

THE SILK ROADS

A New History of the World

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The Creation of the Silk Road

From the beginning of time, the centre of Asia was where empires were made. The alluvial lowlands of Mesopotamia, fed by the Tigris and Euphrates, provided the basis for civilisation itself – for it was in this region that the first towns and cities took shape. Systematised agriculture developed in Mesopotamia and across the whole of the ‘Fertile Crescent’, a band of highly productive land with access to plentiful water, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean coast. It was here that some of the first recorded laws were disseminated nearly 4,000 years ago by Hammurabi, King of Babylon, who detailed his subjects’ obligations and set out fierce punishments for their transgressions.¹

Although many kingdoms and empires sprang up from this crucible, the greatest of all was that of the Persians. Expanding quickly in the sixth century BC from a homeland in what is now southern Iran, the Persians came to dominate their neighbours, reaching the shores of the Aegean, conquering Egypt and expanding eastwards as far as the Himalayas. Their success owed much to their openness, to judge from the Greek historian Herodotus. ‘The Persians are greatly inclined to adopt foreign customs,’ he wrote: the Persians were prepared to abandon their own style of dress when they concluded that the fashions of a defeated foe were superior, leading them to borrow styles from the Medes as well as from the Egyptians.²

The willingness to adopt new ideas and practices was an important factor in enabling the Persians to build an administrative system that

allowed the smooth running of an empire which incorporated many different peoples. A highly educated bureaucracy oversaw the efficient administration of the day-to-day life of the empire, recording everything from payments made to workers serving the royal household, to validating the quality and quantity of goods bought and sold in market places; they also took charge of the maintenance and repair of a road system criss-crossing the empire that was the envy of the ancient world.³

A road network that linked the coast of Asia Minor with Babylon, Susa and Persepolis enabled a distance of more than 1,600 miles to be covered in the course of a week, an achievement viewed with wonder by Herodotus, who noted that neither snow, rain, heat nor darkness could slow the speedy transmission of messages.⁴ Investment in agriculture and the development of pioneering irrigation techniques to improve crop yields helped nurture the growth of cities by enabling increasingly large populations to be supported from surrounding fields – not only in the rich agricultural lands to either side of the Tigris and Euphrates, but also in valleys served by the mighty Oxus and Iaxartes rivers (now known as the Amy Darya and Syr Darya), as well as in the Nile delta after its capture by Persian armies in 525 BC. The Persian Empire was a land of plenty that connected the Mediterranean with the heart of Asia.

Persia presented itself as a beacon of stability and fairness, as a trilingual inscription hewn into a cliff face at Behistun demonstrates. Written in Persian, Elamite and Akkadian, it records how Darius the Great, one of Persia's most famous rulers, put down revolts and uprisings, drove back invasions from abroad and wronged neither the poor nor the powerful. Keep the country secure, the inscription commands, and look after the people righteously, for justice is the bedrock of the kingdom.⁵ Tolerance of minorities was legendary, with one Persian ruler referred to as the 'Messiah', and the one whom the 'Lord, the God of Heaven' had blessed, as the result of his policies that included the release of the Jews from their Babylonian exile.⁶

Trade flourished in ancient Persia, providing revenues that allowed rulers to fund military expeditions targeting locations that brought yet more resources into the empire. It also enabled them to indulge notoriously extravagant tastes. Spectacular buildings were erected in the huge cities of Babylon, Persepolis, Pasargadae and Susa, where King Darius built a magnificent palace using the highest-quality

ebony and silver from Egypt and cedar from Lebanon, fine gold from Bactria, lapis and cinnabar from Sogdiana, turquoise from Khwarezm and ivory from India.⁷ The Persians were famous for their love of pleasure and, according to Herodotus, only had to hear of a new luxury to yearn to indulge it.⁸

Underpinning the commercial commonwealth was an aggressive military that helped extend the frontiers, but was also needed to defend them. Persia faced persistent problems from the north, a world dominated by nomads who lived with their livestock on semi-arid grassland belts, known as steppes, stretching from the Black Sea across Central Asia as far as Mongolia. These nomads were famed for their ferocity – they were said to drink the blood of their enemies and make clothes of their scalps, and in some cases to eat the flesh of their own fathers. Interaction with the nomads was complex though, for despite stock descriptions of them as chaotic and unpredictable, they were important partners in the supply of animals, and especially fine horses. But the nomads could be the cause of disaster, such as when Cyrus the Great, the architect of the Persian Empire in the 6th century BC, was killed trying to subjugate the Scythians; his head was then carried around in a skin filled with blood, said one writer, so that the thirst for power that had inspired him could now be quenched.⁹

Nevertheless, this was a rare setback that did not stall Persia's expansion. Greek commanders looked east with a combination of fear and respect, seeking to learn from the Persians' tactics on the battlefield and to adopt their technology. Authors like Aeschylus used successes against the Persians as a way of celebrating military prowess and of demonstrating the favour of the gods, commemorating heroic resistance to the attempted invasions of Greece in epic plays and literature.¹⁰

'I have come to Greece,' says Dionysus in the opening lines of the *Bacchae*, from the 'fabulously wealthy East', a place where Persia's plains are bathed in sunshine, where Bactria's towns are protected by walls, and where beautifully constructed towers look out over coastal regions. Asia and the East were the lands that Dionysus 'set dancing' with the divine mysteries long before those of the Greeks.¹¹

None was a keener student of such works than Alexander of Macedon. When he took the throne in 336 BC following the assassination of his

science of astronomy originated with them and for this they must be revered like gods'.²⁹

According to Plutarch, Alexander made sure that Greek theology was taught as far away as India, with the result that the gods of Olympus were revered across Asia. Young men in Persia and beyond were brought up reading Homer and 'chanting the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides', while the Greek language was studied in the Indus valley.³⁰ This may be why it is possible that borrowings can be detected across great works of literature. It has been suggested, for instance, that the *Rāmāyana*, the Sanskrit epic poem, owes a debt to the *Iliad* and to the *Odyssey*, with the theme of the abduction of Lady Sita by Rāvaṇa a direct echo of the elopement of Helen with Paris of Troy. Influences and inspiration flowed in the other direction too, with some scholars arguing that the *Aeneid* was in turn influenced by Indian texts such as the *Mahābhārata*.³¹ Ideas, themes and stories coursed through the highways, spread by travellers, merchants and pilgrims: Alexander's conquests paved the way for the broadening of the minds of the populations of the lands he captured, as well as those on the periphery and beyond who came into contact with new ideas, new images and new concepts.

Even cultures on the wild steppes were influenced, as is clear from the exquisite funerary objects buried alongside high-ranking figures found in the Tilya Tepe graves in northern Afghanistan which show artistic influences being drawn from Greece – as well as from Siberia, India and beyond. Luxury objects were traded into the nomad world, in return for livestock and horses, and on occasion as tribute paid in return for peace.³²

The linking up of the steppes into an interlocking and interconnecting world was accelerated by the growing ambitions of China. Under the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), waves of expansion had pushed frontiers ever further, eventually reaching a province then called Xiyu (or 'western regions'), but today known as Xinjiang ('new frontierland'). This lay beyond the Gansu corridor, a route 600 miles long linking the Chinese interior with the oasis city of Dunhuang, a crossroads on the edge of the Taklamakan desert. At this point, there was a choice of a northern or a southern route, both of which could be treacherous, which converged at Kashgar, itself set at the junction point of the Himalayas, the Pamir mountains, the Tien Shan range and the Hindu Kush.³³

This expansion of China's horizons linked Asia together. These networks had hitherto been blocked by the Yuezhi and above all the Xiongnu, nomadic tribes who like the Scythians in Central Asia were a source of constant concern but were also important trading partners for livestock: Han authors wrote in the second century BC of tens of thousands of head of cattle being bought from the peoples of the steppes.³⁴ But it was Chinese demand for horses that was all but insatiable, fuelled by the need to keep an effective military force on standby to maintain internal order within China, and to be able to respond to attacks and raids by the Xiongnu or other tribes. Horses from the western region of Xinjiang were highly prized, and could make fortunes for tribal chieftains. On one occasion, a Yuezhi leader traded horses for a large consignment of goods that he then sold on to others, making ten times his investment.³⁵

The most famous and valuable mounts were bred in the Fergana valley to the far side of the spectacular Pamir mountain range that straddles what is now eastern Tajikistan and north-eastern Afghanistan. Much admired for their strength, they are described by Chinese writers as being sired by dragons and are referred to as *hanxue ma* or 'sweating blood' – the result of their distinctive red perspiration that was caused either by a local parasite or by the horses' having unusually thin skin and therefore being prone to blood vessels bursting during exertion. Some particularly fine specimens became celebrities in their own right, the subject of poems, sculpture and pictures, frequently referred to as *tianma* – heavenly or celestial horses.³⁶ Some were even taken with their owner to the next life: one emperor was buried alongside eighty of his favoured steeds – their burial place guarded by statues of two stallions and a terracotta warrior.³⁷

Relations with the Xiongnu, who held sway across the steppes of Mongolia and across the grasslands to China's north, were not always easy. Contemporary historians wrote of the tribe as barbaric, willing to eat raw meat and drink blood; truly, said one writer, they are a people who 'have been abandoned by heaven'.³⁸ The Chinese proved willing to pay tribute rather than risk attacks on their cities. Envoys were regularly dispatched to visit the nomads (who were trained from infancy to hunt rats and birds and then foxes and hares), where the Emperor would politely ask after the health of the supreme leader.³⁹ A formal system of tribute developed whereby the nomads

were given luxury gifts including rice, wine and textiles in return for peace. The most important item that was given was silk, a fabric that was treasured by the nomads for its texture and its lightness as a lining for bedding and clothing. It was also a symbol of political and social power: being swathed in voluminous quantities of precious silk was an important way that the *chanyu* (the tribes' supreme leader) emphasised his own status and rewarded those around him.⁴⁰

The sums paid in return for peace were substantial. In 1 BC, for example, the Xiongnu were given 30,000 rolls of silk and a similar amount of raw material, as well as 370 items of clothing.⁴¹ Some officials liked to believe that the tribe's love of luxury would prove its undoing. 'Now [you have] this fondness for Chinese things,' one envoy brashly told a tribal leader. Xiongnu customs were changing, he said. China, he predicted confidently, 'will in the end succeed in winning over the whole Xiongnu nation'.⁴²

This was wishful thinking. In fact, the diplomacy that maintained peace and good relations took a toll both financially and politically: paying tribute was expensive and a sign of political weakness. So in due course the Han rulers of China resolved to deal with the Xiongnu once and for all. First, a concerted effort was made to take control of the agriculturally rich western regions of Xiyu; the nomads were driven back as the Chinese took control of the Gansu corridor in a decade-long series of campaigns that ended in 119 BC. To the west lay the Pamir mountains and, beyond them, a new world. China had opened a door leading on to a trans-continental network; it was the moment of the birth of the Silk Roads.

The expansion of China saw a surge of interest in what lay beyond. Officials were commissioned to investigate and write reports about the regions beyond the mountains. One such account survives as the *Shi Ji* (Historical Records), written by Sima Qian, son of the imperial court's Grand Historian (*Taishi*), who continued to work on this account even after he had been disgraced and castrated for daring to defend an impetuous young general who had led troops to defeat.⁴³ He carefully set out what he had been able to discover about the histories, economies and armies of the peoples in the Indus valley, Persia and Central Asia. The kingdoms of Central Asia were weak, he noted, because of pressure from nomads displaced by Chinese forces who had turned their attention elsewhere. The inhabitants of these kingdoms were 'poor in the use of arms', he wrote, 'but clever

at commerce', with flourishing markets in the capital Bactra, 'where all sorts of goods are bought and sold'.⁴⁴

Trade between China and the world beyond developed slowly. Negotiating the routes along the edge of the Gobi desert was not easy, especially beyond the Jade Gate, the frontier post past which caravans of traders travelled on their way west. Passing from one oasis to another across treacherous terrain was difficult whether their route took them through the Taklamakan desert or through the passes of the Tian Shan mountains or through the Pamirs. Extremes of temperature had to be negotiated – one reason why the Bactrian camel was so valued. Hardy enough to brave the harsh conditions of the desert, these animals have advance knowledge of deadly sandstorms, one writer observed, and 'immediately stand snarling together' – a sign for the traders and caravan leaders to 'cover their noses and mouths by wrapping them in felt'. The camel was clearly a fallible weathervane, however; sources talk of passing large numbers of dead animals and skeletons along the routes.⁴⁵ In such tough circumstances, rewards had to be high for the risks to be worth taking. Although bamboo and cloth made in Sichuan could be found for sale thousands of miles away in the markets of Bactria, it was primarily rare and high-value goods that were transported over long distances.⁴⁶

Chief among these was the trade in silk. Silk performed a number of important roles in the ancient world apart from its value to nomadic tribes. Under the Han dynasty, silk was used alongside coins and grain to pay troops. It was in some ways the most reliable currency: producing money in sufficient quantities was a problem, as was the fact that not all of China was fully monetised; this presented a particular difficulty when it came to military pay since theatres of action were often in remote regions, where coins were all but useless. Grain, meanwhile, went rotten after a time. As a result, bolts of raw silk were used regularly as currency, either as pay or, as in the case of one Buddhist monastery in Central Asia, as a fine for monks who broke the foundation's rules.⁴⁷ Silk became an international currency as well as a luxury product.

The Chinese also regulated trade by creating a formal framework for controlling merchants who came from outside territories. A remarkable collection of 35,000 texts from the garrison town of Xuanquan, not far from Dunhuang, paints a vivid picture of the everyday goings-on in a town set at the neck of the Gansu corridor.

From these texts, written on bamboo and wooden tablets, we learn that visitors passing into China had to stick to designated routes, were issued with written passes and were regularly counted by officials to ensure that all who entered the country also eventually made their way home. Like a modern hotel guest folio, records were kept for each visitor, noting how much they spent on food, what their place of origin was, their title and in which direction they were headed.⁴⁸

These measures are to be understood not as a form of suspicious surveillance, but rather as a means of being able to note accurately who was entering and leaving China, as well as what they were doing there, and above all to record the value of the goods that were bought and sold for customs purposes. The sophistication of the techniques and their early implementation reveal how the imperial courts at the capital in Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and from the first century AD at Luoyang dealt with a world that seemed to be shrinking before their eyes.⁴⁹ We think of globalisation as a uniquely modern phenomenon; yet 2,000 years ago too, it was a fact of life, one that presented opportunities, created problems and prompted technological advance.

As it happened, developments many thousands of miles away served to stimulate demand for luxury items – and the ability to pay for them. In Persia, the descendants of Seleucus were deposed around 247 BC by one Arsaces, a man whose background is obscure. His descendants, known as the Arsacids, consolidated their hold on power and then set about extending it, skilfully expropriating history to fuse Greek and Persian ideas into an increasingly coherent and robust new identity. The result was a time of stability and prosperity.⁵⁰

But it was what was happening in the Mediterranean that provided the greatest stimulus of all. A small town in an unpromising location halfway up the west coast of Italy had slowly managed to turn itself from a provincial backwater into a regional power. Taking over one coastal city-state after another, Rome came to dominate the western Mediterranean. By the middle of the first century BC, its ambitions were expanding dramatically. And attention was focused firmly on the east.

Rome had evolved into an intensely competitive state, one that glorified the military and acclaimed violence and killing. Gladiatorial games were the bedrock of public entertainment, a place where mastery over foreign peoples and over nature was brutally celebrated.

to Judaea to conduct a census, once again so as to ensure that taxes could be calculated accurately. Assuming the same model was used as had been employed in Egypt, which required all births and deaths to be recorded as well as the names of all adult males, the arrival in the world of Jesus Christ would have been registered by an official whose interest lay less in who the infant and his parents were, and more in what the birth represented by way of additional manpower and a future taxpayer for the empire.⁶³

Rome's eyes were opened by the world it encountered in the east. Asia had already acquired a reputation for lazy luxury and fine living. It was indescribably wealthy, wrote Cicero, its harvests the stuff of legend, the variety of its produce incredible, and the size of its herds and flocks simply amazing. Its exports were colossal.⁶⁴ Such was Asia's wealth that Romans opined that its inhabitants could afford to dedicate themselves to idle pleasure. Little wonder that it was in the east that Roman soldiers came of age, wrote the poet Sallust: this was where Roman soldiers learnt how to make love, to be drunk, to enjoy statues, pictures and art. This was hardly a good thing, at least as far as Sallust was concerned. Asia may have been 'voluptuous and indulging', but 'its pleasures soon softened the warlike spirits of the soldiers'.⁶⁵ Presented in this way, the east was the antithesis of everything that stern, martial Rome stood for.

Augustus himself made a concerted effort to understand what lay beyond the new frontiers in the east. Expeditionary forces were dispatched to the kingdom of Axum in modern Ethiopia and to the Sabbaean kingdom of Yemen, while the Gulf of Aqaba was being explored even as Roman rule in Egypt was still being cemented.⁶⁶ Then, in 1 BC, Augustus ordered a detailed survey to be conducted of both sides of the Persian Gulf to report on trade in this region and to record how the sea lanes linked with the Red Sea. He also oversaw the investigation of the land routes heading deep into Central Asia through Persia. A text known as the *Stathmoi Parthikoi* ('Parthian Stations') was produced around this time; it recorded distances between key points in the east, and carefully set out the most important locations from the Euphrates up to Alexandropolis, modern Kandahar in Afghanistan, in the east.⁶⁷

The horizons of traders expanded substantially. According to the historian Strabo, within a few years of the occupation of Egypt, 120 Roman boats were sailing for India each year from the port of Myos

Hormos on the Red Sea. Commercial exchange with India did not open up so much as explode – as is clear from an extraordinarily rich archaeological record from the subcontinent. Roman amphorae, lamps, mirrors and statues of gods have been recovered from a wide range of sites, including Pattanam, Kolhapur and Coimbatore.⁶⁸ So abundant are the coin finds dating to the reign of Augustus and his successors from the west coast of India and the Laccadive islands that some historians have argued that local rulers in the east used Roman gold and silver coins for their own currency, or melted these metals down to reuse them.⁶⁹

Tamil literature from the period tells a similar story, recording the arrival of Roman traders with excitement. One poem talks of ‘cool and fragrant wine’ being brought in ‘good ships’ by the Romans, while another is rhapsodic: ‘The beautiful large ships . . . come, bringing gold, splashing the white foam on the waters of the Periyar [river], and then return laden with pepper. Here the music of the surging sea never ceases, and the great king presents to visitors the rare products of sea and mountain.’⁷⁰ Another source provides a lyrical account of the European traders who settled in India: ‘The sun shone over the open terraces, over the warehouses near the harbour and over the turrets with windows like eyes of deer. In different places . . . the onlooker’s attention was caught by the sight of the abodes of [the westerners], whose prosperity never waned.’⁷¹ The *Stathmoi Parthikoi* reveals what goods the Romans wanted from western India, noting where merchants could acquire valuable minerals, such as tin, copper and lead, as well as topaz, and where ivory, precious gemstones and spices were readily available.⁷²

Trade with ports in India was not, however, limited to products that originated in the subcontinent. As excavations at the Red Sea port of Berenike in Egypt have shown, an array of goods from as far afield as Vietnam and Java found their way towards the Mediterranean.⁷³ Ports on both the western and eastern coasts of India served as emporia for goods brought from all over eastern and south-eastern Asia ready to be shipped west.⁷⁴ Then there were the goods and produce of the Red Sea, a vibrant commercial zone in its own right as well as linking the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean and beyond.⁷⁵

Rome’s well-heeled citizens were by now able to indulge the most exotic and extravagant of tastes. Well-connected commentators complained that spending bordered on the obscene and bemoaned

the voguish displays of excess.⁷⁶ This is captured perfectly in Petronius' *Satyricon*, whose most famous scene is the dinner party of Trimalchio, a former slave who had gained his freedom and amassed a fortune. The satire is acidic in its portrayal of the tastes of the new super-rich. Trimalchio wanted only the best that money could buy: pheasant brought in specially from the eastern coast of the Black Sea; guinea fowl from Africa; rare and expensive fish; plumed peacock, and much more besides, presented in excess. The grotesque theatre of presenting dish after dish – live birds sewn inside a whole pig that flew out the moment the ham was carved, or silver toothpicks being given to the guests – was a remorseless parody of the vulgarity and excess of Rome's new wealth. One of the major booms of antiquity produced one of the great literary expressions of bitter jealousy towards the nouveaux riches.⁷⁷

New wealth brought Rome and its inhabitants into contact with new worlds and new tastes. The poet Martial typifies the internationalism and expanded knowledge of this period in a poem mourning a young slave girl, comparing her to an untouched lily, to polished Indian ivory, to a Red Sea pearl, with hair finer than Spanish wool or blonde locks from the Rhine.⁷⁸ Where couples wanting to conceive beautiful children would previously have had sex surrounded by erotic images, 'now', reported one horrified Jewish writer, 'they bring Israelite slaves and tie them to the foot of the bed' for inspiration, and because they could afford to.⁷⁹ Not all were impressed by the new tastes: the Tiber had been overwhelmed by the waters of the Orontes, the river that flows through Syria and southern Turkey, complained Juvenal in his *Satires* later – in other words, Asian decadence had destroyed old-fashioned Roman virtues; 'clear off', he wrote, 'if you take a shine to a fancy prostitute wearing barbarian headgear'.⁸⁰

For some conservative observers, it was the appearance of one commodity in particular that appalled: Chinese silk.⁸¹ The increasing volume of this fabric available in the Mediterranean caused consternation among traditionalists. Seneca for one was horrified by the popularity of the thin flowing material, declaring that silk garments could barely be called clothing given they hid neither the curves nor the decency of the ladies of Rome. The very foundation of marital relations was being undermined, he said, as men found they could see

riches – the sons of coppersmiths, bath attendants, sausage-makers and the like.¹¹⁸

Constantinople was to become the largest and most important city in the Mediterranean, far eclipsing its peers in size, influence and importance. Although many modern scholars strongly repudiate the idea that Constantine intended the city to be a new imperial capital, the lavish resources spent on its construction tell their own story.¹¹⁹ Constantinople was situated in a commanding position for other sensitive routes, not least maritime traffic in and out of the Black Sea, and also as a listening point for developments to the east and also the north – in the Balkans and towards the plains of Pannonia, where trouble was brewing.

For the vast majority of the population in antiquity, horizons were decidedly local – with trade and interaction between people being carried out over short distances. Nevertheless, the webs of communities wove into each other to create a world that was complex, where tastes and ideas were shaped by products, artistic principles and influences thousands of miles apart.

Two millennia ago, silks made by hand in China were being worn by the rich and powerful in Carthage and other cities in the Mediterranean, while pottery manufactured in southern France could be found in England and in the Persian Gulf. Spices and condiments grown in India were being used in the kitchens of Xinjiang, as they were in those of Rome. Buildings in northern Afghanistan carried inscriptions in Greek, while horses from Central Asia were being ridden proudly thousands of miles away to the east.

We can imagine the life of a gold coin two millennia ago, struck perhaps in a provincial mint and used by a young soldier as part of his pay to buy goods on the northern frontier in England and finding its way back to Rome in the coffers of an imperial official sent to collect taxes, before passing into the hands of a trader heading east, and then being used to pay for produce bought from traders who had come to sell their provisions at Barygaza. There it was admired and presented to leaders in the Hindu Kush, who marvelled at its design, shape and size and then gave it over to be copied by an engraver – himself perhaps from Rome, perhaps from Persia, or from India or China, or perhaps even someone local who had been taught the skills of striking. This was a world that was connected, complex and hungry for exchange.

It is easy to mould the past into a shape that we find convenient and accessible. But the ancient world was much more sophisticated and interlinked than we sometimes like to think. Seeing Rome as the progenitor of western Europe overlooks the fact that it consistently looked to and in many ways was shaped by influences from the east. The world of antiquity was very much a precursor of the world as we see it today – vibrant, competitive, efficient and energetic. A belt of towns formed a chain spanning Asia. The west had begun to look east, and the east had begun to look west. Together with increasing traffic connecting India with the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, the ancient Silk Roads of antiquity were coursing with life.

Rome's eyes had been fixed on Asia from the moment it transformed itself from a republic into an empire. And so too, it turned out, had its soul. For Constantine – and the Roman Empire – had found God; and the new faith was from the east too. Surprisingly, it came not from Persia or from India, but from an unpromising province where three centuries earlier Pontius Pilate had found infamy as governor. Christianity was about to fan out in all directions.