

The Silk Road

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"The Bridge between Eastern and Western cultures"

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In This Issue

- Bronze Age Steppe Archaeology
- The Antiquity of the Yurt
- The Burial Rite in Sogdiana
- The Caravan City of Palmyra
- The Tea and Horse Road in China
- Klavdiia Antipina, Ethnographer of the Kyrgyz
- Mongolia Today
- The Khotan Symposium in London

Next Issue

- Stride, Padwa and Kansa on the GIS Atlas of Ancient Bactria
- Dr. Alexander Leskov on the Maikop Treasure
- Reviews of new books on the Silk Road

And more....

About

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From the Editor

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.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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.⁴

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. Guitty Azarpay's reinterpret-

tation of a well-known mural from Panjikent nicely complements Stronach's article by reinforcing for us the importance of examining images for the information they may contain about the interaction between nomadic and sedentary cultures. Azarpay and Stronach exercise admirable caution in drawing conclusions about cultural exchange involving the nomads. Would that anthropologist Jack Weatherford, who advances ahistorical generalizations about the impact of the Mongols on world history in his recently published self-indulgent popularization, had shown even a fraction of their good judgment.⁵

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 preconceptions about levels of culture which tend to privilege a few centers that we will be able to appreciate the complexity of our subject. The importance of a very different set of regional networks is clear from Yang Fuquan's article on the "Tea and Horse Road" in southwest China and Tibet, the story of which is absent from histories of the Silk Road. Spectacular archaeological discoveries in Sichuan in recent years have forced scholars to reassess the "remoteness" and "backwardness"

of the region that embraces the upper Yangtze valley.⁶ As in the case of so many other regions, the routes of trade and cultural exchange which Yang can document from written evidence only at some late stage in their existence in fact have a much longer history. Mountainous terrain and swiftly flowing rivers did not necessarily isolate people. As students of the Silk Road and its many feeder routes, we should be as interested in their recent history as in the question of when they began, if for no other reason than to gain some appreciation for what travel along those routes may have been like in an earlier era. A case in point is the Tea and Horse Road, which arguably experienced in World War II the peak period of its traffic thanks to the exigencies of the war.

The tragic events of the twentieth century have, of course, affected directly the lives of scholars who work on the areas of Inner Asia that interest us, as the history of Klavdiia Antipina, movingly recounted by John Sommer, attests. This is certainly not the first instance where exile created the circumstances in which a scholar could contribute substantially to knowledge of a region and culture that she otherwise would likely never have studied. Yet the constraints imposed by Soviet system seriously limited the degree to which most scholars could interact with their foreign colleagues or even become acquainted with their work. While scholarship today is still not free from constraints imposed by politics, at least the mechanisms for communication across international boundaries now make possible the kind of cutting-edge scholarly exchange such as the Khotan Symposium in London on which Richard Salomon reports for this issue.

Whether the twenty-first century will be as kind to the countries of the Silk Road as to scholarship on its ancient history is quite another matter. One cannot but be alarmed by Morris Rossabi's report about the current situation in Mongolia, observations informed by the kind of deep understanding of that country's

history and culture which is so lacking in those who guide both domestic and international politics. Alas, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the prognosis for any number of countries along the historic Silk Road is far from sanguine.

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Notes

1. Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
2. A good summary of such arguments is in David Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads: The Silk Roads in World History," *Journal of World History*, 11/1 (2000): 1-26.
3. Another project illuminating early Inner Asian nomadic culture and using GIS technology is "Altay: Joint Mongolian/American/Russian Project" (<http://www.uoregon.edu/~altay>), which is carefully mapping petroglyphs, ritual sites and other surface evidence over a very large territory on the Altai Mountains.
4. Susan Whitfield, *Aurel Stein on the Silk Road* (Chicago: Serindia, 2004).
5. Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown, 2004).
6. I have in mind the material exhibited in *Ancient Sichuan: Treasures from a Lost Civilization*, ed. Robert Bagley (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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Special thanks to Ruth and Frank Harold for providing their excellent photographs of Palmyra. Other photos of theirs from travels along the Silk Road may be viewed at <http://www.depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/cities/cities.html>.