

Introduction: From the Rise of the Silk Roads to a Eurasian Market System

The Silk Roads that carried trade goods between China and the lands of the Mediterranean for more than a millennium facilitated a multitude of cross-cultural transactions. Traders and religious pilgrims traveled these roads, spreading ideas as well as merchandise and linking peoples throughout Eurasia and many parts of Africa. Local transactions along the routes sustained communities of merchants, nomads, farmers, and monks. Commercial and cultural activities spurred political and social developments that spread across three continents. No travel corridor is more important in world history.

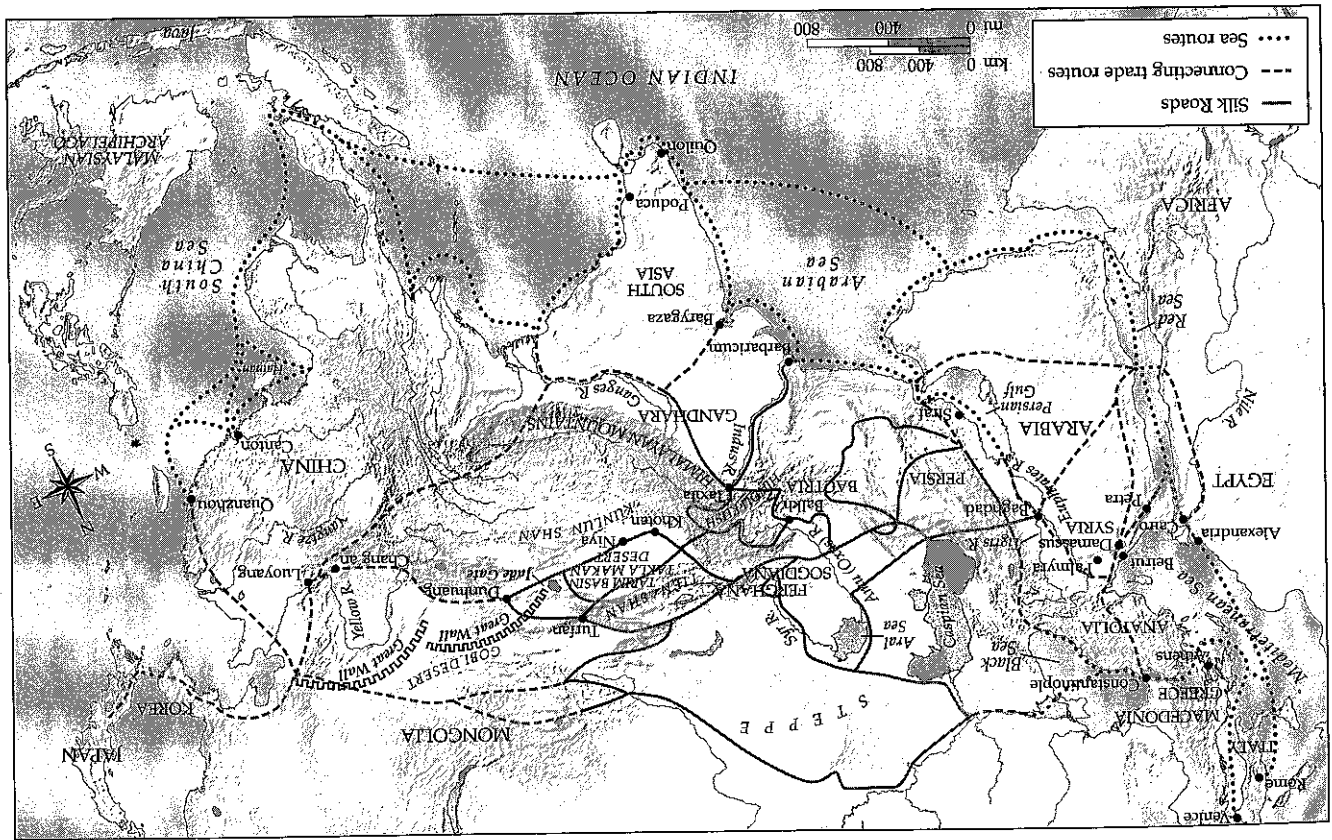
The term *Silk Road* is often used in a narrow sense, referring only to the land routes through Central Asia that first delivered Chinese silks to the West. This book adopts the broadest definition of the Silk Roads, presenting the formation and development of the vast commercial networks, including sea-lanes, that ultimately involved so much more than silk and encompassed much of the world.

From the second century BCE through the thirteenth century CE, peoples from Eurasia and Africa's great agricultural empires, nomadic tribes and federations, and desert oases and ports participated in the commercial transactions that took place along the Silk Roads. When the

Han Empire ruled China beginning in the late third century BCE, both mutually beneficial trade and imperial conflicts with the steppe nomads to the north caused great volumes of silk to flow out of China across the political and geographic divide marked by the Great Wall. By the first century CE, Chinese silk had reached the markets of the Kushan Empire in Central and South Asia, the Parthian Empire of Persia (modern Iran), and the Roman Empire based around the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, Buddhism spread beyond India's borders, following the Silk Roads to Central Asia and China. In the early third century, when the Han and Parthian Empires were collapsing and the Roman Empire was beginning to lose its vigor, Buddhist institutions were already well established in the Silk Roads' desert oases between Central Asia and China. They were thus able to sustain the critical infrastructure on the long-distance routes and to keep trade moving during this difficult time. In the seventh century, after China reunified, its Tang Empire traded with the Sassanid Empire in Persia and the Byzantine Empire in the eastern Mediterranean. Subsequently, nomadic Turks, originally from the easternmost steppe, began to play an important role in the political and commercial relationships among empires along the Silk Roads. In addition to Buddhism, missions promoting Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam traveled the Silk Roads, encouraging the exchange of ideas as well as religious practices. The golden age of the overland Silk Roads began to wane at the end of the ninth century when the Tang Empire was collapsing. Although China's economy and foreign trade continued to flourish under the Song dynasty, which rose not long after the Tang fell, most goods now traveled by sea.

Interactions among the political units and social groups along the Silk Roads were not always peaceful. Nevertheless, the travelers who went to foreign lands, either for warfare or for trade, brought with them their own languages, knowledge, technologies, religions, and customs; when they returned home with new goods and trophies, they also brought back at least some new ways of doing and thinking about things. Nomadic groups that invaded and occupied agricultural lands had to impose their own languages upon the conquered people or adopt the language of their subjects in order to collect taxes and maintain order. Soldiers on the frontiers came into contact with people from many different lands and ethnicities. Traders who arrived in foreign cities sought religious institutions affiliated with their homelands to get advice about local markets. All these travelers transformed themselves at the same time that they transformed the places in which they settled. The documents in this book help us to understand the lives and thoughts of these

Map 1. The Silk Roads and Sea Routes, 1-1300 CE



travelers, entrepreneurs, and pilgrims of past centuries and to appreciate how they spread both goods and ideas from many lands throughout Eurasia and parts of Africa.

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CHINA'S TRADE ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER, SECOND-FIRST CENTURIES BCE

China's Great Wall, a defense system built across its northern border, was essentially a stone fence that separated farmers in the agricultural zones to the south from the horseback-riding nomads to the north. When, late in the third century BCE, the founder of the Qin Empire (221–206 BCE) extended the walls of the northern states he conquered, he intended to fend off the Xiongnu nomads. The Xiongnu had a long history of hostilities with China, and their formidable force of horseback-riding archers made frequent incursions into the agricultural villages on China's northern frontier to steal grains, silk textiles, alcohol, and anything else that could not be produced on the steppe.

Silk was especially prized. As early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the Chinese exported a variety of silk products. Light, translucent silk crepe was woven with very long filaments, each one harvested by carefully unraveling the single thread that makes up an entire cocoon. Most likely, at that time only Chinese women had mastered the skill of reeling up this single filament while the cocoon was still floating in boiling water. There was also a medium-weight silk material, now known as damask, that had elaborate raised patterns woven into the fabric using only a single color of thread. To make such patterns, weavers had to repeatedly change the threading on the loom. A heavy textile, now called brocade or tapestry, was woven with a variety of different colored threads; it required even more complicated looms and highly skilled workers. These types of silk were made in workshops owned by the imperial government and were intended only for the imperial family and court officials. Chinese emperors prohibited commoners, including rich merchants, from wearing silk tapestries and embroidered silk clothes. The overwhelming majority of silk textiles made in and exported from China were not these luxurious silks, however, but relatively thin silk now referred to as plain tabby. This silk was produced by Chinese farm families, who raised mulberry trees, fed their leaves to silkworms, boiled their cocoons, and unwound the cocoons to make thread. They paid their taxes to the government in grains and bolts of

plain silk, which for about a thousand years also served as a kind of currency in China's economy.¹

During these years, the emperors of agricultural China were dependent upon steppe peoples for horses, the fastest means of overland transport before the nineteenth-century steam engine. Since Chinese farmers used all available land to raise crops, they lacked the large pastures necessary for the best varieties of horses to flourish and breed. Thus the Great Wall was actually a barrier with many gates, at which markets were established. Nomads who wanted to trade their horses for grains and silk came to these markets, as did farmers with products. As long as China's imperial government was strong, the Great Wall was an efficient system for both protecting the border and facilitating trade. Due to this silk-horse trade, China's silk rapidly became famous along its northern steppe frontier as the most beautiful and comfortable textile. Within a century of the construction of the Great Wall, silk's reputation and market had spread throughout much of Eurasia and North Africa.

The founder of the Qin Empire could not purchase horses from the Xiongnu, his fiercest adversary on the steppe. Instead, he bought horses from another nomadic people, the Yuezhi, who seasonally moved their herds and their homes in the northern foothills of the Tien Shan—the Heavenly Mountains—a Central Asian range now within China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The Yuezhi sold better horses than the Xiongnu, in part because they had better grasslands and better breeds; they were also sellers of jade, a precious stone found in the Kunlun Mountains. They sold these items to the Qin Empire for silks, which they then sold to other nomads, garnering great profits. Yuezhi horses helped the Qin in their battles against the Xiongnu, who despised this cooperation between their chief rival on the steppe and their archenemy, China.

The Qin Empire was short-lived, and the civil wars that ensued in China provided plenty of opportunities for the Xiongnu to plunder Chinese farms. After the Han dynasty established another central government, Han emperors still found it hard to defend their northern border, even with the Great Wall (Document 1). The first few Han emperors had to marry some of their royal princesses to Xiongnu chiefs and to provide large dowries of silks, grains, and alcohol to buy peace on this border. This form of exchange, though rather one-sided, continued to deliver silks from China to the steppe.

After the Han Empire had become stronger economically and militarily, the emperor Wudi (r. 140–87 BCE) took the offensive against the Xiongnu. He sent military expeditions to chase the invaders away from

the Great Wall, and he also sought allies on the steppe. Believing that the Yuezhi people who had previously traded with the Qin emperor might be allies, in 139 BCE he sent an envoy, Zhang Qian, out onto the steppe to look for them. But Zhang Qian had to pass through Xiongnu territory before reaching the Yuezhi in Bactria, a Central Asian land to which they had retreated. When in 126 BCE he finally made his way back to Chang'an, the Han capital, he was immediately recognized by officialdom as the expert on the "Western Regions." He reported everything he had learned about the nomads on the steppe, the agricultural settlements on the edges of the Takla Makan Desert, and the markets of Bactria. He even provided some information about India, which he had most likely gathered from traders in Bactria. The wonders and curiosities of the Western Regions that he described, especially the "heavenly horses," engaged the attention of the emperor, who determined to build trading networks that could bring these wonders to China (Document 2).

By this time the Xiongnu were no longer a military threat on China's northern border, but rather a rival on the trade routes linking China to the Western Regions. To secure an important part of the route along China's northwestern frontier, Wudi had the Great Wall extended westward along the Hexi Corridor, a narrow strip of land south of the Gobi Desert and north of the Qilian Mountains. The westernmost gate on the Great Wall's new extension was called Yumen,² literally the "Jade Gate," and thereafter it was through this gate that jade from the Western Regions was transported to the Chinese interior.

This new, more western frontier was effective in protecting traders traveling with their goods, but it was also very expensive to maintain. Supplying food to the soldiers who guarded the watchtowers along the Great Wall was a major challenge to the state granary and transportation systems. Wudi thus decreed that these soldiers could, with government help, produce their own food in this arid area. They were encouraged to bring their wives and children to the frontier and settle there. They were also given seeds, tools, and technological guidance for growing crops on what had previously been wasteland, a project that required building irrigation systems (Document 3). In addition to the food they produced, they received salaries paid in bolts of plain silk, which they could exchange for goods from the nomads or local farmers.

The success of these agricultural endeavors along the Great Wall encouraged the Han Empire to establish additional settlements of soldiers outside the Jade Gate in the Tarim Basin. There small farming oases were situated on the edges of the Takla Makan Desert where snowmelt from the Tien Shan and Kunlun Mountains provided water

for agriculture. Once the silk trade began, the Han Empire protected the routes that went through the desert and encouraged agricultural development through irrigation. These programs increased the productivity of the oases, encouraging more people, including nomads, to settle there. By the end of the second century CE, as the Han Empire was collapsing, there was a well-established network of trade routes that linked the oasis towns of the Tarim Basin together. By this time, traders were transporting silks from China to Sogdiana, a land of oases east of the Amu (ancient Oxus) River, as well as to locations even farther west. Moving from the west to the east, from Central Asian oases, India, Persia, and even the Roman Empire, considerable quantities of horses, cotton cloth, woolen textiles, and glassware were flowing into Chang'an, Luoyang (another Han capital), and other major cities in China.

ROME'S TRADE TO THE EAST, FIRST CENTURY BCE–SECOND CENTURY CE

By the first century CE, the Roman Empire was the westernmost market for China's silks, and its merchants and rulers had turned their attention to the east. This was not the first time a Mediterranean empire had looked eastward. In the late fourth century BCE, the military expeditions of Alexander the Great of Macedonia had gone into Central Asia and as far east as India, and his efforts to conquer these territories brought Greek-speaking populations to many eastern lands, thereby paving the way for the easterly trade of the Roman Empire. On his way east, Alexander had allied with and recruited mercenaries from many different peoples (Document 5). Asian Scythians, for example, were horseback-riding archers who defeated a troop of Macedonians in the region of the Don (Greek Tanais) River. In revenge, Alexander massacred local peoples suspected of supporting the Scythians, but the real culprits retreated out of sight, as nomads often did. In contrast, the European Scythians, who moved their herds through the grasslands around the Black Sea, offered their services and even a princess to Alexander, though the offer was turned down. Alexander set up fortified towns from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean all the way to Bactria and Sogdiana in Central Asia, and he staffed them with Greek soldiers. These soldiers, and others who were not Greek but had been recruited on the way to India, settled in these towns and became farmers, planting vineyards and wheat fields.

Residents of these Hellenistic towns were often bilingual, using Greek for commercial and official purposes, and they maintained city-states with Greek-style institutions such as temples, theaters, and gymnasiums (Document 4). After the arrival of the Yuezhi in Bactria in the latter part of the second century BCE, these Greek-speaking cities began participating in the silk trade, and Chinese silk began flowing westward toward the Mediterranean. The Greeks had heard about silk. The Greek name for China was *Seres*, a word that was apparently derived from *si*, the Chinese word for "silk."

As the Romans gained prominence in the Mediterranean, they received tribute and trade from many lands. Women from wealthy Roman families became so enamored of silk crepe, a translucent light textile revealing their beautiful figures, that Pliny the Elder, a noted scholar, complained that the love of such oriental luxuries was draining the imperial treasury (Document 6). Pliny certainly exaggerated the financial consequences of silk importation, especially since men still wore wool dyed purple to demonstrate their status. However, once artisans began dyeing imported silks with this rare purple, silk became even more expensive and prestigious.

Roman scholars such as Pliny studied Greek documents and the writings of Greek authors to advance their knowledge of eastern lands. Nevertheless, Roman knowledge of more distant countries, such as India and China, was still limited and vague. Geographers attempting to place the names of these countries on their maps often put them in the wrong locations (Documents 5, 8), and Pliny's accounts of the origins of silk, cotton, and gemstones and of how they were produced were full of errors (Document 6). In contrast, his knowledge of the much-coveted purple dye, which came from a particular kind of shellfish of the eastern Mediterranean, was accurate. During Pliny's lifetime the Mediterranean market for silk was well-established, and his detailed descriptions of the finished goods from India and China reveal that the Romans loved luxuries and were willing to pay high prices for them. Gemstones, silks, and other fabrics dyed purple were important symbols of social status. In Rome's highly stratified society, the wealthy purchased goods that were rare, beautiful, and from faraway countries to distinguish themselves from the general population.

Both the Han and Roman Empires sought to extend their interests far beyond their territorial borders. While China protected its trade with the Western Regions by extending the Great Wall westward and supervising the coming and going of traders through the Jade Gate, the Roman Empire managed its trade with the East from the port of Alexandria on

the Nile Delta. The lighthouse at Alexandria, built by Egypt's Ptolemaic regime, became the symbol of Rome's gate to its easternmost trade. Alexandria was not only the most important port on the Mediterranean, but also the one that gave access to the Arabian Sea via the Nile and a short portage across the desert to the Red Sea. The traders who set out from the port of Alexandria were Greek-speaking Egyptians, and those who traded on the overland routes that went east through the Parthian Empire were Greek-speaking Arabs. These Roman Empire traders could reach Bactria and Sogdiana by land, or they could sail from ports on the Red Sea to ports along India's western coast. Regardless of the route they took, they encountered traders from Hellenistic cities who spoke enough Greek to communicate about the quality of the goods and to bargain about the prices.

Goods from South and East Asia also came by overland routes handled by merchants based in the caravan cities of present-day Syria and Jordan, where the "Incense Road" had long enticed Mediterranean powers to trade eastward. Here Nabataeans, who spoke a variety of Arabic, built caravan cities such as Petra, where the architecture still reflects Greek styles. They, too, adopted Greek as a commercial language. Traders from these caravan cities brought spices and aromatic tree resins used as incense from the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula (present-day Yemen and Oman), where the Sabaeans, a people who spoke a dialect of Arabic, made great fortunes from frankincense and myrrh. Their ancestors had appeared in the biblical record when the queen called Sheba visited King Solomon of Israel. The Sabaeans were also a seafaring people who sailed across the Arabian Sea to purchase tropical spices such as cinnamon and pepper in Indian ports. They knew how to take advantage of the monsoons, the seasonal winds that blow across the Arabian Sea, and thus their ships could make a round trip to India within one year (Document 7).

Greek-speaking Roman traders also learned about the trade monsoons on the Arabian Sea, and they sailed from Red Sea ports to buy silk, gemstones, and spices from India. In exchange, they carried cargoes of Mediterranean wine and glassware, as well as gold and silver coins to help pay for all the items they wanted to bring back from India. They also discovered that they could make larger profits by first stopping at ports along the southern Arabian coast and trading some of their Mediterranean goods for frankincense and myrrh before heading to India, since there was a great demand in Indian markets for these famous tree resins. At this time, India's major commercial ports were Barbaricum, at the mouth of the Indus River, and Barygaza, on the Gulf of Cambay.

There Roman traders found old coins that had been issued by Hellenistic authorities in previous centuries, as well as more current coins that were inscribed with Greek letters and shared the same standard as the Roman denarii. Roman sailors explored many ports along the west coast of the Indian subcontinent and even rounded the tip to reach the east coast via the strait between the subcontinent and modern Sri Lanka. They set up a trading depot at Poduca, near modern Pondicherry, and employed both Mediterranean and local laborers to process the goods before sailing them back home. Their entrepreneurship brought a variety of luxuries, in addition to silk and pepper, to the marketplace of the Roman Empire.³ Thus, what had begun in China as direct exchange of silk for horses had become, by the end of the second century CE, a vast trading network in luxury goods that shaped and enriched the lives of the elite throughout Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean world.

THE KUSHAN EMPIRE AND THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM, SECOND CENTURY BCE-SECOND CENTURY CE

On both land routes and sea-lanes, traders from the West and the East encountered each other as they passed through the lands of the Kushan Empire during the first centuries CE. The empire had been built by the Yuezhi after the Xiongnu had forced them from their original homeland on the steppe just west of China. When they first arrived at the bank of the Amu River, where the Han envoy Zhang Qian eventually caught up with them, they were still very much nomads. All the adult men, who numbered between ten thousand and twenty thousand, were horseback-riding archers.⁴ As agents of the silk trade, they became rich, for they possessed many good horses as well as much gold.⁵ Bactria, their new home, was a fertile agricultural land, and they settled in its Hellenistic cities with Greek-style institutions and architecture. But the Yuezhi lacked experience in ruling and taxing a sedentary society. They had to learn to read and write and to keep accounts. They soon began to cast Greek-style coins with the image of the king on one side and that of a deity on the other. Their gold, silver, and copper currencies facilitated domestic and long-distance trade in both inexpensive wares and expensive luxuries.

In 50 CE, after they had been ruling Bactria for some 170 years, the Kushans crossed the Hindu Kush Mountains and invaded India. Now stronger and richer than when they left the steppe, they had profited

from the wealth of an agricultural society and had an excellent cavalry. Their territory in northern India, both in the Indus River Valley and in the western part of the Ganges River Valley, was even richer than Bactria, but also more complicated to rule. Before the coming of the nomads, northwestern India, especially the region then called Gandhara (modern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan), had been ruled by Alexander's garrisons and their descendants. These Hellenistic cities had more Indian than Greek residents but maintained the political structure of Greek city-states. Like residents of the Hellenistic cities in Asia, they had never insisted on a single religion but welcomed the worship of both local and foreign deities. The Kushans inherited this cosmopolitan tradition and patronized all the religions of the region. In fact, the Kushan kings' patronage of religious institutions was an integral part of their strategy for ruling the lands they controlled. Of the religions that prevailed in their territories at this time, Buddhism was among the most influential.

Buddhism had changed greatly since the Buddha had lived and preached in the Ganges River Valley around the fifth century BCE. When the Buddha was alive, he was respected as the wise man of the Shakyas people, a small chiefdom in the foothills of the Himalayas, but not thought of as a god. For several hundred years after his death (nirvana), there were no statues of the Buddha for his followers to worship. Buddhist stupas, or shrines, might preserve relics of the Buddha amid sculptures of elephants, monkeys, and minor deities associated with nature, often represented by young maidens. A pair of footprints might represent the presence of the Buddha, and a *bodhi* tree might symbolize his enlightenment.

By the first century CE, however, when the Kushan Empire ruled most of north and northwestern India, the Mahayana school of Buddhism had brought fundamental changes to Buddhist cosmology and further connected the *sangha*, the community of Buddhist monks, with commercial communities. The Buddha was now worshipped as an omnipotent god. His transition from sage to god had begun by the reign of the Indo-Greek king Menander (also known as Milinda, late second century BCE) who, Buddhist texts report, was puzzled by the contradiction between the Buddha's human nature and his divinity (Document 9). By the time of the Kushan Empire, the divinity of the Buddha was no longer in question, and the Buddhist sangha had built monasteries surrounding the stupas, adorned with carved statues of the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhism also worshipped a host of deities called bodhisattvas, saints who had accumulated enough merit to forego another rebirth (Documents 10, 11) and were on the brink of achieving nirvana,



Figure 1. Kushan Gold Coin, ca. 130 CE

This coin exemplifies the diffusion of languages and amalgamation of religions that took place on the Silk Roads. The most famous Kushan king, Kanishka, is shown on one side, where in the inscription, written in a language native to northwestern India but with the Greek alphabet, reads "Great King, King of Kings, Son of God, Kanishka." On the other side is a Hindu god, four-armed Shiva. Here the Greek inscription reads "Oesho," the Bactrian name for Shiva. Coins such as these facilitated trade.

where the suffering of earthbound lives would be eliminated; the bodhisattvas had postponed their final emancipation to stay in this world and help all its creatures cross what they called the ocean of sufferings. These developments in the theology and institutions of Buddhism made the religion less mysterious to foreigners. Traders now worshipped the Buddha as a god and sought protections from various Buddhist deities when they came to northwestern India to trade in silk and gems.



Figure 1. (continued)

Thus during the rule of the Kushans, traders from the Mediterranean world and East Asia exchanged not only trade goods but also ideas. Some Roman Empire traders, often Greek-speaking Egyptians, reached Kushan territory by sea, sailing through the Red Sea and across the Arabian Sea to ports in western India. Merchants from the empire's caravan cities such as Palmyra in Syria took land routes through the Parthian Empire to Bactria and returned home with silks. The Parthian traders, descendants of the ancient Scythians, were often rivals of the Romans in the silk trade.

Kushan and Sogdian traders speaking a variety of languages traveled between China's Han Empire and India. They found hospitality, security, and interpreters at the Buddhist monasteries along the way and

often made generous donations to the monasteries for the construction of additional facilities and the carving of religious sculptures. Buddhist donors also hoped that their donations would bring them religious merit, which would improve their lot in future lives as well as protect them and their loved ones in this life. Accordingly, they had their donations and their wishes inscribed on the new buildings or at the base of the sculptures (Document 12).

As traders and monks spent time together, they benefited and learned from each other. The increase in commercial activities brought prosperity not only to the Kushan state but also to the Buddhist monasteries. When the Buddha was alive, he had gone out to beg for food every day and never had a permanent residence. By Kushan times, in contrast, Buddhist monks lived in splendid settings. Instead of going out to beg for food, they set up symbolic begging bowls in front of their monasteries for the collection of valuables. Thus the monasteries came to possess silks from China; pearls from Sri Lanka and the Persian Gulf; crystal and other precious stones from India; frankincense and myrrh from Arabia; red coral, gold and silver coins, glassware, and grape wine from the Mediterranean; and lapis lazuli, a dark-blue gemstone from northeastern Afghanistan. Monks burned incense made of frankincense and myrrh to worship the Buddha and bodhisattvas; decorated stupas with silk banners and draperies, pearls, and coral and crystal beads; and painted the hair of the Buddha and bodhisattvas with pigments made from lapis lazuli.

Once these valuable goods entered Buddhist monasteries, they became sacred objects. In particular, Buddhist writers of the period accorded some of the most precious stones, which had become a significant part of the Buddhist esthetic, the status of *sapta ratana*, "the Seven Treasures," and these were said to adorn the heavens or Buddha lands. According to Mahayana theology, devotees who were not yet ready to go to nirvana after their death could hope to go to one of the many heavens of the bodhisattvas. The best known is the Western Pure Land, which is overseen by Amitabha, a bodhisattva who efficiently answers the calls of his devotees (Document 11). However, those seeking help for life on this earth worship the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who assists the world's creatures, especially travelers, on land and sea (Document 10). Donating either silk or the Seven Treasures to this bodhisattva is believed to aid those in danger. Traders were willing to donate such goods from their inventories, and local devotees were happy to purchase these treasures from the monastery, since the proceeds would be used for its benefit. Mahayana Buddhist texts thus became advocates

for trade in the valuable goods that traveled the Silk Roads.⁶ Eventually, Mahayana Buddhism spread from India to Central Asia and China.

THE OASIS TOWNS OF CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM, THIRD-SEVENTH CENTURIES

While the agricultural empires of China and Rome were the major markets for luxury goods, the lands of Central Asia crossed by the Silk Roads were also transformed by trade. Interactions between the steppe and the oases were, in fact, the basic dynamics of the Silk Roads. In the north on the steppe, a grassland that stretches from Mongolia to the Caspian Sea, horseback-riding nomadic tribes moved around within their own territories and could be distinguished from each other mainly by the different languages they spoke. Conflicts among the tribes and with the agricultural empires often stimulated large-scale migrations, which generally went westward, starting with the Yuezhi. In the south, the people of the Takla Makan Desert lived in oasis towns that clung to the desert's rim at the bottom of the mountains and were gradually settled by Chinese, Indian, and Central Asian immigrants as well as at least a few Greeks who had been living in Central Asia for many generations (Document 13). Although nomads sometimes raided the oases for goods and slaves, some also settled there peaceably. The people of the Takla Makan Desert were the first in Central Asia to convert to Buddhism. By the time that Buddhist monasteries appeared in these oasis towns, local agricultural production could support thousands of people.

Farther west in Ferghana, where the Syr River flows, and in Sogdiana, on the plain between the Syr and the Amu Rivers, a series of large oases had developed using river water to irrigate agricultural fields. Before the coming of the Greeks in the late fourth century BCE, the Sogdians had not been farmers, or at least not full-time farmers. Both Sogdiana and Ferghana were mainly famous for good horses. After the founding of Greek garrison towns, grape cultivation and wineries had developed along with food crops (Document 13). Thereafter the Sogdians, realizing the benefits of commerce, soon became the most active and numerous traders on the routes connecting Persia, India, and China. They must also have been intrepid mountaineers, given that the Sogdian route to India went over the extremely dangerous high-altitude passes of the upper Indus Valley. Their first encounter with Buddhism was in the region of Gandhara, and they carried its teachings back to Sogdiana. Some early Sogdian Buddhists

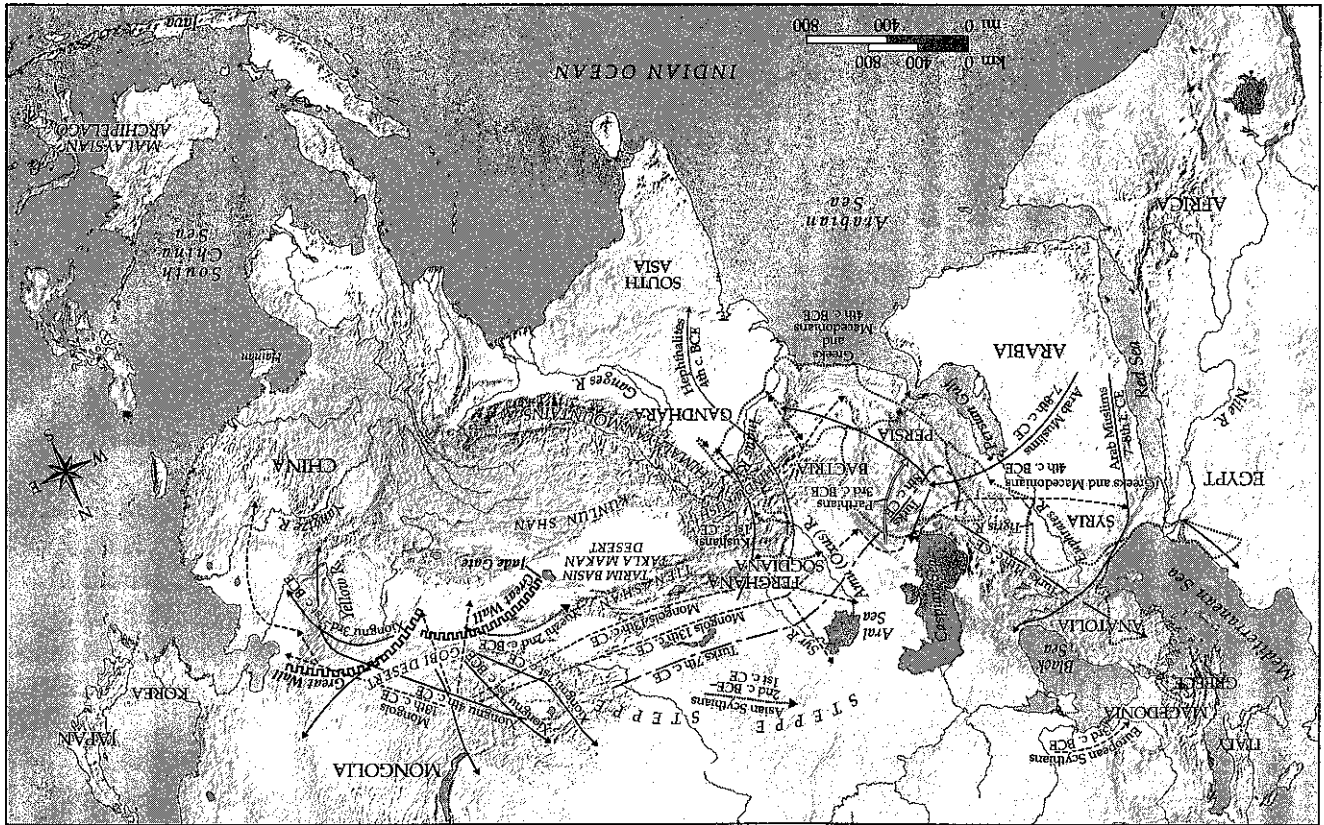
also went to China to trade and in Luoyang helped to translate Buddhist texts into Chinese. In fact, several of the earliest Buddhist preachers in China had the surname Kang, the name the Chinese authorities gave to people from Kangju, their name for Sogdiana.

Nevertheless, Buddhist institutions did not take root in China or Central Asia until the late third century, after the Han Empire had collapsed, the Roman Empire had started to decline, and Rome's market for eastern luxuries had withered. It was around this time that Buddhist monasteries began to appear in many oases between Sogdiana and Turfan, only three hundred miles west of China's Jade Gate. Although few monks engaged in agricultural work, they were active members of the community and very much involved in transactions between the local people and outsiders (Document 13). They often served as interpreters, since the populations in the Central Asian oases had diverse origins and no single language was used for all occasions.

Meanwhile, even though the Han dynasty had fallen, relatively small regional states in northern China continued to exert an influence in the towns of the Takla Makan Desert. For example, in Khotan, an oasis on its southern edge, local rulers issued bilingual coins. On one side the inscription was written in the Prakrit language, a vernacular related to Sanskrit in India, with the Kharoshthi script, and on the other side the inscription was in Chinese written with Chinese characters. Sogdian traders continued to travel to China and settled in a great many oases along the Silk Roads, and whenever the demand for luxuries in China was weak due to civil wars, they engaged in regional trade from oasis to oasis (Document 14).

During the fourth century, nomads set off a large wave of migration and invasion to their south. Among them were the Xiongnu, who managed to pass through the Great Wall and migrate into northern China, where during its civil wars they built a series of ephemeral states. Eventually, the Tuoba family of the Xianbei people, who were originally from Mongolia, established the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534). They thus became rulers of a part of agricultural China, and they changed their surname to the Chinese name Yuan. Meanwhile, another nomadic group, the Hephthalites, or White Huns, occupied a number of Central Asian oases and made incursions into India. They also, in due course, transformed themselves into rulers and residents of sedentary societies. These rulers of nomadic background soon learned the benefits of patronizing religious institutions, especially Buddhist monasteries, for communicating with their subjects and for enhancing their legitimacy. It was at this time that Buddhist cave monasteries with their numerous murals

Map 2. Migrations and Conquests on the Silk Roads, 350 BCE-1300 CE



and sculptures lined the foothills of the Central Asian trade routes. The two gigantic standing-Buddha statues at Bamiyan, in the Hindu Kush Valley, became a landmark at the western end of the Central Asian Silk Road, until they were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. And at Yungang, in northeastern China in the foothills near the Great Wall, five huge sitting Buddhas marked the eastern end of the Central Asian Silk Road.⁷ Between them were a series of fourth-century Buddhist cave temples, including Kezhi, near modern Kucha on the northern edge of the Takla Makan Desert, and Dunhuang, just inside the Jade Gate.

During this time, Chinese Buddhist monks began traveling to India to learn the true Buddhist doctrines firsthand. Faxian, for example, made a pilgrimage to India from 399 to 414 (Document 15), and Xuanzang made one from 629 to 645 (Document 17). These religious travelers were significant carriers of goods along the Silk Roads. Xuanzang's pilgrimage is a good example. When he left Turfan, he needed an entire caravan of horses to carry his provisions and travel funds, which were mostly bolts of silk damask. After he returned to China, he sent many of the gifts he received from the emperor—mostly silk textiles and robes—to his Indian friends through various traders. He also returned with Buddhist sutras and Sanskrit texts, which he translated. In the early sixth century, the Northern Wei sent a mission to deliver tribute to Buddhist shrines in Central Asia and India (Document 16). These pilgrims witnessed the further development of Buddhism in Central Asia and took advantage of the hospitality offered by the region's monasteries. At a time when the newly established Tang Empire (618–907) had not yet extended its power into Central Asia, the oases and steppe powers provided a thoroughfare for travelers, both traders and monks. After the Tang expanded, it acted as the great patron of the Silk Roads.

For more than four centuries, between the Han Empire's withdrawal from Central Asia and the Tang Empire's extension in its eastern parts, Buddhist monasteries dominated this region and shaped the religious mentality as well as the economic behavior of its people. Here, and later in Tang China, the acceptance of Buddhism changed burial practices. From ancient times, the Chinese had buried the deceased's precious possessions with the body, believing that an individual would live another life after death and that all a person owned in this world could be carried over into the next life. But Buddhism taught that one would be reborn as another sort of creature after death, so people ceased burying goods with the body. Instead, the virtues and merits of the dead were recorded and buried with the deceased (Document 18), and good deeds, especially donations to Buddhist monasteries, were believed to secure a better rebirth.

THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND SILKS IN ROYAL PURPLE, SIXTH-NINTH CENTURIES

After the disintegration of the western part of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the eastern part survived as the Byzantine Empire, and its capital of Constantinople emerged as the Mediterranean region's major sponsor of the trade in eastern luxuries. This city, once called Byzantium, had been renamed by Emperor Constantine (r. 306–337), who made it an imperial capital. Constantinian had also made Christianity a legal religion, as he clearly saw a compatibility between a monotheistic religion and the authoritarian power of a Roman emperor. In the following centuries, emperors in Constantinople became the staunch supporters and patrons of the Christian church and were deeply involved in the religion's theological development.

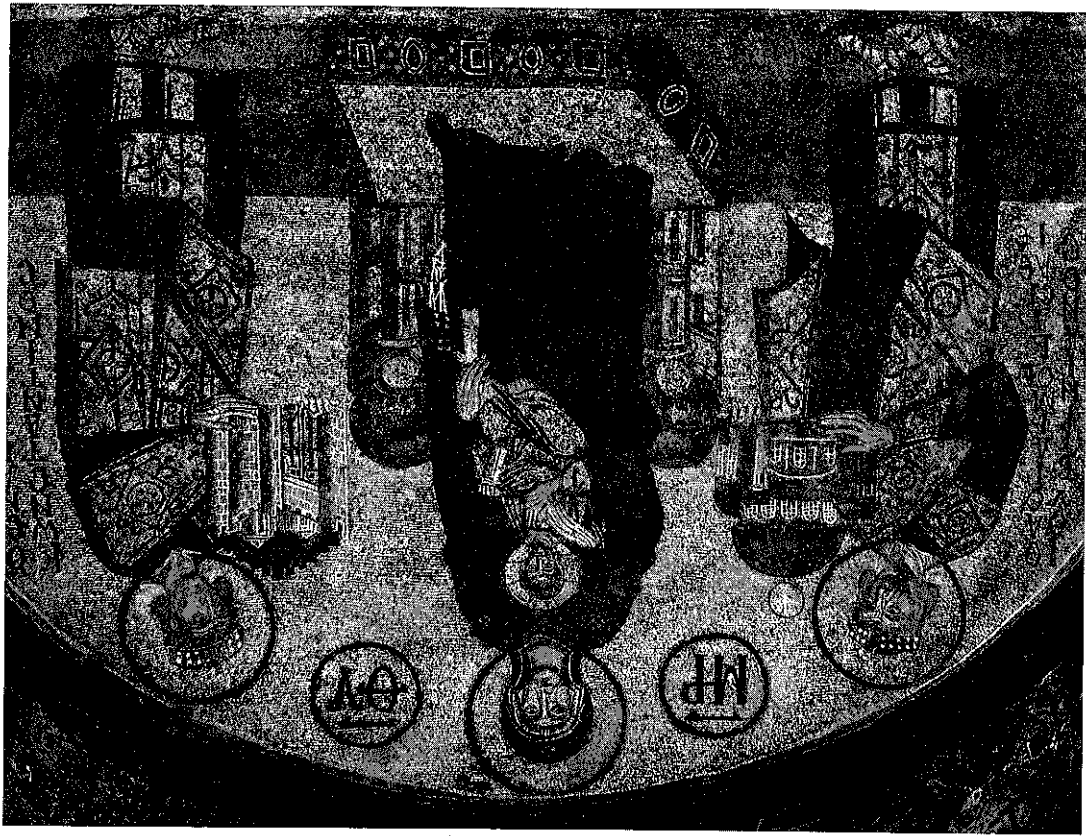
In the years between the high point of the Roman Empire and the peak of Byzantine power, the technology and marketing of silk textiles had changed fundamentally. In Pliny's time, women preferred the light crepe imported from China, and men wore wool dyed in prestigious purple. Persians, both the Parthian rivals of the Romans and the Sasanids who defeated the Parthians and ruled Persia until the Arab conquest of the seventh century, liked heavy silk tapestries. The Persians had a long tradition of rug weaving, and once silk yarn became available they adapted their looms to create silk tapestries that were often superior to Chinese products. The process required sophisticated technology and highly skilled artisans, but not the finest of silk fibers. Soon weavers in Gaza, Beirut, and other Roman cities on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean started to weave their textiles the Persian way. When they could not get enough silk yarn from China, they bought plain silk tabby and unraveled it to get the fibers they needed for their looms.

The Byzantine Empire had a world monopoly on the rare purple dye made from eastern Mediterranean shellfish, and the custom developed that the emperor should wear purple. Not only should his ritual robes be purple, but he should be born in purple—that is, in a chamber built with purple stones—and be buried in a sarcophagus of purple stone. Because the shellfish's purple dye works well on silk fibers, as both are animal proteins, purple-colored silks became the most expensive and prestigious clothing for both women and men in the Byzantine Empire and the Christian world. In the sixth century, the Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527–565) and his advisers decided that both resources could serve political purposes, and thus they decreed that within the empire the shellfish-dyed purple silks could be worn only by the emperor and his court.

Justinian was notable for recovering some Roman territories in the West that had been lost to various invaders and also for promoting the development of sericulture—the technology of raising silkworms, harvesting the filaments from the cocoons, and spinning silk thread. Although the transfer of this technology to the West is popularly attributed to Nestorian Christian monks asked by the emperor to smuggle silkworm eggs out of China (Document 19), this story is unlikely, as discussed in the headnote to Document 19. The work started by Justinian no doubt took many decades to accomplish,⁸ but what is certain is that Byzantine rulers did everything they could to monopolize the production and distribution of silk textiles within their realm (Documents 20, 21). Silk consumption and production became one of the empire's many tools for the display and consolidation of imperial power.

Justinian's ambition was to be not only the emperor of the area that had been the entire Roman Empire but also the leader of the Christian world. During his reign, purple silk textiles also became an efficient diplomatic tool to exert his influence within the Christian church. One of his most obvious achievements in support of Christianity was the construction of a monumental cathedral, the Hagia Sophia, whose mosaics display purple as a sacred color. Subsequently, the Byzantines added a provision in the sumptuary law—the law regulating dress, food, and certain privileges to particular classes—granting Christian priests and churches the right to wear and use silk textiles and robes. Byzantine silk culture set the standard of adornment and display for all Christian churches and thereby contributed to believers' vision of heaven.

Shortly after sericulture was established in the eastern Mediterranean, the part of Anatolia where mulberry trees flourished was conquered by Arabs, who were extending their control of the region in the name of the new religion of Islam. Although this was a significant loss for the Byzantines, the traders who lived in Anatolia and Syria, then



Opposite: Figure 2. Hagia Sophia Mosaic, Constantinople, late tenth century CE
This gold and glass mosaic is situated above the royal entrance to the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (today Istanbul). It shows the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of Constantinople, robed in purple with the baby Jesus on her lap. On her right Justinian holds a model of the cathedral, and on her left Constantine holds a model of the city of Constantinople. Both emperors are robed at least in part in purple, thus displaying the role of purple silk in marking a celestial and an earthly hierarchy. Mary, robed fully in purple, is presented as the highest authority, and the two emperors are portrayed as those closest to her in significance and the most important benefactors of the Christian church.

also under Muslim rule, continued to sell silk materials and textiles to customers in Constantinople and other Byzantine cities (Document 21).

Due to the efforts of the Muslim powers, sericulture now spread throughout the entire Mediterranean region, and the Byzantine government could no longer control the production and consumption of silk textiles. The focus of the Byzantine monopoly then became the production and supply of the purple shellfish dye, which were easier to control. The government watched every step of its production and transport, and thereby managed to keep the process secret for many more centuries. During the reign of Emperor Leo VI (r. 886–912), the mayor of Constantinople guarded the monopoly forcefully (Document 21). Even after the empire had shrunk to a small and weak state following the devastation wrought by the Christian Crusaders in the thirteenth century, the Byzantine rulers managed to maintain their monopoly of the purple dye. Thus the prestige of wearing purple-hued silk robes did not end until the total collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century.

THE TANG EMPIRE AND FOREIGN TRADERS AND PRIESTS, EIGHTH-TENTH CENTURIES

The Tang Empire (618–907 CE) brought another celebrated imperial age to China, and its prestige made it a cultural model for nearby countries such as Korea and Japan as well as for several Central Asian states. The Tang capital at Chang'an and secondary capital at Luoyang attracted many foreign students of Confucianism, Buddhism, and other subjects. The large market for imported luxury goods drew foreign traders to sell their goods and Chinese traders to engage in foreign trade (Document 22). Foreign travelers established their own neighborhoods in the cities of China, and some enjoyed the patronage of the imperial court. Court documents record foreign envoys carrying tribute gifts to Chang'an, and figurines portray these people's non-Chinese faces and clothing styles.

Following Xuanzang's famous seventh-century pilgrimage, many Chinese Buddhist monks also went to India to look for Buddhist texts and relics of the Buddha. Nevertheless, even during the Tang dynasty, Buddhism never gained the status of a state religion as Christianity had in the Byzantine Empire. Yet since all travelers, regardless of religion, took advantage of the hospitality found in Buddhist monasteries and other religious hostels, their donations facilitated more excavations of caves adorned with more religious paintings and sculptures.

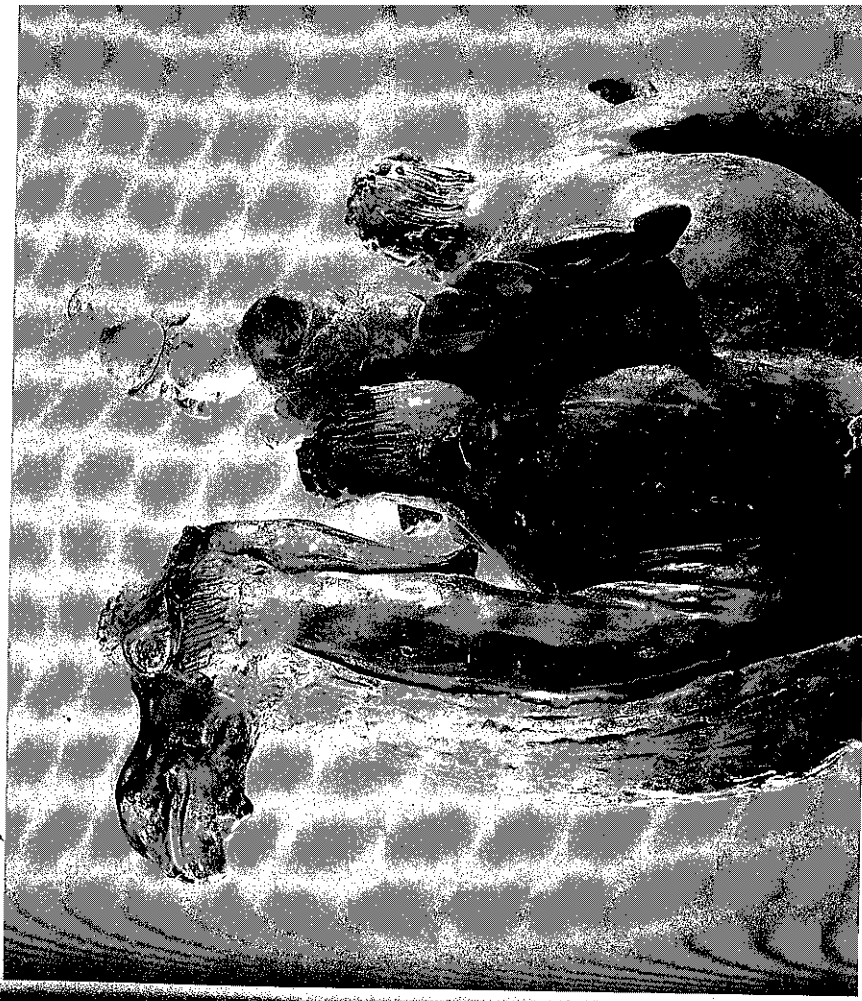


Figure 3. *Glazed Figurine of Camel and Rider, Tang dynasty, eighth century CE*
This *sancai* (tricolor) glazed figurine is typical of burial goods popular during the Tang dynasty. Here the exaggerated large nose indicates that the camel rider is not Chinese, but Central Asian. Other figurines portray African and Greek riders, but the vast majority of the Silk Roads trade was handled by the peoples of Central Asia, primarily Sogdians.

Like the Byzantine Empire, its contemporary, the Tang Empire also tried to monopolize the production and use of the most prestigious silk textiles for political purposes. Since the Han dynasty, commoners had been banned from wearing silk tapestries and embroidered silk clothes, and in the seventh century the newly established Tang Empire reasserted similar sumptuary laws for a new reason. Tang rulers sought

to overcome local hereditary powers and end inefficiency by building a new, merit-based bureaucracy in which only highly educated men would serve as officials. To enhance the prestige of the new scholar-bureaucrats, the emperors prescribed acceptable clothing for various categories of people, designating particular patterns and a particular color for the official robes worn by each level of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Only the ritual robes of the emperors remained yellow, traditionally the royal color in China since ancient times. Among their advisers and officials, the color that was assigned the highest status was purple, the same color that the Byzantines were using to distinguish their imperial family. The purple dye used in Tang China was an indigenous product, but the aesthetic value of purple could have been influenced by the Roman Empire and Byzantium, as purple had not previously been a favored color in China. Once the color purple was established as the most prestigious within the bureaucratic ranks, all those who aspired to move up in society dreamed of wearing it (Document 22).

Like the Byzantine rulers, the Tang emperors also displayed their patronage of religious personages and institutions by granting purple robes. However, the Tang emperors never tried to establish a single state religion. Instead, they rewarded individual priests and institutions, regardless of religion, for their service to the court and the state. Clearly Buddhism enjoyed the most patronage from the royal families and the most support from commoners, but Buddhism had a strong competitor in Daoism. The Tang ruling family claimed a close relationship to Daoism, but enlisted the services of priests from many different religions—Buddhists and even Hindu Brahmins as well as Daoists—in praying for the empress during childbirth, for example, and for military victories on the frontier. Those called upon accumulated large quantities of purple robes as well as other fine robes and silk textiles. Members of religious institutions, especially Buddhists, often breached the government's sumptuary rules by selling the restricted goods granted to them by the royal family for cash in local markets. It was largely for this reason that the Tang silk monopoly declined and disappeared when the dynasty ended.

During the golden age of the Tang, however, Nestorian Christians, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, and Muslims all gained followers in China. Nestorianism, a Christian sect based in Syria and condemned for heresy by a Byzantine church council in 431, found an auspicious setting for the propagation of Christianity in the Tang Empire. In 635, A-luo-ben (Rabban), the first recorded Nestorian missionary to settle in China, reached Chang'an, and in 638 he established a church there with the

Tang government's permission (Document 23). The Nestorian church flourished in Tang China for more than two hundred years and received many grants of silks from Tang emperors. One priest was even honored with a purple robe. Records of the Tang courts also indicate that Constantinople sent a number of Orthodox Christian archbishops to China, but they do not seem to have had much impact.

Zoroastrian priests were also active in Chinese cities. Zoroastrianism was an ancient Persian religion that had lost much of its significance during the rule of the Parthians. However, after the Sassanids recovered Persia in the third century CE, it became the official religion. Its presence in Tang China was, however, largely owing to Sogdians, who seem to have been open to numerous religions, especially those practiced by foreign traders. The Sogdians had been among the first Buddhists to arrive in China; from as early as the fifth century, even before China was reunified and the Tang dynasty was founded, most Sogdians who went to China to trade were Zoroastrians. Although the Sogdian Zoroastrians joined the Tang army and served as Tang officials, their religion does not seem to have attracted many Chinese converts. Their religious activities tended toward the mystical and magical, and even though Zoroastrian priests performed various rituals in public that attracted much curiosity, Chinese crowds had little or no understanding of their religious meanings (Document 22).⁹

The Sogdians were also indirectly responsible for the arrival of the Manichaean religion in China. Manichaeism first emerged in Persia in the second century CE. Mani, its founder, had been influenced by both Buddhism and Christianity, and this religion eventually had a significant presence from the shores of the Mediterranean to China. The people who brought it to China were the Uighurs, a nomadic Turkish tribe whose pastures were located along China's northern frontier. Like their nomadic predecessors, they traded their horses for Chinese silks, but they had difficulty finding a market for the amount of silk that they were receiving. Thus they began to use Sogdian traders as their agents. These Sogdians were Manichaeans, and they converted their Uighur business partners to this religion. Thereafter, the Manichaean temples that appeared in Tang cities served as trading depots for both the Uighurs and their Sogdian agents. As the rituals of Manichaeism were somewhat similar to those of Buddhism, its priests may have been more successful than the Zoroastrians in attracting Chinese converts.

On the Silk Roads, trade and religion seemed inseparable, and pilgrims and priests carried goods and generated trade. The Sogdians were not only successful and pragmatic traders but also faithful propagators

of their religions. In Sogdiana they decorated their homes with inspirational murals from many different religions as well as from secular traditions. In their trading diasporas, they often followed the religious trends of the time, and they used both Zoroastrian temples and Manichaean shrines to practice their faith and to carry out their business.

When, late in the Tang dynasty, the empire's economy declined, Emperor Wuzong (r. 841-847) blamed its troubles on foreign religious institutions that had appropriated much wealth and land, and eventually he banished all foreign religious institutions from China, including those of the Buddhists (Document 24). This drastic policy began over a conflict with the Uighurs and what Wuzong claimed was an imbalance in the horse-silk trade that was causing the economic decline. He banned their Manichaean religion and in 845 extended his attacks to all foreign religions. He closed Buddhist monasteries, confiscated their properties, and sent monks back to their homes, whether they were from outside or inside the empire. Within in a very short time, however, he had to restore the Buddhist institutions, for it soon became obvious that neither the state nor the Chinese people could function without the many services that the Buddhist monasteries provided. Wuzong ruled for only a few years. Buddhism recovered fully after his reign, but the other religions either disappeared from China or retreated to remote areas.

MUSLIM BAGHDAD IN THE EURASIAN MARKET, NINTH-ELEVENTH CENTURIES

After the emergence of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula in the early seventh century, friction between its leaders and nearby empires soon led to hostilities and, thereafter, to the Muslim conquest of large portions of Eurasia and Africa. These conquests obviously had a major political impact, but also important were the economic changes they brought. Islam introduced a new set of aesthetic values regarding material culture. In its early days, Islam frowned upon luxuries, and so its spread had a significant impact on the marketing of silks and other Silk Roads goods. Because this religion maintains that all people are equal before God, Muslim society rejected both the religious and the political hierarchies that then flourished, as well as the restrictions and material symbols that marked their ranks. Muslims and their converts thus discontinued many of the Byzantine and Tang practices regarding the wearing of silk.

The ruling caliphs of Islam, known as the commanders of the faithful, also changed practices regarding the production of silk in territories they seized from the Byzantines and the Persian Sassanids. Silk-weaving was no longer a royal monopoly, and the caliphs did not control the production of even the rarest and most valuable silk textiles, such as those dyed purple and brocades made with golden threads. Aesthetically, Muslims strongly disliked the color purple, which they called the "blood color." The caliphate did order all weaving shops to inscribe silk products with a sentence praising Allah, as well as the place and time of production and the name of the vizier, or prime minister, who was in charge of taxation. This practice, called the *tiraz*, put a specific "brand name" on every textile product, facilitating the government's ability to tax the industry and the market and to supervise the quality of the product. The unintended result of this policy was the development of a brand-oriented market that created a new dynamic in textile production and distribution.

The Prophet Muhammad and early Muslims were Arabs, either the residents of towns known for their caravan traders or Bedouin nomads who lived in tents as they moved their herds from one locale to another. Even after they became rulers of agricultural societies, they preferred their tent culture, and so they decorated their urban palaces and mansions with the same sort of upholsteries and rugs they had used to furnish their tents. In short, they moved their tent culture into their palaces. Outside the Arabian Peninsula, the first Muslim political center—the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate—had been at Damascus in Syria, where Arabic languages were indigenous. After a civil war within the ranks of the caliphate in the middle of the eighth century, the political center of the Muslim empire moved eastward to Baghdad—the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate—which had been ruled for centuries by the Persian Sassanids. Thereafter, Muslims who spoke Persian asserted their economic as well as their political influence.

Persians had a long tradition of weaving woolen and silk carpets and tapestries, and their textiles soon came to dominate the market in home furnishings (Document 27). Carpets and tapestries brightened the brick and pebble walls of the palaces and mansions of the caliphs and princes in Baghdad, Samara, and other cities,¹⁰ and bureaucrats, generals, and wealthy residents were soon caught up in this fashion trend, especially as there was no sumptuary law that forbade their using the same luxurious materials that the caliphs used. Thus, in the Muslim world, the market for textiles, especially silk textiles, expanded rapidly.

The Abbasid Caliphate soon incorporated yet another nomadic material culture that put a high value on textiles. Turkic tribes, originally from the Mongolian steppe, were now migrating westward, and they, too, became involved in the political and economic dynamics of the Muslim world. As early as the seventh century, this Turkish migration had already reached Sogdiana in Central Asia. After the Abbasid conquest of Central Asia in the eighth century, many Turks moved to Baghdad to pursue civic, intellectual, and military careers within the Abbasid Caliphate. The Turkish soldiers' bravery and sturdiness were well known. Thus, when the caliph Mu'tasim (r. 833-842) believed he was being oppressed by court politicians, he brought Turkish slave-soldiers, recruited from captured slaves or war prisoners, into Baghdad to serve his needs (Document 26). The Turkish tribes, still moving westward, thus had even more access to the center of power in the Muslim world and eventually became the major force battling the Christian Crusades.

Islamic institutions had only a marginal role in the large markets of northern China, but Muslim merchants actively traded in the ports of China's southern coast, where they arrived by sea. In Canton they established their own neighborhood, where they traded and practiced their religion (Document 25). During the Tang religious persecution of the mid-ninth century, the Muslim community in China suffered relatively little due to its limited presence in the capital region, and the Muslim merchant community in Canton was largely immune. But it was almost wiped out during an uprising of southern peasants that eventually brought down the Tang dynasty. Some of the Muslim merchants who survived the rebellion moved their establishments to Quanzhou, a port north of Canton, near modern Xiamen in the province of Fujian.

TRADE NETWORKS FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN TO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, TENTH-THIRTEENTH CENTURIES

By the tenth century, Muslim traders had created large mercantile networks that connected the Mediterranean to the east coast of Africa and to various ports in the Indian Ocean, in Southeast Asia, and on the South China Sea. From that time on, sea routes south of Eurasia gradually replaced land routes as the main commercial artery of trade. This fundamental change in trading patterns was not a result of warfare or political instability, nor was it due to the weakness of economies. Throughout the centuries that the Silk Roads had flourished, continuous warfare and

political upheavals never stopped trade. However, agricultural developments from East Asia to western Europe had created wealthy societies and thus more surpluses for trade. Now staple goods such as cotton textiles, rice and other grains, timber, tea, and porcelain and ceramics became part of long-distance trade in addition to highly valued luxuries such as silks, gemstones, and fragrances. These staple goods were bulky, such as tea, or heavy, such as timber, or fragile, such as porcelain, which had to be packed in heavy crates. Overland caravans could not manage their transport. Meanwhile, ships had been improved for long-distance seafaring, and merchant communities in many countries thus increasingly depended on ships to carry their goods.

Three ports served as the key depots for this extensive maritime trading network. In the west, Cairo linked the Mediterranean traffic to ships on the Red and Arabian Seas. After Baghdad lost control of some of its distant territories, the Fatimids, a Shi'ite Muslim lineage, arose in North Africa and took over Egypt in 969. In very little time, Cairo became a new center of Muslim culture. Muslim and Jewish trading communities that migrated to Cairo oversaw the transport of goods arriving at Alexandria by ship, mostly from Italy, and then up the Nile River to Cairo. From there, these goods were dispatched overland to ports on the Red Sea, where they were loaded onto ships bound for India.

The ships that plied the Arabian Sea were called dhows. They were medium-sized vessels with triangular sails, later known as a lateen rig. Since ancient times, Arab peoples on the southern coasts of the peninsula had sailed the Arabian Sea, taking advantage of the monsoon winds. Once the dhows anchored at Quilon (in modern-day Kerala), the designated port on India's southwest coast, the traders unloaded their cargo. Hindu chiefs in Quilon welcomed foreign traders, especially Muslim traders. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, this coast was under the dominion of the Chola Empire based in southeastern India. Quilon was, nevertheless, a haven of commerce where traders from the West could sell their goods to the local people or to traders who came on ships from as far away as China. Quilon's markets were filled with valuable and often rare goods from many lands.

The ships that came to Quilon from China were known as "junks." They were huge vessels built with transverse bulkheads that made them especially strong. Horizontal partitions in the holds created sealed compartments that would keep a ship afloat even if one compartment was damaged and filled with water. In Quilon, traders could board junks bound for Quanzhou on China's southeastern coast. The Song dynasty (960-1279) moved its import-export office from Canton to Quanzhou

to collect taxes and to guide and protect ships entering and leaving the port (Document 29). The Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), which was established by the Mongols, a power that first arose from the steppe under Genghis Khan (1167?-1227), followed the same policies. Genghis Khan's grandson, Khubilai Khan (1215-1294), declared himself the first Yuan emperor and encouraged foreign commerce (Document 34). In the process of conquering China, the Mongols had to build a navy and learn the craft of shipbuilding. They also tried to become a sea power. Although their efforts to conquer Japan and Java failed, they were efficient at collecting revenue from the maritime trade centered in the port of Quanzhou.

Commercial communities from many countries were active in all three ports, where traders of various religious affiliations found hospitality and set up their own facilities. Quanzhou, especially, was a haven for traders from a wide variety of religious communities. The Mongols had their own financial systems and stationed representatives and agents in all the ports, and they frequently formed close commercial relationships with trading firms of other nationalities. These trading communities, not the governments, controlled the commercial activity.

Muslim traders owned most of the ships on the Mediterranean Sea, which were based in North African ports, and the dhows on the Arabian Sea.¹¹ To safeguard navigation on the Arabian Sea, the Fatimid government in Cairo started an armed escort system called the *karim*. Three or four armed vessels regularly guarded merchant fleets going to and from India. Since their departures were regularly scheduled, merchants who did not own ships could sail on the karim ships or put their cargos on them for delivery elsewhere. Traders who joined the karim trade were known as *karimis*. Usually they were family trading firms who assigned their goods and staffs to the fleets. In the Muslim community, the only obstacle to trade was the Islamic prohibition on moneylending, especially on collecting interest on loans. To avoid the stigma of moneylending, Muslims created partnerships between financiers and the traders who traveled with their goods. When a trader returned from a commercial voyage with a profit, he paid back the money he had borrowed and also shared the profit with his partner. If the goods were lost due to shipwrecks or other unpredictable events, the loss was shared. This credit system worked well and was copied by others, including Jewish traders.

At this time, a Jewish community based in Fustat, the old part of Cairo, was also very much involved in the maritime trade on the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas. Jewish traders owned large consignments

that they put on ships owned by Muslims, and they also boarded karim ships destined for ports on the Arabian Sea. Jewish traders had a relatively good relationship with the Fatimids, and some even collected the government's taxes from the local people in the areas around the North African ports where they traded. Jewish bankers also played an essential role in the long-distance trade, since they were experts in sorting and evaluating coins from many different lands. Jewish traders who lived in Arabic lands learned to speak and write in Arabic, but when corresponding with each other they wrote Arabic in the Hebrew script (Document 31). Jews generally lived peacefully under the Muslim caliphates. Although a few Muslim rulers occasionally restricted their business or religious activities, Jews could still pursue profits and purchase and enjoy whatever luxuries they desired, including silk clothing (Document 28).

Cairo traders, including Jews, Coptic Christians, and Muslims, shared similar commercial ethics and practices and generally cooperated with each other. Their religious calendars were different, however. When traveling on the land routes, each group ceased work on a different holy day—Muslims on Friday, Jews on Saturday, and Christians on Sunday. Because of these differences, determining ships' departure schedules was a complicated matter until the Coptic Christian calendar was adopted by all the trading communities.

During the time of the Fatimids, merchants from Venice, and then from other Italian cities, came to Alexandria to buy silk, paper, and spices. There they learned trading techniques and banking practices from Jewish and Muslim traders. The Venetians also built ships, which they supplied to the Crusaders of western Europe, who, beginning in 1096, sought to reconquer Jerusalem and sacred shrines in the Holy Land that were now in the hands of Muslim Turks. Their campaigns, which continued into the thirteenth century, were ultimately a failure, although at various times they captured Jerusalem and ruled Crusader states in Palestine. Despite the warfare, the Crusaders did not hinder trade (Document 30). In fact, once they learned the real sources of spices and textiles, they actually stimulated trade. Demand for these goods and for a new "spice" called sugar increased in western Europe upon their return, and Italian merchants grew rich and powerful from this trade. In 1271, Marco Polo, a trader from Venice, set off with his father and uncle on a journey to the Mongol court of Khubilai Khan, and his report of their travels on his return more than twenty years later did much to stimulate interest in China and its riches for generations to come (Document 33).

In Quanzhou, Muslims formed a large community that dominated trade. The largest shipping firms in Quanzhou were owned by several different Muslim families, who had purchased thousands of junks from their Chinese manufacturers to maintain connections with Muslim communities in Arabia, Persia, and the islands of Southeast Asia. The eminent Muslim families residing in Quanzhou served the interests of the court during Song times, but immediately switched their loyalty to the Mongol Yuan dynasty when the latter took over the country. They acted as the new regime's liaison to overseas trading partners, using their Islamic networks and language skills (Document 34). Jewish merchants also migrated to Quanzhou and to other parts of China. Nestorian Christians, who had been expelled from China during the late Tang, reestablished themselves under Mongol rule in the thirteenth century, and they, too, became active in the maritime trade. Manichaeans, also suppressed by the late Tang persecution, had survived in southeastern China, and they likewise became active traders. There were also Hindu traders from India on China's southeastern coast. They must have found it hard to explain to the Chinese that they were not Buddhists, but members of a separate (not to mention competing) religion, and they apparently failed to get this message across. Enshrined in the largest Buddhist monastery in Quanzhou are statues of the Hindu deities Vishnu, Shiva, and Hanuman, an example of the religious diffusion often evident in trading communities.

Literally tons of herbs, spices, and aromatic resins used to make incense as well as medicines arrived at Quanzhou by ship. These items were no longer only for the use of religious institutions and royal families, but were commodities sold in even the most ordinary markets of China (Document 32). Large numbers of people in Asia and in the Mediterranean world were now wealthy enough to use spices in their cooking, incense in their devotions, and medicines made with imported herbs. Shiploads of silk textiles, tea, and porcelain departed from the port of Quanzhou. Some were highly valued products for the elites, and some were affordable for ordinary people to use, at least on some occasions.

Thus after fifteen hundred years of the Silk Roads, even as traffic shifted from the old land routes to the sea, the trade that had begun as an imperial exchange for rare luxuries was now driven by commerce and profit and by the desires of ordinary people rather than only by elites. As the trade broadened and widened, so did exchange of ideas, religions, and technologies. With the West ever more interested in the commodities of the East, and merchants and sailors ever more adventuresome in

their search for new routes and higher profits, the stage was set for the modern era.

NOTES

¹For the variety of silk textiles from Han China, see Adreas Schmidt-Clinet, Anne-Marie Stauffer, and Khaled Al-As'ad, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000), especially for the numerous high-quality plates and figures that reveal the styles of the second century CE.

²This Yumen, sometimes seen on maps as Yunenguan, was located west of Dunhuang and should not be confused with the present-day city of Yumen, which is located east of Dunhuang.

³For information regarding this international trade studied from the perspective of the Roman Empire, see Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD 305* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁴This number is probably an estimation by Zhang Qian and was recorded by Sima Qian. Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 2: 267.

⁵The excavations of Tillya Tepe in Afghanistan revealed a wealth of golden ornaments and other valuable goods that were buried with the Kushan rulers. See Victor Sardini, *The Golden Hoard of Bactria* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, and Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1985).

⁶For an analysis of the relationship between the theological development of Mahayana Buddhism and the Silk Road trade, see Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, AD 1-600* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88-102.

⁷For a good survey of Buddhist cave monasteries and their engagement in trade, see Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, eds., *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, with the Asia Society, 2001).

⁸For a comprehensive analysis of the Byzantine silk industry and its political significance, see R. S. Lopez, "Silk Industry in the Byzantine Empire," *Speculum* 20 (1945): 1-43.

⁹Etienne de la Vaisière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), is a collection of essays on recent discoveries of Sogdian graves and remains in China.

¹⁰Hugh Kennedy describes the splendid court decoration when the caliph Muqtadir received a delegation from Constantinople in 917. See *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2005), 152-56.

¹¹For more technical details about Arab dhows and seafaring, see George Fadlo Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, rev. and expanded by John Carswell (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).