

SILK ROADS AND STEPPE ROADS

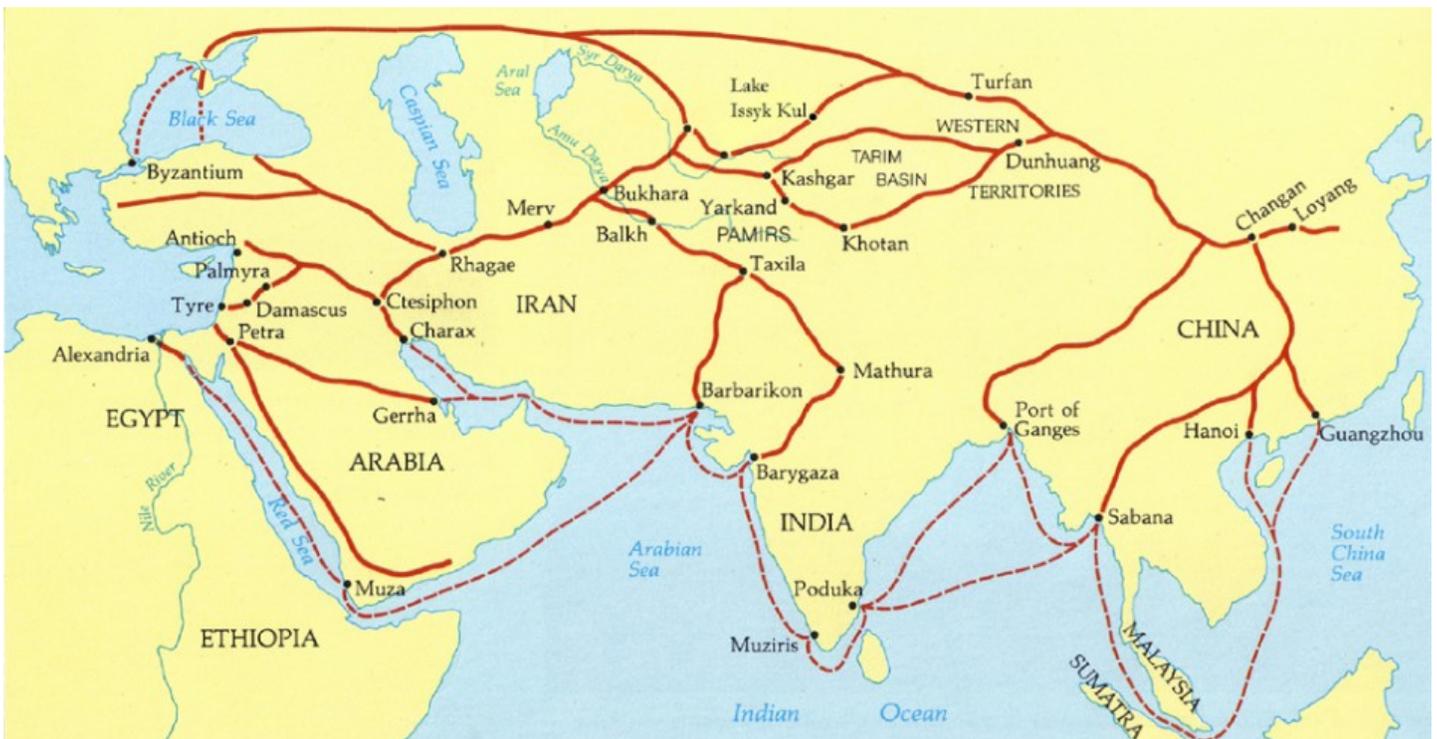
David Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History." *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1–26.

Modern historiography (study of the study of history) has not fully appreciated the ecological complexity of the Silk Roads. As a result, it has failed to understand their antiquity (ancient-ness), or to grasp their full importance in Eurasian history. The role played by the Silk Roads in exchanging goods, technologies, and ideas between regions of agrarian civilization is well understood. Less well understood is the trans-ecological role of the Silk Roads—the fact that they also exchanged goods and ideas between the pastoralist and agrarian (agricultural) worlds. The second of these systems of exchange, though less well known, predated the more familiar “transcivilizational” exchanges, and was equally integral to the functioning of the entire system. A clear awareness of this system of trans-ecological exchanges should force us to revise our understanding of the age, the significance, and the geography of the Silk Roads.

Further, an appreciation of the double role of the Silk Roads affects our understanding of the history of the entire Afro-Eurasian region. The many trans-ecological exchanges mediated by the Silk Roads linked all regions of the Afro-Eurasian landmass, from its agrarian civilizations to its many stateless communities of woodland foragers and steppe pastoralists, into a single system of exchanges that is several millennia old. As a result, despite its great diversity, the history of Afro-Eurasia has always preserved an underlying unity, which was expressed in common technologies, styles, cultures, and religions, even disease patterns...

World historians are becoming increasingly aware of the underlying unity of Afro-Eurasian history. Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills have argued that the entire Afro-Eurasian region belonged to a single “world-system” from perhaps as early as 2000 B.C.E. And William McNeill and Jerry Bentley have recently restated the case for a unified Afro-Eurasian history. But Marshall Hodgson had made the same point as early as the 1950s, when he argued that “historical life, from early times at least till two or three centuries ago, was continuous across the Afro-Eurasian zone of civilization; that zone was ultimately indivisible... The whole of the Afro-Eurasian zone is the only context large enough to provide a framework for answering the more general and more basic historical questions that can arise.”

This paper argues that the Silk Roads played a fundamental role in creating and sustaining the unity of Afro-Eurasian history. It counts as one more attempt by a historian interested in “world history” to tease out the larger historical significance of the Silk Roads.



COMPETING SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES

Daniel Waugh, "From the Editor," The Silk Road Foundation Newsletter, Department of History, University of Washington (Seattle)

***NOTE:** The term "Inner Asian" refers essentially to the Steppe region, the area that is today part of western China, Mongolia, and eastern Russia.*

When did the "Silk Road" begin? To a considerable degree, the answer depends on how we interpret the archaeological evidence about Inner Asian nomads and their relations with sedentary peoples. Long-accepted views about the Silk Road situate its origins in the interaction between the Han and the Xiongnu beginning in the second century BCE, as related in the first instance in the Han histories. As the stimulating recent book by Nicola Di Cosmo reminds us though, if we are to gain an Inner Asian perspective on the development of nomadic power we need to distinguish carefully between the picture drawn from those written sources and what the archaeological evidence reveals. Although this is not the direct concern of Di Cosmo's book, others with an Inner Asian perspective argue that we really should think of the "Silk Road" as part of a continuum of nomadic movement and interaction across Eurasia dating from much earlier times.

It is possible, of course, that an Inner Asian perspective risks reading back in time too much from what we know about the best documented and unquestionably most extensive Inner Asian empire, that of the Mongols. That is, the dramatic and rapid expansion by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, which unquestionably facilitated the movement of the products of other cultures into and across Central Eurasia, is a tempting model to explain how cowrie shells or Persian motifs find their way millennia earlier into early nomadic tombs. Indeed we might reasonably conclude from the material evidence that there was perhaps regular commerce and interaction with distant places. Thus the developments by which Chinese silk made its way to the Mediterranean world by Han and Roman times were hardly unique. In short, what we see here is a conscious effort to argue for "globalization" before the advent of the modern global economy.

Michael Frachetti's contribution to this issue suggests that in learning about the world of nomads, we might best start by thinking about local networks, not migrations over long distances. Of particular interest here is the possibility that patterns of short-distance migration from lowland winter settlements to pastures in the mountains can be documented from the archaeological record for earlier millennia. The project described by Frachetti also reminds us of how much the new interpretations of archaeological material depend on the application of modern technologies ranging from GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping to microscopic analysis of pollen. We have come a long way from the days of the pioneer of Silk Road archaeology, Aurel Stein, who has just been celebrated in an attractively produced new book by Susan Whitfield.

When we think of nomadic culture, one of the first images that comes to mind is the tent or yurt. Yurts are ephemeral, even if their design has a long history. Not surprisingly then, David Stronach relies on historically datable images of yurts to revise what we know about the earliest dates for which the yurt's existence. By asking new questions of evidence which has been known for some time, he plausibly adds nearly a millennium to the documented history of the yurt, pushing its origins back to ca. 600 BCE...

Stronach's article, in which key evidence comes from Iran, and Albert Dien's article on the Syrian caravan city of Palmyra, underscore the fact that any history of the Silk Road needs to give Western Asia equal time with Eastern and Central Asia. Given the paucity of concrete documentation about the individuals involved in the Eurasian trade, the inscriptions at Palmyra offer at least a good start for reconstructing the organization of the caravan trade which shaped the city's fate. Yet the limits of that evidence are also quite apparent. We learn about only one of what must have been many routes converging on the city. Much about the social history of the caravan leaders is conjectural. At very least we can appreciate that the Silk Road was not just a line connecting two great cities, Chang'an and Rome, but a path with multiple branches involving many intermediary centers and local networks.

It is only by discarding pre-conceptions about levels of culture which tend to privilege a few centers that we will be able to appreciate the complexity of our subject.