translated three of these letters into English. See: Serruys, H. The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions (1400–1600). Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming, Vol. II. Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques, Vol. XIV. Bruxelles, 1967. P. 454–455.

demands of the protocol. There is no evidence of this letter having been translated back into Mongolian.[1]

The vassal letter of Altan Khan of August 17, 1580, was translated into Chinese and back into Mongolian at the *Siyi Guan*, but was not shortened to the standard formula. The study of Henry Serruys explains the poor quality of the translation (this manner was typical of the *Siyi Guan*) and asserts that the original Mongolian text of the letter was most probably different in both style and content.

None of the researchers who studied the scroll have commented on its form or questioned the origin of the painting. No other vassal letters are known to have survived as separate documents, and we are not aware of any descriptions of their format or décor, which gives no counterpart to compare our source with. This makes the scroll containing the vassal letter of Altan Khan one-of-a-kind, leaving the question of its authenticity open.

Codicological Description: Materials, Construction and State of Preservation

The document is a traditional Chinese horizontal handscroll 36 × 942.7 cm in size (the height is uneven, fluctuating between 36 and 36.6 cm), made of paper and several kinds of silk and backed with thick polished paper (see Fig. 1). Unrolled from right to left, it begins with a blank piece of silk, traditionally called *heaven* (serves a protective function), followed by the text segment, the painting, and another blank piece of silk — *earth*. All parts of the scroll are divided with vertical strips of white silk. There is no border mounting. The text is read from right to left in both languages (Mongolian being secondary to Chinese), but the painting, when unrolled in this direction, can only be followed counter to the sequence of the depicted events, starting from the roofs of the Forbidden City and all the way West to the Mongolian lands. There are no labels or stamps on any parts of the scroll.

The gluelines show the scroll was assembled starting from *earth*: the sheets of silk and paper on the front side of the reel overlap in such a way that the edge of each successive layer covers the previous one, *heaven* being the uppermost layer.

Heaven (total length 191.5 cm) consists of three parts. First comes a 41.5 cm piece of milky-white silk twill fabric with a floral ornament (stylised flowers and leaves, the pattern area size is 8.5 cm). The white silk is followed by 140 cm of patternless yellow silk,

[1] For the translation of its full text see: Ibid., 455–461; for the commentary: Ibid., 464–465.

and a 10 cm vertical strip of white silk which separates it from the text segment. The average thickness of paper with the yellow silk is 0.28 mm, white silk — 0.25 mm.

On the back side, the first 20.5 cm of *heaven* are covered with ornamented silk twill fabric — the cover of the scroll. The pattern consists of four types of festoon medallions composed of a flower in the middle surrounded with images of birds, turtles and butterflies (the pattern area size is 17.3 cm). The colours have faded, but can be identified as indigo, green and brown on a background of unpainted silk of a milky hue. There is no label, and no trace of one can be seen on the cover.

The beginning of the scroll is fixed on a wooden stick, semi-circular in cross-section. In the middle of the stick, on the inner side of the scroll, there is a metal fastener — a V-shaped hook meant to hold the cord when the scroll is rolled up (the cord is missing).

The scroll bears traces of previous conservation procedures, performed both before and after the document was acquired by Pozdneev (there is no information as to where or when they were carried out). As a result of previous conservation (presumably, performed in the twentieth century), on both sides of the scroll, along the lower edge of *heaven*, the lining paper that holds the silk has conservational patches of old non-calendered mica-coated paper. There is a large stain on the cover area, caused by contact with glue, which continues as horizontal stains along the upper and lower edges of the scroll up to the end of *heaven* (the stains did not spread on the text segment). The yellow silk is speckled with gold. There is significant abrasion on its surface, and stains of dark yellow colour along the lower edge, situated at regular intervals of around 19 cm. These stains indicate that the scroll was rolled up when it was affected by the moisture that caused them. The stains are not visible on the text and painting segments, only on *heaven*, suggesting that this part was separated from the rest of the scroll when the damage was inflicted.

All along both edges of the reel, there are small, heavy vertical creases caused by old conservation patches. Compared to *earth* and the text segment, *heaven* has heavier vertical and horizontal creases on both the paper and silk, especially on the paper on the back side of the yellow silk. On the white silk in the beginning of the scroll, there are stains of yellowish and brownish shades, of unknown origin; in the centre of the white silk — a smaller (1.0 × 2.5 cm) and a larger stain (2.5 × 3.5 cm), and a stain of vertical shape (4.0 × 0.3 cm) located closer to the wooden stick. Along the upper edge there is a large yellowish stain (13.0 × 6.0 cm) caused by an old conservation patch that reinforced the tear of lining paper along the line where it meets the ornamented silk cover.

Before the conservation procedures carried out in 2021, the scroll was separated into two parts: *heaven* (with the cover and wooden stick) was torn off from the main part — the

text, painting and *earth*. Pozdneev does not mention this tear, so it is possible that the scroll was damaged after he acquired it.

The cover area was severely damaged along the upper and lower edges, and conservation of this part was carried out in 2021. Along the lower edge, where there is severe damage of the white silk and a crack, previous conservation with mica-coated paper is visible. On the cover (ornamented silk), there is significant splitting of silk fibres, with fabric partly misplaced in the middle. Closer to the wooden stick, residue of wax is visible in the form of small stains and one large stain (1.2 cm in diametre).

The upper and lower edges of the reel are rimmed with a white silk ribbon, 7 mm wide. This decorative ribbon was almost entirely lost along the lower edge, and partly — along the upper one (it is completely misplaced along the upper edge of the cover).

The text is written in black ink with a brush. In his article Pozdneev describes the Mongolian text as written with a calamus, but a closer look at the calligraphy leaves little doubt that a brush was used for both Chinese and Mongolian, although the ductus does imitate an archaic style of Mongolian writing characteristic of calamus-written manuscripts of the pre-classic period. The text is written on thick, smooth paper. Its total length is 169 cm, but it consists of two sheets glued together (85.5 and 83.5 cm long). As can be seen from its texture, the paper was moulded on plain-weave fabric. The paper is toned in a yellowish colour, speckled with gold, and backed with lining paper (five sheets of various sizes). The thickness of paper in this segment ranges from 0.25 to 0.34 mm.

The paper is covered with stains of black and purple shades, presumably of biological origin, concentrated along the upper and lower edges of the scroll. As can be seen in comparison with the old facsimile, the stains were partly present when the scroll was photographed in 1895, but significantly expanded after that. A big stain (4.2 × 3.8 cm) in the beginning of the text was already there in 1895 (see Fig. 2), but later another one (5.5 × 2.0 cm) appeared next to it — a stain of a similar colour, but a different shape that resembles a smeared ink stain. These stains do not appear on the back side of the paper, but other stains of a yellowish colour can be seen in corresponding places. Possibly, the dark stains were caused by contact with moisture, and the biological process that stimulated the formation and spreading of these stains started before the different parts of the scroll were assembled together.

The text segment is separated from the painting with a vertical strip of white silk, 9.5 cm wide.

The painting segment takes up 454 cm of the reel. The thin silk of the painting is lined with thick paper of a greyish-brown shade, with multiple conservation patches of a

light-brown silk of a thicker weave. The damage of the painting segment includes splitting of silk fibre, multiple tears, heavy creases that have caused loss of the paint layer, tears and deformation of the silk. Traces of old conservation show that the painting had been repaired at least twice before the scroll was acquired by Pozdneev: some of the old conservation patches are situated under the silk of the painting (see Fig. 3), others are placed above the paint layer to cover the cracks and tears on the silk (see Figs. 4, 5). The patches could only be placed under the damaged silk when it was re-lined with paper, which can be explained in two ways. The more feasible explanation is that the silk was originally stored without lining and was damaged at that stage. All over its surface, there is crumbling of the paint layer accompanied by fading and even loss of pigment. When silk is stored without being lined, loss of the paint layer is inevitable. Another possible explanation is that the silk was initially lined, but the original lining was later replaced. This version seems less probable as no traces of an older lining have been found. In either case, it is clear that the painting had already been damaged before it became part of this scroll.

The painted silk, lined with one layer of paper, was later backed with the thick paper that now constitutes the basis of the scroll. However, the colour and state of this thick backing paper of the painting segment, when compared to the same paper on the back of the text segment, *heaven* and *earth,* look different: the backing paper of the painting is more worn, has a darker yellow shade and traces of stains of a dark blue colour (presumably, indigo or another pigment). This observation suggests that the whole segment of the scroll that holds the painting, including its lining, was crafted earlier than the scroll was assembled, despite the fact that the backing paper is practically identical in all parts of the reel. The similarity of paper is understandable: there was a unified tradition of papermaking, and after the scroll was put together the lining paper received the same kind of treatment (polishing).

The thickness of the paper and silk of the painting segment ranges from 0.31 to 0.35 mm. All over the surface of the painting, there is separation of the lining paper of the silk from the backing paper of the scroll, as well as heavy creases with through-cracks of the silk fabric, in several cases — even of the backing paper. None of the other parts of the scroll have such heavy creases. Their intensity is the highest in the beginning of the painting, suggesting that this part had always been closest to the roller. The fact that this damage is found only on the painting, which constitutes the middle part of the reel, suggests that the creases formed some time before the whole scroll was assembled, and later caused the formation of creases in its other parts.

In the end of the painting segment, on the back side of the reel along its lower edge, there is a conservation patch of old blue rag paper of European origin that covers a heavy crease. This patch is a trace of previous conservation, presumably carried out not later than the 1940s (this kind of paper has not been in use in the later period).

Earth consists of the same kinds of silk as *heaven* — milky-white silk twill with a floral ornament and yellow silk with golden speckles. A 10 cm wide vertical strip of white silk separates it from the painting. The length of the yellow silk up to the roller is 108.7 cm. Another 19.2 cm of the same silk is wrapped around the roller and glued on. The roller that holds the end of the scroll, 1.5 cm in diametre, is made of multi-layered rolled paper. Both its ends are covered with rounded decorative knobs of white jade, 5 mm thick and 1.7 cm in diametre. The overall length of the roller is 36.4 cm.

POZDNEYEV'S DESCRIPTION AND FACSIMILE

The facsimile published in 1895 allows to make a few remarks as to the state of preservation of the scroll. However, the observations are restricted to the text and painting segments, as the facsimile does not reproduce the plain silk of *heaven* and *earth*. The facsimile is monochromatic and small-scale, which limits the judgement even more. Nevertheless, the cracks and creases on the silk and paper of the painting are very distinct. The separation of the lining paper of the silk from the lining paper of the scroll on the heavy creases is clearly visible as well. On the old conservation patches, the facsimile also captured the separation of the edges of the painted silk, as well as the edges of the patches, from the paper lining.

Given below is the full account of the structure and state of the scroll as recorded by Pozdneev:

> As to its appearance, the letter of Altan Khan is a huge scroll, thirteen *arshins*[1] and three *vershoks*[2] long (=9.37 m), and half an *arshin* wide (=35.56 cm). The base of the scroll is made up of eight sheets of thick, sleek Tibetan paper, glued together to form a reel and, on the inner side of the scroll, patched in places with silk fabrics of various sorts and colours. Thus, being unrolled and observed at its full length, it can be divided into four parts. The first part, so to say, the wrapper of the scroll, consists of two glued pieces of silk fabric: the first nine and a half *vershoks* (=42.22 cm) are a white silk satin with an inwrought pattern of equally white flowers (a sort of a modern *ku duan* or a

[1] *Arshin* is an old Russian measure of length equal to 0.7112 metres.
[2] *Vershok* is an old Russian measure of length equal to 4.445 centimetres.

French silk *demassé*) followed by a two and a half *vershoks* (=11.11 cm) of yellow silk foulard. The second part of the scroll, two *arshins* and eight *vershoks* long (=1.77 m), contains the very text of the letter, which was obviously written with an ink-filled reed pen (ᠬᠠᠯᠠᠮ) directly on the Tibetan paper, not covered with anything, but only sprinkled with golden ink over the whole surface of the letter. The third part of the drawing (sic!), six *arshins* and six *vershoks* long (=4.53 m), is a drawing of the journey undertaken by the envoys of Altan Khan to deliver the tribute, from his headquarters in the vicinity of Guihuacheng, and even further to the West — the borders of Ordos, and up to Beijing. The drawing is artistically painted on the finest gauze (*sha* — a specific kind of gauze fabric) of a sandy colour which has, regrettably, significantly suffered and discoloured to orange in time. Finally, the fourth part of the drawing, one *arshin* and eleven *vershoks* in length (=1.20 m), is a piece of absolutely blank yellow foulard glued onto paper, apparently added to serve as a margin does in our papers, or perhaps to create a symmetry with the wrapper in the beginning of the scroll.[1]

Further in the text of his article Pozdneev gives remarks concerning the state of the painting, marking that the names of many of the buildings and settlements, written in gold in Chinese characters, had faded and could not be read at the time when he acquired the scroll.[2] It is safe to state that the damage recorded in 2021 was there when Pozdneev acquired the document, and the state of the scroll has not changed much in the last 130 years. The only visible difference is the amount of dark stains of biological origin which grew in number after the scroll was photographed in 1895.

Microscopic Study

Conservation procedures involved a microscopic study of the materials the scroll is made of: the paper lining of the scroll, the paper lining of the painting segment (to be compared with the same on the other segments of the scroll), the paper and media of the text segment, the silk of the painting (including the paint layer), the white and yellow silk used on the vertical strips, *heaven* and *earth*, the ornamented silk of the cover, and the blue paper of the old conservation patch on the back side of the painting segment. The study was conducted using the Levenhuk Rainbow 2L Plus biological microscope.

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[1] Новооткрытый памятникъ монгольской письменности времен династіи Минъ // Восточныя замѣтки. Сборник статей и изслѣдованій профессоровъ и преподавателей Императорскаго С.-Петербургскаго университета. Санктпетербургъ: Типографія Императорской Академіи Наукъ, 1895. P. 374–375.

[2] Ibid., P. 382.

The backing paper (see Fig. 6). The fibres of the backing paper appear stable and intact, with no signs of mechanical damage. The paper is covered with glue size, most probably plant-based (flour or starch paste). No visible differences between the lining paper of indigo and, possibly, oil. The character of the blue stains suggests that the lining paper of

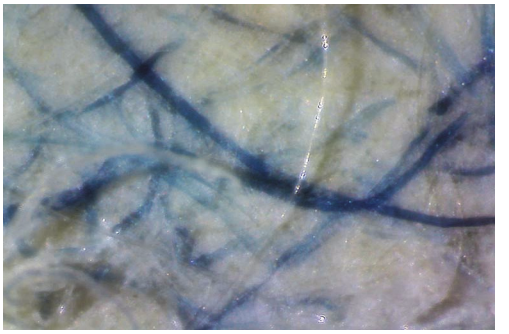

Fig.1

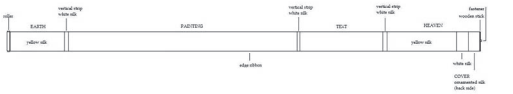

Fig.2

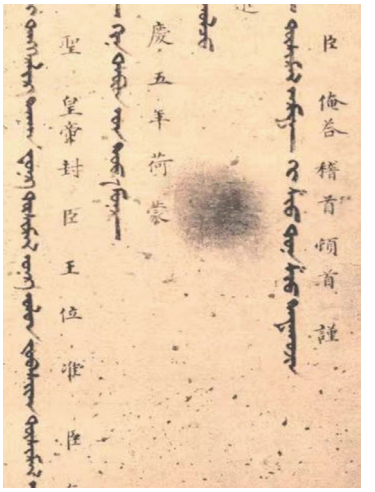

Fig.3

Fig.4

Fig.5

Fig.6

different parts of the scroll have been detected: the backing of the painting (see Fig. 7) looks the same as the backing of the other parts. However, only on the lining of the painting there are multiple stains of various colours and origin: presumably, stains of ink, the painting segment was in contact with some materials of unstable colouring that left the

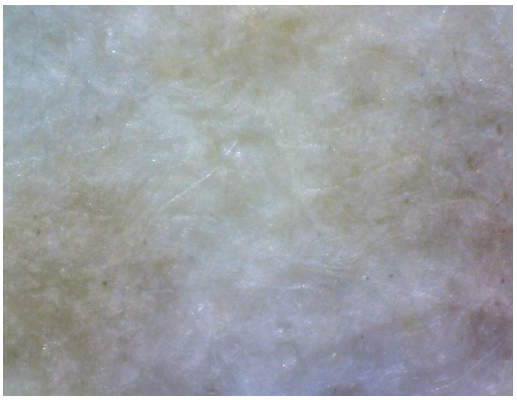

Fig.7

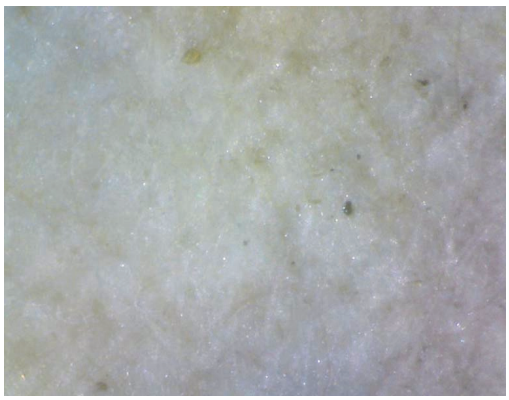

Fig.8

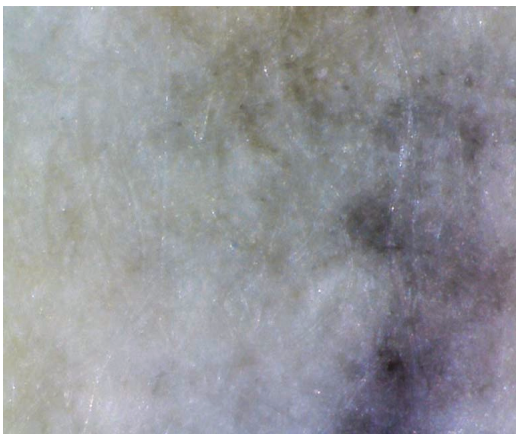

Fig.9

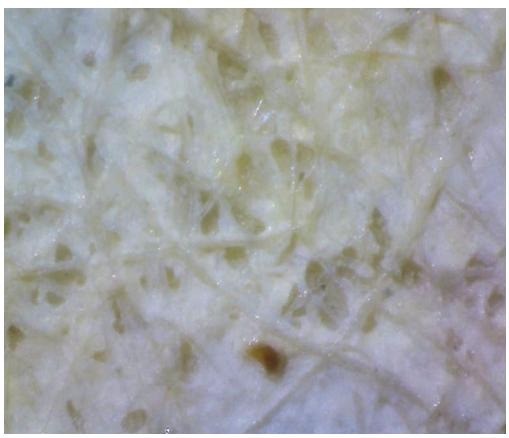

Fig.10

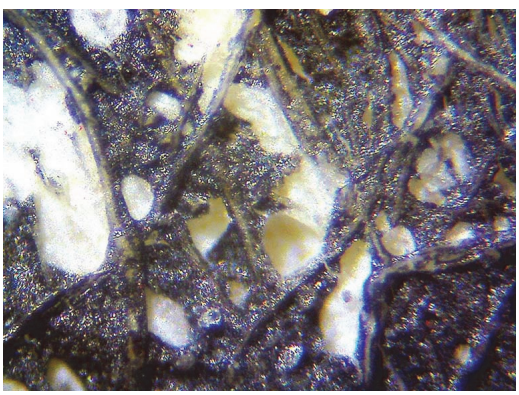

Fig.11

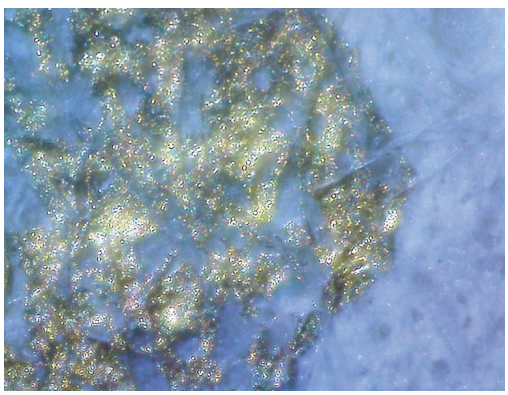

Fig.12

marks on its surface (see Fig. 8). The blue stains are most probably indigo, a plant-based pigment that got uniformly distributed in the paper fibres, unlike mineral paints.

The paper of the text segment (see Fig. 9). The paper is covered with glue size which gives it extra durability, the layer is thicker than that of the lining paper. The concentration of the soot pigment in the ink is not very high. The surface of the ink-covered fibres is visibly worn (see Fig. 10). The speckles on the paper are genuine gold (see Fig. 11).

The silk of the painting (see Fig. 12). The structure of the painted silk reveals a double-thread weave, when the two threads of the woof are placed very close to each other, as if forming a single thread. The threads of the beamed yarn vary in width. The paint layer consists of paints typical of the Chinese tradition, based on natural plant and mineral pigments, including indigo, gamboge, azurite, malachite, cinnabar and gold. The white paint is most probably based on a natural pigment, such as shell or chalk. The shots reveal losses of the paint layer in between the silk threads, strong abrasion and tears of the fibres (see Figs. 13, 14).

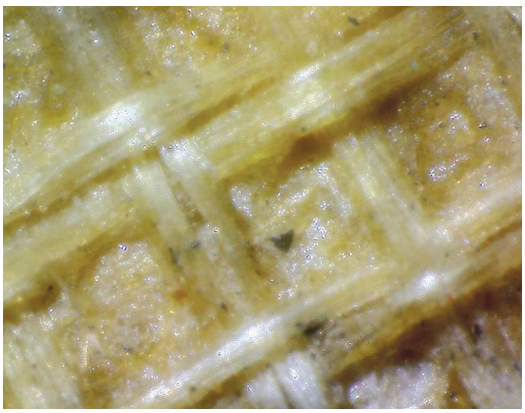

Fig.13

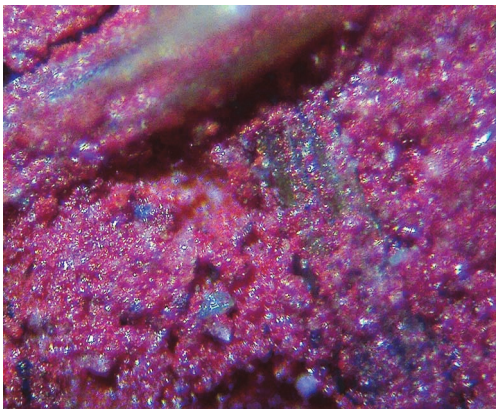

Fig.14

The white silk (see Fig. 15). is a densely structured twill weave with few signs of light destruction.

The yellow silk (see Fig. 16) is a densely structured plain weave without visible signs of damage.

The ornamented silk of the cover (see Fig. 17) is a twill weave with a marked difference in thickness between the fibres of the beamed yarn and the woof. The silk is dyed with paints of plant origin: gamboge, common madder (Rubia tinctorium), indigo, etc. The shots show mechanical destruction: torn fibres.

The blue paper of the old conservation patch (see Fig. 18). The fibres are dope-dyed, probably with a plant pigment (indigo). The character and length of the fibres, as well as

the presence of laid lines, show that the paper was produced in Europe or Russia: such paper was typical of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

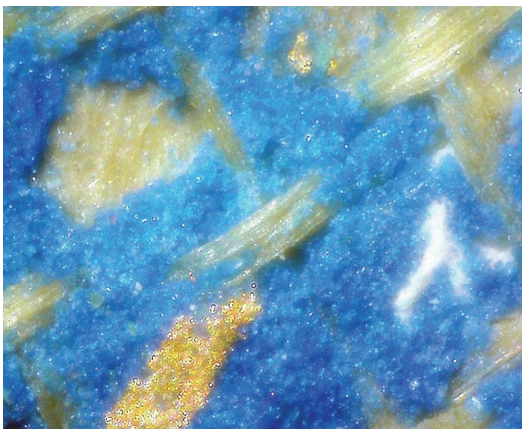

Fig.15

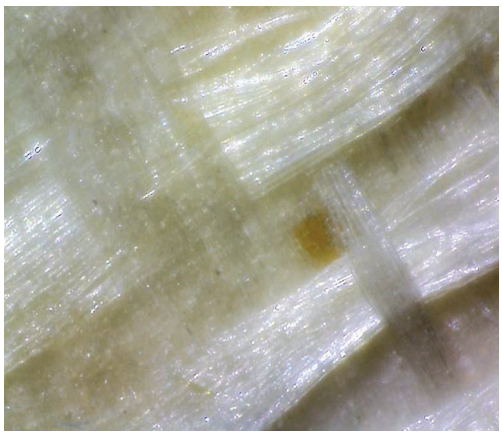

Fig.16

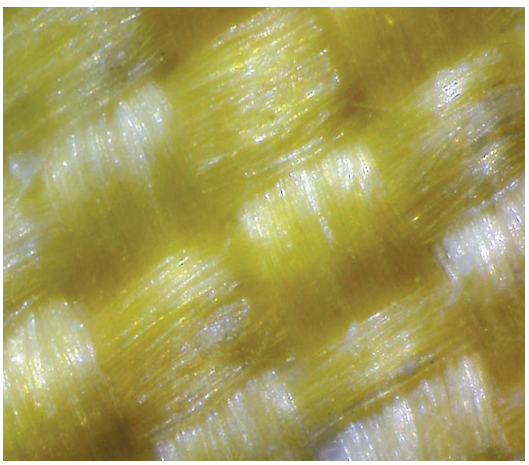

Fig.17

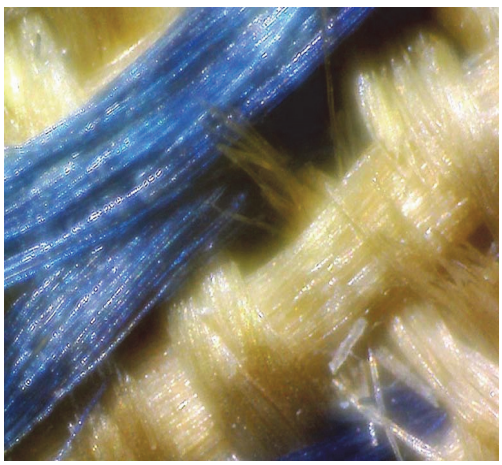

Fig.18

CONSERVATION PROCEDURES

Conservation procedures were aimed at stabilising the state of preservation of the scroll, improving it storage conditions and producing photographic images of the whole document. Preliminary conservation work was performed in 2015. It included consolidating the paper-lined silk and reinforcing the tears. Several tears of paper and silk in the end of the scroll, including a heavy vertical crease that caused a tear of paper in the end of the text segment, were reinforced with patches of Japanese conservation paper on the back side.

In 2021, the surfaces of paper and silk on both sides of the scroll were cleaned with polyurethane sponges of varying softness. The separation of silk from the lining of the painting segment, and the separation of the decorative ribbon from the upper and lower edges of the reel, were reinforced with wheat starch paste. The silk that was selected to replace the lost fragments of the edge ribbon was dyed with tea to match the original colour and lined with thin conservation paper. Prior to that, the losses of paper on the back side of the reel were replaced in order to place the silk ribbon onto them. The silk was cut with a sharp knife into 1 cm wide strips. The tear that separated *heaven* from the main part of the scroll was reinforced with Japanese conservation paper matching the lining paper of the scroll. To prepare the scroll for photography, the heavy creases that caused the most of the deformation were smoothed down in a mechanical press using technical fabrics.

The scroll has multiple heavy creases, and the small diametre of the roller aggravated this condition, so it was decided to craft a special conservation roller with a larger diametre. The conservation roller is designed in such a way that the original roller is placed inside its body allowing to smoothly reel up the scroll. To protect the paint layer and the media of the text, the corresponding parts of the scroll were interlaid with thin protective paper made of pure cotton, which helps to prevent peeling and abrasion. A conservation case, designed as a double back box, was crafted from acid-free cardboard and covered with vinyl paper. The conservation roller is placed on special holders inside the box to avoid any contact of the scroll with the case.

Observations and Conclusions

The construction of the scroll, as well as the state of preservation of its different parts, clearly show that the layout we see today is not the original one, and the scroll was reassembled at some point in its history.

The painting is the most damaged part of the scroll. The nature of the heavy creases suggests that they formed before the scroll was assembled, as its other parts are free from similar creases. The presence of silk patches between the painted silk and its thin paper lining shows that the silk of the painting had been torn before it became part of this scroll. The paper of the text segment, on the other hand, is in a very good condition, with little visible damage. The silk and paper of *heaven* and *earth* are also well-preserved, although these parts of the scroll are naturally exposed to damage.

The difference in the state of preservation between the two main parts of the document — the text and the painting — strikes the eye, both when observed in the old facsimile and

scrutinised in its modern condition, which brings us back to the origins and functions of the vassal letter. These two parts must be of different origins, however their content is closely connected: the painting illustrates the text, which makes it secondary to the letter. However, it is secondary in terms of content only, as the physical copy of the letter could as well be produced at a later point in time.

The painting is the most enigmatic part of the document, as there are no other illustrated vassal letters to compare it to. There is no clue as to who initiated its creation and what purpose it was supposed to serve. Based on what is known about the tribute presentation procedure, the painting could possibly be part of the original vassal letter written by the Mongols and sent to Beijing along with the embassy. The portrait of Altan Khan and his spouse occupies an important position in the whole picture, and they are depicted as Buddhist rulers, which was an important issue for the Mongols (but not for the Chinese). It is possible that the painting was created as a supplement to the original letter, and its function was not only to serve as beautiful décor, but also to glorify the Mongolian ruler and his lands. At the same time, all the inscriptions on the painting are made in the Chinese language, and its style is distinctly Chinese as well, suggesting that the artist who created it belonged to the Chinese tradition.

The text of the letter is a translation created at the *Siyi Guan*, although the date and origin of this particular copy are unknown. One little detail suggests that the text segment is likely to be of the same origin as the yellow silk that covers *heaven* and *earth*: these parts are decorated with speckled gold.

The first possible version to be considered is the following: providing the painting was brought to Beijing with the original letter of Altan Khan, it could be re-lined and made part of the translated document to be used in the ceremony at the Temple of Heaven. The main evidence that contradicts this version are the creases and tears of the painted silk: it is unlikely that the painting had reached such a poor condition already upon its arrival at the capital.

In another possible scenario, the scroll was re-assembled sometime after the presentation of tribute, when it had already been damaged, worn and discarded as useless to the new administration. The re-mounting could be performed by the new owners of the document (such as the ancestors of the lama who sold the scroll to Pozdneev). The text segment could as well have been replaced with a new, fresh copy, while the painting, which is much more difficult to reproduce, was re-lined and patched with silk on its most damaged spots.

These two versions are by no means the only possible ones, but we suggest considering

them as the most plausible at this point. We hope that the publication of high-quality photocopies of the scroll combined with this codicological description will become a stepping stone for new research on the subject.

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