

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert N. Spengler III. *Fruit from the Sands: The Silk Road Origins of the Food We Eat*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

As the range of scientific methods available to scholars grows and their methods become more sophisticated and sensitive, artifacts obtained from archaeological contexts that were once ignored or discarded can now be analyzed to provide information about the movement of peoples and the spread of plants. The analysis of the latter—seeds left in rubbish pits, grains found at the bottom of cooking pots and more—is a growing field known as “archaeobotany.” This field is both supporting and challenging our theories of the past, most especially in our understanding of the domestication of grains and other foods and their spread across human cultures. In this book, Robert Spengler summarizes much of this research for the Asian continent.

The book is aimed at a general audience, primarily North American with its periodic appeals to U.S. recipes and culture today. Its aim is to show how many of the foods that are part of our everyday diet can be traced back to the cultivation, domestication, and movement of plants—including grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruit—across Asia from prehistorical times. Much of this spread, the author argues, was the result of human agency, and the routes they travelled were those that were later absorbed under the “Silk Road” moniker—hence the justification for the book’s subtitle: *The Silk Road Origins of the Food We Eat*.

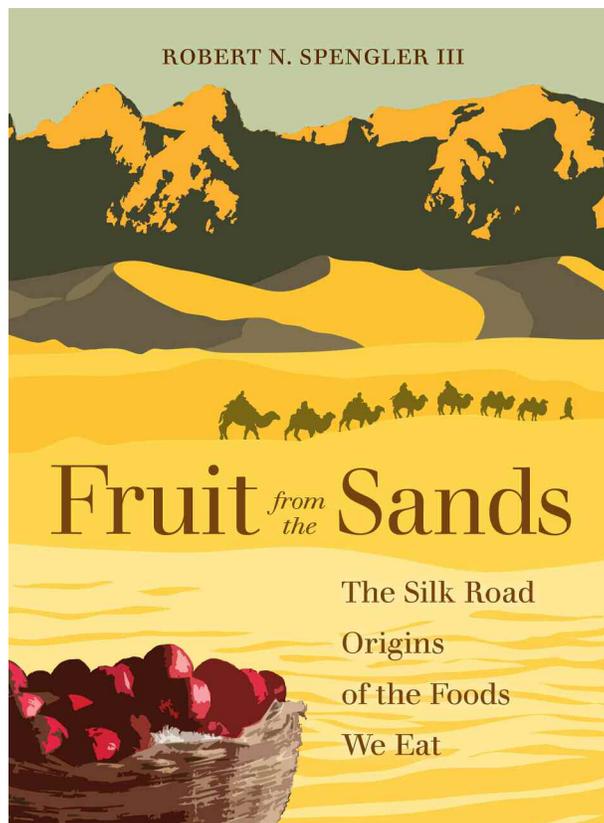
The author discusses the “Silk Road” concept in his introduction and early chapters, giving the oft-repeated narrative that the Silk Road started with

Chinese expansion in the Han dynasty. But he points out the limits of this narrative, in that there had been transmissions across Central Asia long before this, dating back to the third millennia BC. He defines his use of the Silk Road to include the earlier period. The discussion is expanded in Chapter 3 when he notes Russian scholarship on pastoralists and their seasonal routes through the mountains long pre-dating the Silk Road, Richthofen’s original coining of the term, and more recent discussions.

I think very few scholars today would deny the existence of routes of trade and transmission across Afro-Eurasia from prehistorical times, as the author sometimes seems to be suggesting. The Silk Road term is used to describe a period when there was a quantitative change in these interactions, most especially across Central Asia, a point the author concedes when he observes that such interactions were “marked by increased mobility and interconnectivity” (46). But this was prompted not only by the Chinese Han dynasty dispatching envoys and then establishing military posts along the main route westward out of China and to the peace between the

Romans and Parthian empires in West Asia and Europe, but also to the uniting of much of Central Asia under one political regime, the Kushan empire (1st to 3rd centuries).

The role of the Kushan is not much discussed and, in a type of inconsistency all too frequent in this book, the author gives the dates of the Kushan both as AD 78–144 (42) and second century BC to third century AD (191). Occasional such discrepancies are to be expected in any book covering such a wide chronological and geographical range and



would not usually be noted, but this book is full of them. Even the dates given in the text do not always match the timelines given at the start: for example, the Shang dynasty appears in the timeline as ca. 1600–1046 BC, but elsewhere as ca. 1538–1046 BC (146) and ca. 1558–1046 BC (211, where it is incorrectly named—and indexed as—“Sang dynasty”). The reference on page 238 gives no dates.

There are now many discussions of Richthofen and the Silk Road concept, including its “prehistory,” and some of these could have usefully been referenced in footnotes. But the book does not have footnotes as such, only citations, and these overwhelmingly give only one source and no page reference. This means that the reader is left stranded if they want to check the information or find out more. It also deprives the author of the opportunity to follow up on ideas which would otherwise distract from his narrative.

The first two chapters following the introduction consist largely of lists, many of them taken from travelers’ accounts of the great variety of foodstuffs to be found across Asia but also, for example, including a list of twenty different shapes of pasta (36). The point of these chapters is not quite clear. There is some historical narrative, although it is patchy and at times unreliable or misleading (such as the claim about sericulture, mentioned below) as it generally relies on only a handful of secondary sources. Again, the reader could have been directed to existing and more reliable histories and the contemporary accounts incorporated into the text later where the foodstuffs they mentioned are discussed in more detail.

What would have been more helpful for the general reader is a chapter introducing archaeobotany, its background, growth, and methodology, with a discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of the procedures currently available, and of the other evidence used by the author. This could have usefully introduced the reader to various concepts referred to later, such as signs which show a plant has been cultivated or domesticated. It would also have been helpful to know about the distribution of evidence, the fact that some regions/sites have been studied more extensively than others, especially in terms of archaeobotanical evidence, and how this might leave gaps or skew our current un-

derstanding of a plant’s distribution and domestication.

After these introductory chapters, the author considers various groups of plants and here he is clearly on more familiar and comfortable territory. He groups the plants under various headings for discussion, starting with various grains and legumes, then moving onto fruit, nuts, vegetables, and ending with spices, oils, and tea. His speciality comes to the fore when discussing, for example, the different grains, how they adapted to their environments and how we can tell when they were domesticated. This is fascinating material which will undoubtedly increasingly inform our understanding of the movement of peoples across Afro-Eurasia. But, as the author also hints, conclusions drawn by scholars working on this material might not always be reliable. It would have been interesting to learn more about the possible reasons for this: such as contamination of the evidence; inadequacy of the tests available; or scholars, as we have seen in many fields throughout history, seeking to make the evidence fit a preconceived theory. These are the strongest areas of the book and cover wide ground, but I was puzzled by notable omissions. For a book using “Silk Road” in its title, the lack of a small section on the domestication and spread of the mulberry (*morus* sp.) is perplexing. In China, the silkworms were fed on the leaves of the *morus alba*, but the fruit was also probably eaten: they are still found dried today in Turkey and elsewhere. And as sericulture spread along the Silk Road, the leaves of the black mulberry (*morus nigra*) were also used as feed. Remains of desiccated mulberry trees are found in early Central Asian sites (noted on page 16) although the site and dates from the report by the archaeologist, M. Aurel Stein, of his 1900 expedition are cited incorrectly by the author as 8th century Dandan-Uliq when they should be 1st to 4th century Niya (*Ancient Khotan*, 359). His use of secondary sources at times detracts from the reliability of the historical information. Mulberry fruits were greatly prized by many in Central Asia, as early European travelers noted (24–25) and as evidenced by finds (33). The Romans introduced the tree throughout Europe for its fruit and it continued to be cultivated after they had left (mulberry seeds are found in medieval midden pits in England, for example, not

noted here). To add to the story, the bark of both the *morus* sp. and that of a different genus, *broussonetia papyrifera*, were both used in papermaking, another important technology and commodity of the Silk Roads. Regrettably, the confusion between the different genus and species is not noted by the author when he quotes Marco Polo: “mulberry trees, grown to feed silkworms and produce fiber for paper” (35).

The planting of mulberries for silk is mentioned briefly (53, and the only page reference to mulberries given in the index) but this is assigned to the 8th century under the Abbasid caliphate. The author here notes, in parentheses, that “some scholars have suggested, however that there might have been earlier silk industries in Central Asia.” He cites one scholar, thus highlighting again the fragility of some of his historical research. The existence of sericulture across much of Asia—not just Central Asia—is widely accepted by most scholars before this date. And by the date he gives, the caliphate was planting mulberries to feed silkworms in southern Spain. Having historical colleagues read the manuscript at an earlier stage might have helped avoid this (or indeed, consulting more than one source).

In his discussion of tea, he concentrates almost exclusively on its cultivation in China and neighboring regions and barely mentions India. This means he assumes that the tea found in an early western Tibetan tomb came from central China, and does not raise the possibility, even to reject it, that it could have come from India (130, 264). He also fails to mention the links between tea drinking and Buddhism—to keep monks awake—and an early Chinese text on tea written by a Buddhist monk. And while his discussion reaches the demand for tea in Russia and extends to the 20th century, the curious history of the 18th century free-trade port of Kyakhta on the Mongolia-Russian border, where merchants from Sichuan traded their tea for furs from Siberia, sadly does not find a place.

In the 19th century, it was suggested that this port be used also for Europeans to obtain “superior” rhubarb from the Indian Himalaya rather than the “inferior” type from China (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3 [March 1986]: xxvii). And indeed, the almost total exclusion of rhubarb in this book is another mystery. Where mentioned it is under

the section on brassicas and not in the following section on plants whose roots and stems are used, and then only mentioned in passing as a plant grown in Central Asia and not as an important medicinal export from China to Europe. Nor does he mention the different species and their uses.

The book is rich in information and some omissions are inevitable. But not inevitable are the regrettable number of inconsistencies and errors. Apart from the dates, mentioned above, the romanization of Chinese names is inconsistent and often incorrect. In one case, a mythical archaeological site is introduced—Kualmqiao (206)—which is in fact the site of Kuahuqiao mentioned on the following page (although given with different dates) They have separate index entries. This probably arose from a mistaken reading of notes, rather than going back to check the original source (which was easily found online) and which betokens the obvious haste in which this book was put together. A quick read by anyone familiar with Chinese would have picked up all these errors immediately, just as a good copyeditor should have noted the many inconsistencies in naming and dating. The author has been badly let down by his manuscript readers and publisher. The book also perpetuates an unwitting and all too common Eurocentrism so, for example, where “Classical” is used to refer to the western definitions of classical without dates or explanation and where non-European periods are dated but not western periods. Again, something that would have been noticed by an alert reader or copyeditor.

The evidence from archaeobotany will undoubtedly play an increasingly important role in constructing a narrative for the prehistory and history of Eurasia and one which historians and archaeologists will be wise to pay attention to. This book is important for bringing this information to a wider audience. It is therefore a shame that it is often a muddled book, lacking a coherent narrative and often reading like research notes, transcribed inaccurately and not checked. It is hoped that a second edition can correct most of these infelicities, as the core of the information it contains and the author’s expertise deserve a wider readership.

- Susan Whitfield