

A Road as an Empire: Some Remarks about the Most Important Ancient Periods and Powers of and along the Silk Road

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Editors' Note

An earlier version of this working paper was presented at the workshop “**Goods, Languages, and Cultures along the Silk Road,**” held at Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, on October 18 and 19, 2019.

Participants at the workshop came from different disciplinary backgrounds. The presentations were recorded with the intention of putting together a teaching module in the future.

Select presentations were rewritten for public dissemination. These are being published in the Working Paper Series on Informal Markets and Trade, which is permanently housed at the University of Frankfurt Library with ISSN 2519-2826. This collection of working papers is guest-edited by **Susanne Fehlings** and **Zakharia Pourtskhvanidze**.

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Introduction

This paper was presented at the workshop “Goods, Languages, and Cultures along the Silk Road” at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, October 18 and 19, 2019. While many contributions to the workshop focused on recent developments in China’s current “New Silk Road” politics, on forms of communication, and on contemporary exchange of goods and ideas across so-called Silk Road countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia and with China, this short essay focuses on the history of the so-called Silk Road as an important transport connection. Although what is now called the “Silk Road” was not a pure East-West binary in antiquity but rather developed into a network that also led to the South and North, the focus here will be on describing the East-West connection.

I will start with a few brief remarks on the origins of the connection referred to as the Silk Road and will then introduce the different great empires that shaped this connection between antiquity and the Middle Ages through military campaigns and by using it as a trading route and network. But the Silk Road was by no means only of economic and military importance. Its significance for the exchange and dissemination of religions should also be mentioned. This paper does not detail the importance of the numerous individual religions in the area of the Silk Road but discusses the phenomenon of the spread of religions and the loss of some of their own distinguishing characteristics in this spread, a phenomenon that could be described as a “unity of opposites” (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Finally, the essay asks who, in the face of the regular replacement of powers, held sovereignty over the transport connection: the subject (in the form of the empires) or the object (in the form of the road).

Who were the main protagonists of and along the Silk Road in the course of history? Who were the people who became the great powers of the ancient Silk Road, building up the material route, governing parts of it, and organizing trade and relationships from the far East to the extreme West of the Eurasian continent?

Prehistory

As Elena Kuzmina states in her introduction to *The Prehistory of the Silk Road*, citing Viktor I. Sarianidi, there is no doubt “that some parts of the Road began functioning as early as the Bronze Age. One of its sections was used for transporting lapis lazuli from Badakhshan¹ to Western Asia, Egypt, and India, from the third millennium B.C. on” (Kuzmina 2008: 3). Turquoise was also

¹ Located between what is now Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and China.

exported from Sogdiana². Beads imported from Bactria and Sogdiana have been found in the burials of certain pastoral tribes of the second millennium BC. These tribes lived in places including the Ural region, where lapis lazuli has been found in Sintashta and Ushkattka and turquoise in Alabuga; Gurdush, near Bukhara, where lapis lazuli, agate, and turquoise in the shape of a Maltese cross have been discovered; and even Siberia, where turquoise has been found in Rostovka (Kuzmina 2008: 3). Kuzmina also notes that Paul Reinecke “was the first to show, based on the widespread presence of a particular type of art depicting certain animals (deer, tigers, etc.), that there were contacts throughout the vast area from the Black Sea littoral to China in the seventh to fourth centuries B.C.” (Kuzmina 2008: 3). These contacts are also proved by finds of articles made of Chinese cotton and silk fabrics in Pazyryk and of bronze mirrors in Pazyryk, Minusinsk, and Eastern Kazakhstan. So we have several indications that even before the formation of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, beginning in the Bronze Age, there were trade routes from China to Western Asia.

China

The development of silk production had extraordinary significance for Chinese culture, economy, and policy. Silk was not only a textile but was used as currency. It was used to pacify the barbarians in difficult times (Kulke 2001: 1–16), and it was the material used to describe not only the trading route to the West but also the people who produced it. Thus Ammianus Marcellinus (1978: 6, 23, 60, 102) in the second half of the fourth century spoke of the “longest route,” which was used by traders to travel to the “silk people” (ad Seras). The name “Silk Road” itself first appears only in the nineteenth century (Mertens 2019: 4)³, but the project of a consciously centrally planned East-West connection became official after the Chinese Han emperor Wu sent his official Zhang Qian to the West in the late second century BC. Zhang Qian crossed the Tarim Basin and the Tian Shan mountains and reached with his people the Ferghana Valley, Bactria, and Parthia (Hopkirk 1980: 9–17).

Silk, coming from China, became the most traded good along this newly established trade connection. In the other direction, nephrite came from Khotan, horses from the steppe, and glassware from the Mediterranean (Xinhua News 2005).

² One of the easternmost satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire, located in an area divided among present-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

³ The term Silk Road (*Seidenstraße*) was made famous by Ferdinand von Richthofen, but it had already been used by Carl Ritter in 1838 (Mertens 2019: 4).



Image 1: China in the time of Tang dynasty. Similar to the times of Han dynasty the territorial striving towards the west to dominate the trade route is clearly recognizable from this map⁴

If we compare a map of China under Wu (first century BC), during the Han Dynasty, to one of China under Xuanzong (eighth century AD, see above), during the later Tang Dynasty, we can see how this trade route significantly shaped the direction of Chinese Western expansion. This expansion ended during Xuanzong's reign with the famous battle of Talas against Arab Muslims and Tibet in AD 751.

⁴ "File:Tang Dynasty circa 700 CE.png", URN:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Dynasty_circa_700_CE.png [accessed May 09, 2021].

Rome

If we take a look at a map for the year AD 200, we see that the Roman and Chinese empires were the poles of the Eurasian continent.

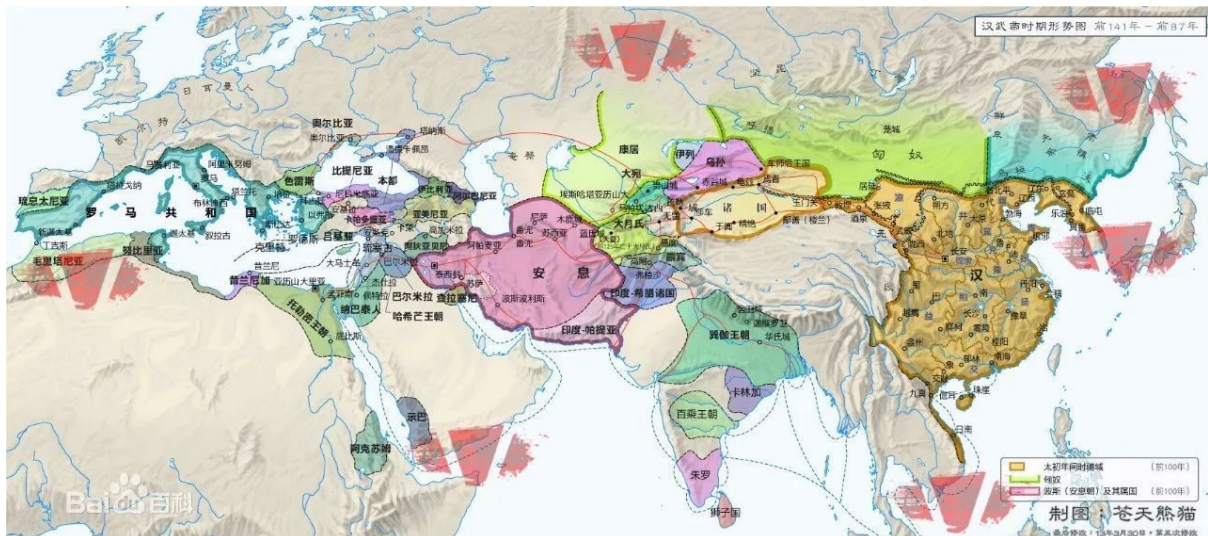


Image 2: Map of Eurasia around AD 200⁵

Rome had been on the way to becoming a political and economic superpower of the ancient world since at least the Roman victory over Carthage around 200 BC. But before that, Carthage had developed from a Phoenician colony into the most important trading hub in the Mediterranean. The Phoenician city-states in the Levant were the most important trading centers in the ancient world, with a network that extended in all directions. With her military victory over Carthage, Rome also inherited the economic capacities of this competitor state. Tyre, for example, Carthage's most important city, was famous for its processing of silk (Hardy 1912)⁶. By the first century BC, Rome had also become the heir of a part of the Hellenistic diadochi states, which developed after Alexander's death and played a leading political role in Asia Minor and Palestine. It was at this time that silk became one of the most sought-after luxury goods in Rome—a fashion trend particularly popular among women. Besides the fact that the new cloth caused scandals because of its transparency, it became along with other luxury goods a serious economic factor (Plinius 1764: 523) and more and more a standard economic issue in Roman-Persian relations.

Ammianus Marcellinus's remark quoted above shows that Rome and China (like other Eastern peoples) knew of each other, but the powers between them managed to keep their monopoly on intermediary trade via the control of the trade routes, which were already described as “the long trade road of the Seres or ‘Silk people’” (Graf 2018: 447, footnote 4). Persian

⁵ “Map of Eurasia around AD 200”, URN: <http://5b0988e595225.cdn.sohucs.com/images/20171030/4d92c64baf74abda74b79a17e4571ee.jpeg> [accessed September 15, 2021].

⁶ For the position of Tyre in the Roman Empire see Ernest G. Hardy (1912).

influence saw to it that a great deal of Chinese-Roman relations remained deliberately mythological. But it is worth noting that the Chinese, according to the Hou Hanshu, called Rome Da Qin (Ta- Ch'in), the Great Qin (Great China), thus expressing the view, that Rome was a kind of civilized opposite pole to China and comparable with it⁷. Especially when Rome temporarily gained the upper hand over the Parthians in the second century, China tried to establish direct relations with the Romans. But even before but at the latest with the Sassanian rise to power, these contacts seem to have vanished quickly (Twitchett et al. 1986: 579).

Persia/Parthia

From the sixth century BC onward, it was the Persian Empire that for a long time formed the western antipole for China. After the Achaemenid Empire was destroyed by Alexander in 330 BC, the Greek-Seleucid interregnum in Persia was finally ended in the second century BC by the Parthian Arsacids, who were replaced by the Sassanids in the third century AD. Even when the Romans began to develop as a world power in the West, the Persians for about 200 years and also the Macedonians (Seleucids) were the westernmost power that was part of the Chinese world for most of this time. As noted above, long-distance trade on the continent goes far back in history. But deliberately planned political, military, and economic expansion to the West started in the second/first century BC at the behest of Emperor Wu of Han, who sent his ambassador Zhang Qian on multiple missions to the West in search of coalition partners against the people of Xiongnu, predominant in the region in this period (Twitchett et al. 1986: 407–409). During Zhang Qian's third mission between 115 and 105 BC, a Chinese delegation arrived at the court of Anxi (Parthia). The Chinese were received with respect, and effective mutual and permanent relationships developed afterward. Silk goods were the most important trade goods for the Chinese. And henceforth silk no longer arrived only occasionally in Western countries but regularly (Sima Qian 1993: 234–235, 243).

In AD 97 Ban Chao (Zhongsheng), a general of the Later Han dynasty, sent his official Gan Ying to the Western regions. If Persian merchants had not told Gan Ying that it was another two years' journey away, he would have reached the Roman border during his Western mission⁸. Even if Persia was not the end of the trade routes that branched toward the West, Persia was the uncontested lord of the intermediary trade. Rome's heir Byzantium paid annual tributes to its Persian neighbor over long periods. Khosrow II in the first two decades of the seventh century after a period of its own weakness seemed to have wanted to establish the subordinate status of Byzantium for all time, when Byzantium came close to the edge of the abyss.

⁷ See annotation 1 to the section 11 of "*The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu*", <http://depts.washington.edu/> [accessed August 12, 2021].

⁸ "The ocean is huge. Those making the round trip can do it in three months if the winds are favourable. However, if you encounter winds that delay you, it can take two years. That is why all the men who go by sea take stores for three years. The vast ocean urges men to think of their country, and get homesick, and some of them die." (see "*The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu*", URN: http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html#sec10 [accessed September 15, 2021].

The importance the Persians attached always to their intermediary economic position between China and Rome becomes clear in a famous and often-cited episode that happened under the Sasanian King Khosrow I, when the Sogdian king, at this time a vassal of the Göktürks, sent a delegation with a huge amount of silk asking for free silk trade with Rome. Khosrow bought the whole cargo and burned it right in front of the eyes of the ambassadors, demonstrating that their gifts were worthless in comparison with Persia's unique intermediary trading position (Dobelhofer 1955: 132).

A r a b s

While the Persians almost always maintained a good relationship with China, the Arabs after defeating and taking over the great Persian Empire followed another policy. Their direct victory over the Tang Dynasty in AD 751 resulted in Muslim domination of Transoxania and the economically important cities along the Silk Road. The Arabs thus controlled an area reaching from Morocco to the south of what is today Kazakhstan. But their control over such vast areas along the Silk Road did not last long. There were rebellions against Abbasid rule, and in the ninth century, the so-called "Iranian interlude" began, when dynasties of Iranian origin, like the Tahirids, Safavids, Samanids, Bujids, and others, took over power in Central Asia and Iran until the Seljuk Turks emerged and became the new central Muslim power (Minorsky 1953: 2).

M o n g o l s

One of the chapters of Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads*, titled "The Road to Hell," is concerned with the Mongol invasions (Frankopan 2015: 158–174)⁹. The Mongols managed to achieve what the Arabs had tried but failed to obtain during their quarrels with the Chinese: control over the whole Silk Road, from Luoyang to the Black Sea (the Sea of Azov) and the Mediterranean. The key to their success lay in precise planning, ruthless elimination of all resistance, fierce and absolutely uncompromising warfare, and the rigorous hierarchy of Mongol rule. But that, of course, is not all. The Mongol Empire resulted from a kind of combination of the absorption of the centuries-old traditions of empire-building in the steppe, the incorporation of Chinese state organizations and rule and developed material technologies, and finally, the Mongols' self-image as rulers, which found its ideal realization in the person of Genghis Khan.

There exist a number of accounts by medieval Silk Road travelers describing the Mongols. Marco Polo, for example, gave a description of the post stations and messenger systems (Marco Polo 2003: 15). Another well-known account of the functioning of the Mongol state is the report of the Franciscan friar William of Rubruk, whose missionary journey took him to the Mongol court (William of Rubruk 2012: 90–94). A further example is found in the thirteenth-century Armenian history written by Kirakos Ganjakec'i, who describes in detail the travel of the

⁹ It is significant that the term "hell" is quickly put into perspective by Frankopan himself.

Armenian king of Cilicia, Hetum I, to the court of Möngke Khan in Karakorum (Kirakos Ganjakec‘i 1961: 364–372).

Mongol rule over the road system was connected with the ferocity of their conquest of cities that offered resistance to the Mongols. In other words, the “Pax Mongolica,” the possibility of safe travel on this route under Mongol rule, was preceded by the “Terror Mongolicus” (Menzel 2007: 47–48), as described by the aforementioned Kirakos, who details, for example, the conquest and destruction of the Armenian city Ani and of Baghdad (Kirakos Ganjakec‘i 1961: 258–259, 377–384). Here it becomes evident that these devastating actions were not chaotic but characterized by precise organization: even if the majority of the people of Baghdad, for example, were systematically executed, this happened only due to the resistance of the caliph of the city. Excessive terror and absolute security were both part of a comprehensive Mongol policy.

Although Peter Frankopan notes that “the Mongols conspicuously failed” to “patronize historians who write sympathetically of their age of empire” (Frankopan 2015: 161), the case can be made that not all historians condemn the Mongols. Juvaini, a Persian author, does not¹⁰. William of Rubruk recounts some very interesting episodes (William of Rubruk 2012: 186–189). Even the Armenian author Kirakos, who declares at the beginning of his book that the Mongols are the precursors of the son of destruction and of doomsday, takes a less absolute position later in the work, where he praises certain Mongol generals for their support of church-building or for being baptized as Christians. Moreover, in regard to the destruction of Baghdad, he expresses his satisfaction about the destruction of the city, when, after having reported extensively on the extinction of the whole city, he declares the divine legality of its destruction:

“[...] Then countless multitudes came through the city gates, climbing over each other to see who would reach him [i.e. Hulegu] first. [Hulegu] divided up among the soldiers those who came out and ordered [the soldiers] to take them far from the city and to kill them secretly so that the others would not know. They killed all of them ... [Hulegu] then ordered the troops guarding the walls to descend and kill the inhabitants of the city, great and small. [The Mongols] organized as though harvesting a field, and cut down countless, innumerable multitudes of men, women, and children. For forty days they did not stop. Then they grew weary and stopped killing. Their hands grew tired; they took the others for sale ... Five hundred fifteen years had elapsed since that city was built by the Ishmaelite Jap'r in 194 A.E. [A.D. 745] on the Tigris River above Ctesiphon (Katisbon), about five day's journey above Babylon, and it had taken everything into its kingdom like an insatiable blood-sucker, swallowing up the entire world. It was destroyed in 707 A.E. [1258] paying the blood price for the blood it had caused to flow and for the evil it had wrought. When its measure

¹⁰ For example, when he emphasizes the positive role played by the governor Arghun Āqā, who is condemned for its brutal methods in the Armenian sources (Juvaini 1997: 507).

of sin was filled up before the omniscient God, he repaid it justly, strictly, and truthfully. And the arrogant and fanatical kingdom of the Tajiks ended after a duration of six hundred and forty seven years. Baghdad was taken on the first day of Lent, on Monday of the month of Nawasard, the twentieth of the month by the moveable [calendrical system] (Kirakos Ganjakec‘i 1961: 382–384).¹¹

So, according to this Christian author, it was not the cruelty of Hülägü that was responsible for the damage to the city but divine revenge.

The approximately one hundred years of the “Pax Mongolica” in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have several aspects. The Mongols were interested in benefiting from the trade routes and pursued a benevolent policy toward European and other long-distance traders. At the same time, they demanded absolute recognition of their political rule. Their lordship had to be accepted explicitly and personally: often the subject princes/kings/religious leaders had to travel to Karakorum to show their submission. All resistance was ruthlessly eliminated. Cities that submitted in time were normally spared. Kirakos Ganjakec‘i also narrates that destroyed cities were rebuilt after their destruction (Kirakos Ganjakec‘i 1961: 261). And he reports on Armenian merchants who were strongly supported by the Khan or Mongol governors (Kirakos Ganjakec‘i 1961: 363). With this and the efficient post system in mind, it becomes clear that the Mongols were both destroyers and new builders. This even holds true for Tamerlane.

Religious Expansion as a Unity of Opposites (Coincidentia oppositorum)

The Silk Road, as is well known, was a kind of “transshipment point” of religions: Nestorian and other Christians, Buddhists, Manicheans, Jews, and Muslims spread their beliefs on their way to the interior of Asia and back. Many principalities and kingdoms became Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or Jewish. This reveals an interesting contradiction and a certain “unity of opposites”¹²: an important intention of prominent religious figures like Jesus or Siddhartha Gautama was to reform their own religious tradition in a comprehensible and reasonable way. Their message and preaching were directed primarily to their own people and religious community with the intention of breaking up encrusted structures. Although they found resonance and formed groups of followers in Jewish and Brahmin society, their reform movements did not manage to convince the whole base of their societies within their homeland. But eventually, becoming over the course of time large communities or churches, they continued to expand and crossed the national borders—using the great trade routes. In this way, the Nestorian or Persian Church spread from Mesopotamia to China. Likewise, Buddhism spread from India to the North.

¹¹ Translation: see R. Bedrosian,

URN: <http://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg12.htm#60> [accessed September 15, 2021].

¹² The “unity of opposites” as the central category of dialectics became as “Coincidentia Oppositorum” the main element in the philosophical thinking of the medieval philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus).

A good example of the success of this missionary activity is the religious discussion at the court of Möngke Khan transmitted by William of Rubruk (2012: 176–185). But these beliefs did not spread only among the common people. It was much more effective to convince the kings themselves, even if the principles of the new religion seem not to correspond to the ruthless power interests of the Mongol and Turkic tribes.

Maybe the most bizarre incident was the conversion of the Uyghur ruler Bögü Khan to Manichaeism in the eighth century. This strictly dualistic belief was forbidden and damned almost everywhere. Werner Sundermann asks in his article “Der Manichäismus an der Seidenstraße” what the reason was for Bögü Khan to convert to a religion telling its believers that military service, hunting, taxes, slaughter, and even killing insects would be a sin (Sundermann 2001: 160). Other decisions seem more comprehensible. In addition to religious reasons, such as the charisma of the apostles, the impression of power given by their speech, and their practices and spiritual purity, there were political reasons that led Romans to convert to Christianity, Chinese to Buddhism, Arabs to Islam (as a specific mixture of Christianity and Judaism), and Khazars to Judaism.

In the case of Bögü Khan, there are some possible answers: First, he needed a religion with few nationally determined elements, one that was acceptable to different ethnic groups and traditions and had simple and clear moral demands compatible with different cults. The new religion in this way should help connect and consolidate a multiethnic and multitrade state. Second, a new cult should also help give new rulers or dynasties the authority they were looking for. In the case of Bögü Khan, Sundermann makes the laconic remark that Manichaeism—already known to the Uyghur people and with followers along the Silk Road—was the only one of the renowned, great intertribal belief systems that remained available to distinguish Bögü Khan’s realm from other powers (Sundermann 2001: 161). An essential point to add is that missionaries tried to make their beliefs comprehensible in other cultural contexts, thus making them even more compatible with each other.

The great trade routes had the most significance for the spread of different beliefs. Revolutionary thinkers arose and set out to reform the cultic systems in Brahmin and Jewish societies, and as a result, religions such as Buddhism and Christianity emerged. They expanded and took on new shapes and forms, becoming new religions and thereupon state instruments and developing new, sophisticated cultic forms and practices—often directly contrary to the original idea. That is, instead of reforming and transforming, rationalizing and humanizing their own, already existing religions, the reformers’ ideas became new, distinct religions, were dispersed in other cultural contexts, and transformed themselves to such a degree that the original was barely recognizable, as forms of religion preaching peace and acceptance became the competing ideologies of warlike rulers. In the context of the reformers’ intentions and their practical realization, this development represents a kind of unity of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*)¹³.

¹³ E.g., comparing the words in Matthew 15,24 with the development of Christianity & its forms in Europe and Asia.

The Silk Road was a very important technological condition for this development, as well as the expansion of states and empires.

Conclusion

Describing the rise and fall of the great empires along the Silk Road reveals an interesting phenomenon that invites a change of perspective. The Chinese, Persian, and Roman empires built roads and large, connected trade routes. But once a route was built, a newly emerging political power on the horizon would be forced, if it wanted to establish its rule, to occupy as long a stretch as possible of this trade route; otherwise, it would run a risk that other powers would take advantage of the route's economic and military potential. In this way, the purpose of the road changed from a mainly peaceful trade connection to a reason for rivalry and war. The invasion and occupation of as much as possible of the route was therefore not pure greed but also a necessity. The trade route thus developed its own dynamics, forcing its rulers to occupy it and keep it in operation. The ruling powers along the Silk Road can be seen as no more than changing players along a constantly inviting trade route that is the actual protagonist. In a certain sense, it seems, it is trade routes that are creating new empires, putting them under their spell.

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