

## **THE SILK ROAD: AFRO-EURASIAN CONNECTIVITY ACROSS THE AGES**

**Alfred J. Andrea**

*The University of Vermont, USA*

**Scott C. Levi**

*The University of Louisville, USA*

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## Summary

The Silk Road, a complex network of caravan routes across the heart of Central Asia that connected and cross-fertilized the peoples and cultures of the Afro-Eurasian World, flourished from about 100 BCE to circa 1350 CE, with five periods of particular vitality. Long before the advent of a global “world system,” the Silk Road served as a major medium for economic and cultural exchange, and constituted a true Afro-Eurasian System. Regardless of global shifts that witnessed the rise of new systems of transoceanic exchange after about 1450, the old roads of the Silk Road continued to bear traffic. Despite political and environmental shifts over the past 500 years, some of which have been quite disastrous, even today these ancient roads are important arteries for the lands and peoples that they connect.

### 1. An Introduction to the Silk Road

Commonly defined, the Silk Road was a trans-Eurasian network of land routes, largely across Central Asia, that connected China to the trading emporia of India and the eastern Mediterranean, and it enjoyed its greatest period of efflorescence from about 100 BCE to around 1350 CE. Although largely correct, this definition is imprecise. In fact, the Silk Road did not stop in China or the Levant and not even at water's edge. Beyond China lay Korea and Japan in the Far East; beyond the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean lay North Africa and Europe in the Far West; beyond India and Arabia lay the east coast of Africa to the west and the coastal regions of Southeast Asia to the east. Thanks to ships and shipping lanes, Japan, the far-western regions of North Africa and Europe, and the many lands touched by the waters of the Indian Ocean shared in and contributed to the goods, ideas, and other items transmitted across the Silk Road and may legitimately be thought of as part of a Greater Afro-Eurasian Silk Road. Moreover, long-distance travel and exchange across the Afro-Eurasian World flourished for thousands of years before the beginning of the classic era of the Silk Road, and even today many of the traditional routes of the Silk Road continue to bear commercial traffic. This chapter, however, focuses on the Silk Road's land routes across Eurasia, particularly between ca. 100 BCE and 1350 CE.

#### 1.1. Caravan Routes

The peoples and merchandise that moved across the Silk Road's inland trade routes followed an irregular pattern. Especially convenient geographic locations endowed some cities with a heightened commercial importance for the trans-Eurasian caravan trade, but preferred caravan routes connecting these cities fluctuated, sometimes erratically, due to shifting political and environmental factors. Wherever they met,

caravan merchants feverishly exchanged intelligence and rumors of insecurity, highwaymen, raids on recent caravans, and the vicissitudes of local and regional political developments; weighing risks and options carefully, merchants changed their routes accordingly. A tediously predictable route was as good as gold, and even an excruciating desert crossing was preferable to death at the hands of brigands.

Within this web of trade routes one can discern several primary arteries of latitudinal caravan traffic across Asia. Moving from east to west, the southern route out of central China passed below the Tarim Basin and its dreaded Taklamakan Desert. To the north of the Tarim Basin, travelers had a choice of two major routes: one skirted the Taklamakan Desert, passing through a variety of oasis towns; the other swung farther north across the pastoral-nomadic steppe. The two routes that passed along the periphery of the Tarim Basin eventually converged at Kashgar (today Kashi in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) and then crossed the Tian Shan and Pamir ranges, en route to Samarqand and Balkh, where caravans loaded with merchandise from China met with others from northwestern India. The routes then continued in several different directions: south to the markets of India and westward to Iran and the Near East. In the latter case they ultimately led to the port cities of the Levant, North and East Africa, or on to Europe overland through Constantinople. A variety of side routes in Central and Southwest Asia, and the Balkans took travelers northward to Mongolia, Siberia, Russia, and Scandinavia. In addition to the routes that carried commerce into northwestern India and to the far western lands washed by the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas, a southwestern route led from Chengdu in China's Sichuan region into eastern India and the lands of Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding all of these side roads and tributaries, the main traffic was east to west and west to east across Eurasia during the classic era of the Silk Road.

At its height in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, the main overland portions of the Silk Road stretched for more than 6,500 kilometers from east to west, from Chang'an (modern Xi'an), capital of the Tang dynasty (618–907) in north central China, to Antioch, Tyre, Constantinople, and similar commercial centers of the Eastern Mediterranean. Along the way, it passed through such fabled cities as Kabul in Afghanistan, Susa in Iran, Baghdad in Iraq, and Palmyra in Syria. It traversed deserts, steppe, rivers, and mountain ranges, all filled with mortal dangers for those who braved its routes.

Additionally, bandits preyed on travelers, and strange food, drink, and microorganisms always threatened a traveler's internal organs. Then there were the psychic dangers. Several famous Silk Road travelers recorded first-hand accounts of the frightening nocturnal sounds and voices of the Tarim Basin's Salt Desert of Lop Nor that disoriented to the point of death the unwary.

The dangers of Silk Road travel were ameliorated and the journey was made possible by oasis caravanserais, towns, and cities that allowed travelers to progress from refuge point to refuge point at the pace of about 35 to 40 kilometers a day with a variety of pack animals: Bactrian camels, oxen, yaks, horses, Arabian camels, donkeys, and even elephants. Of these, the slow but strong Bactrian, or double-humped, camel, which could carry average loads of about 180 kilos, did the bulk of transport across the pathways of Central Asia. To further ensure the safety of travelers, shrines and

pilgrimage sites sprang up where travelers could find physical refuge and religious solace. One of the most famous and oft-visited was the complex of caves and shrines known as the *Mogaoku* (Peerless Caves) about 35 kilometers outside of the town of Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert. At this bustling oasis of monastic life and pilgrimage worship, more than 1000 caves were carved out of a gravel cliff face between the late 4<sup>th</sup> and mid-14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Of these, almost 500 were decorated shrines containing some of the most exquisitely beautiful Chinese Buddhist paintings and statuary ever crafted—artwork that displayed influences from as far away as Iran, India, and the Mediterranean.

Along the Silk Road's routes merchants moved goods, pilgrims visited holy sites, missionaries sought out converts, armies marched on expeditions of conquest and missions of pacification, prisoners of war were transported to uncertain futures in distant lands and among alien peoples, colonists set out for far-away frontier regions, ambassadors and promised brides journeyed to foreign lands to cement alliances, and imperial administrators traveled to far-flung outposts.

In addition to manufactured goods, livestock, fruits, and vegetables were transported to new homes, where they became integral parts of the agrarian landscapes and tables of host cultures. Artistic motifs and styles in painting and sculpture traveled along these routes, as well as other forms of expression. Music, dance, and a wide variety of musical instruments made their way east from Persia, India, Central Asia, and elsewhere and had profound impact on the cultures of China, Korea, and Japan. Even new sports and games, such as polo and chess, passed along the Silk Road. Perhaps most important, ideas flowed every which way, especially religious concepts. Not all of the exchange was healthy, however. Diseases also traveled along these pathways, as microorganisms were carried by human and animal travelers alike.

## 1.2. The Term “The Silk Road”

Travelers along the Silk Road during its classic era referred to its routes by many different terms, but there is no evidence that any of them called either all or part of it “the Silk Road.” The term is modern. In 1877 a German geologist, geographer, and pioneer-explorer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), coined the term “*die Seidenstrassen*”—the Silk Roads—in his study of the historical geography of China’s Tarim Basin, as a way of indicating that Chinese silk was the commodity that fueled premodern commerce along the routes that passed through the oasis towns that ringed the Tarim Basin’s Taklamakan Desert. *Die Seidenstrassen* was later translated into English as the singular, rather romantic “the Silk Road.” Today many specialists in global history are turning back to the plural; additionally, many of them prefer the term “the Silk Routes,” which allows them to include the sea routes that washed against the shores of Eurasia and Africa and extended trade for many thousands of kilometers. They are correct to do so, but the more evocative “Silk Road” remains part of the popular historical vocabulary among Anglophones.

## 2. Silk and Other Merchandise along the Silk Road

Chinese Silk as a commodity of exchange and diplomacy was undoubtedly a major item

transported along these caravan routes. It has been estimated that by the late first century BCE, China's Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) expended upward of ten percent of state revenues on the tens of thousands bolts of silk and thousands of kilos of silken thread that it sent annually as “gifts” to “tributary” neighboring states and tribes of nomads as a way of keeping them non-aggressive. Silk was avidly sought and expensive, and its secret of production was jealously but not successfully guarded by the Chinese. More important than the dual secrets of the silkworm, *Bombyx mori*, and the mulberry tree leaves on which it feeds, was knowledge of the complex process of silk production, and it was probably the difficulty of mastering that art, more than anything else, that slowed the spread of sericulture beyond China. The Chinese had domesticated the silkworm probably as early as 5000 BCE, but it was only around the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE that the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan (today Hotan or Hetian), then located on China's far western periphery, witnessed the raising of silkworms for their thread. According to a legend recorded in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, the secret of sericulture was brought to Khotan by a Chinese princess-bride, who carried from home mulberry seeds and silkworm eggs hidden in her headdress, as dowry for her Khotanese husband-to-be. Later she founded a Buddhist convent for women, which became Khotan's first center of silk production. Whatever the truth of this charming story, the fact remains that Khotan became a major producer of quality silk, and remains so today. By the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century, the secret of silk had reached Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. Once the Byzantines mastered the art of producing silk, the silk industry became an imperial monopoly and a major component of the empire's economy. In like fashion, silk production became an important industry throughout the Islamic World, thanks largely to Islamic conquest of the Persian Sassanian Empire in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. From both Byzantine and Islamic sources, the technique of producing high quality silk later traveled to Western Europe, where the Italians and the French became masters of the craft.

While silk was an important commodity, it was probably not the primary item transported, bartered, and bought along the Silk Road. From China came ironware, lacquer ware, ceramics and fine porcelains, and many other manufactured commodities. In return, China received from South Asia exotic woods, dyes, and spices, as well as Buddhist relics and texts, and from Central Asia it received horses, furs, and jade. During Roman times, the West sent eastward colored glassware, Baltic amber, bronze statuettes, and especially gold and silver. Trade in humans was equally important, with every society touched by the Silk Road participating in slave traffic.

The Roman West's main form of payment for silk and other Eastern luxury goods was hard bullion, which meant that the Roman World suffered from a trade imbalance with the East. Late in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (23–79) grumbled about all of the wealth wasted so that “a Roman woman might exhibit her charms in transparent gauze.” He estimated that the annual cost to Rome for trade with India alone was minimally 50 million *sesterces*. Although this was very much a seat-of-the-toga estimate, he was probably not too far off the mark. We can also assume that Rome's trade with Central Asia for silk and other luxury items was probably equally costly. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, this trade imbalance contributed to the empire's overall social and economic miseries, especially in its western regions.

### **3. An Historical Overview**

As already noted, the Silk Road's classic era stretched from about 100 BCE to approximately 1350 CE. Within that millennium and a half it enjoyed five periods of particular efflorescence. Following that classic era, it continued to have periods of regeneration and even transformation, well into modern times. For much of the classic period, it was the lure of Chinese manufactured goods that drove Silk Road commerce. After 1350, the Timurids of Central Asia, the Manchu, or Qing, dynasty of China, Indian diaspora communities in Inner Asia, and imperial Russia successively drove and transformed the Silk Road.

### **4. The First Golden Age: The Era of Four Empires (100 BCE–200 CE)**

The first golden age, which saw the true opening up of the Silk Road, stretched from about 100 BCE to about 200 CE, when two major empires, Han China and Rome, anchored the ends of the Silk Road, and two other empires, the Kushan Empire of northern India and Afghanistan and the Parthian Empire of Iran and Iraq, provided security for the transit of merchandise and people across the heart of Asia. The Kushan Empire flourished from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, whereas the Parthian Empire lasted from 248 BCE to 227 CE. Clearly silk and other commodities had traveled long distances across Eurasia well before the classic era of the Silk Road. The prehistoric Chinese imported jade from the region of Khotan well before 2000 BCE., and Chinese silk dating from around 1500 BCE has been found in northeastern Afghanistan, while silk scraps have been found in Egyptian tombs dating from around 1000 BCE. Notwithstanding this early trade, it was only in this age of four great regional empires, which together created a chain of fairly secure routes and citadels stretching across Eurasia, that the volume of travel and trade along the Silk Road became significant.

#### **4.1. Han China**

One can confidently say that China was the engine that drove the commerce of the Silk Road for much of its golden age, and the Silk Road would not have opened and flourished were it not for China's gaining control of the Gansu (or Hexi) Corridor, a narrow defile that lies northwest of the city of Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and is flanked by the Qilian Mountains to the south and the Gobi Desert to the north.

A multi-ethnic confederation of pastoral peoples whom the Chinese called the Xiongnu (common slaves) controlled this narrow defile at the start of the Han Era, but during the reign of Han Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE), the Chinese successfully wrested control of it away from their steppe enemies in a series of campaigns that began in 133 BCE. Driving beyond the Gansu Corridor, in 101 BCE, Han armies reached as far west as the fertile Ferghana Valley (in today's eastern Uzbekistan). There the empire obtained access to a steady supply of Ferghana's large and fast horses, whose superior qualities led the Chinese to refer to them as "Heavenly Horses." These steeds from far-away western pasturelands helped the Chinese cavalry to fight the nomads on a roughly equal basis and to establish and maintain, at least for a while, hegemony over the trade routes of Central Asia that skirted the Great Tarim Basin.

Han China set up fortifications, beacon towers, and bermes along and within this newly established western frontier beyond the Gansu Corridor, which enabled it to control the nomads (whose confederation was conveniently fragmenting by 55 BCE) and to protect and tax mercantile traffic. Within the Gansu Corridor, the Chinese established four citadel towns—Lanzhou, Wuwei, Zhangye, and Anxi. Originally intended to provide a heightened measure of security against incursions from the steppe nomads, they became significant centers of commerce as the Xiongnu threat decreased.

#### **4.2. Parthia**

During this first golden age hardly anyone traveled all the way from East Asia to the Mediterranean or vice versa. Rather, goods, ideas, and the like were passed along from hand to hand, from mind to mind, along a series of connected caravan routes. Indeed, the Parthians were so eager to profit from the riches of the Silk Road that in exchange for patrolled roads and marketplaces with fair exchange rates and standardized weights, they generally forbade merchants to pass through their land from one end to the other. Rather, they compelled them to stop, exchange their goods at major towns and cities in Iraq, pay the market tolls, and return home. For this reason, the Parthian lands of Iran and Iraq became major sites for the transmission of not only merchandise but also ideas and styles.

#### **4.3. Art along the Silk Road**

Statuary that was fashioned during the first five centuries CE along the Silk Road, from Persia through Central Asia to China, shows the adoption and adaptation of certain Greco-Roman sculptural techniques and artistic styles: idealized realism in the portrayal of bodies; the use of drapery to define the body; the technique of contrapposto (the turning of the hip and leg away from the shoulders and the head to impart a sense of dynamism to an otherwise static statue); and an emphasis on facial expression. Thanks to Greco-Roman influences, especially as interpreted by artists of the Kushan Empire in Pakistan and Afghanistan (an area known as Gandhara), Buddhist sculptural art was brought to a new level.

Buddhist cave paintings along the Silk Road drew upon many different traditions—Indian, Persian, and Mediterranean. In 1907 mural fragments were excavated at the ruins of the Silk Road city of Miran, which lay west of Dunhuang in Han-dominated lands. Until Miran disappeared beneath the desert sands in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the city was a major stopping-off point along the southern Tarim Basin route. Little remains of Miran today, but its recovered murals are testimony of the ways in which Eastern and Western cultures mixed along the Silk Road. Its paintings of the Buddha and his disciples, all of which appear to be the work of a single artist and his students, show a definite Mediterranean influence. One fragment gives us the artist's name, Tita, which might be a Turkic variant of the Latin name Titus. He was probably a Romanized Levantine.

#### **4.4. Rome and India**

In addition to its contacts with Central Asia and beyond, the Roman Empire also

enjoyed commerce with India by way of the Red Sea. In large part, Rome's direct commercial contact with India was driven by a desire to circumvent its Parthian enemy's control over the westward flow of luxury goods from the farther reaches of Asia. By the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century CE, Mediterranean merchants had established a regular pattern of routes to the markets of India. Sailing in midsummer up the Nile to Coptos, 12-days journey from Alexandria, they then journeyed over 400 kilometers across the mountains and desert of Upper Egypt for another 12 days before reaching the Red Sea. From there they took advantage of favorable westerly winds to sail to India, returning with the easterly winds of December or January. This long and dangerous journey was made attractive, Pliny the Elder informs us, because merchandise brought back from India sold at 100 times its original price. Even following the collapse of Roman unity in the Mediterranean after about 500 CE, Egyptian, Syrian, Arab, and Jewish, merchants from the Mediterranean continued to maintain this slender but important link between India and the West.

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### **Biographical Sketches**

**Alfred J. Andrea** is a Professor Emeritus of Medieval World History at the University of Vermont, where he taught from 1967 through 2001, Andrea holds the Ph. D. from Cornell University. The author of numerous books and articles, especially in the areas of the crusades and Byzantine-Western relations, his most recent books include *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publications, 2000), xii, 330 pp. and *Encyclopedia of the Crusades* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), xxiii, 356 pp. Currently he is at work on the sixth edition of his world history textbook *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, 2 vols., 5th. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004), co-authored and co-edited with James H. Overfield. He also serves as general editor of the *ABC-Clio World History Encyclopedia*, 21 vols. (in preparation), series editor of Pearson Prentice Hall's *Connections: Key Themes in World History*, and as an officer of the World History Association. In 2002 he was Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Louisville.

**Scott C. Levi** is an Assistant Professor of Central Asian and Islamic World History at the University of Louisville, Levi earned his Ph.D. in History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2000. He is the author of *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550–1900* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publications, 2002) and the editor of *India and Central Asia: Culture and Commerce, 1500–1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, in press). Levi is currently at work on a primary source reader spanning the history of Islamic Central Asia, co-edited with Ron Sela and under contract with Indiana University Press. He is also working to produce a research monograph tentatively titled, *Central Asia on the Frontier of Empires: The Khanate of Khoqand, 1798–1876*. Levi serves on the Executive Board of the Central Eurasian Studies Society.