

Imperial Horizons of the Silk Roads

Archaeological Case Studies

edited by

Branka Franicevic and Marie Nicole Pareja

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And One for the Road!

Introduction

Branka Franicevic and Marie N. Pareja

Current State of the Field

For millennia, the diverse peoples and cultures of Afro-Eurasia were interwoven as delicately as the silken threads for which the exchange routes are named—threads that became both a precious commodity and a fitting metaphor for perhaps the most expansive network of connections and exchanges in preindustrial history. The travel and terrain changed quickly and frequently, however, and the Silk Roads served as a testament to perseverance in travel and exchange. The many highways were treacherous and wound through narrow, steep mountain passes and bleak, expansive deserts where caravans often faced starvation, bandits, and imprisonment, whether lawful or not. Marine routes were no better, brimming with pirates, harsh weather and disease, and innumerable people were lost to the sea, whether by accident or purposeful deposition. Nevertheless, as people traversed vast imperial horizons, empires ravenously vied for resources as the quest for power and status continued.

The main arteries of the Silk Roads allowed for the cultivation of monopolies on certain materials, such as Afghanistan's lapis lazuli, South Asia's spices, or China's silk, which constitute important and unique facets of Silk Road scholarship (Daryaee 2010). Port-studded shorelines along maritime routes testified to the immense scale of exchange in the form of urban growth and prosperity, as evidenced by purpose-built bazaars and markets—veritable heartbeats of each trade hub (Morrisson 2012). Many scholars focus on the exchange of rare, exotic, and precious goods, materials, and even animals from within these marketplaces (Boulnois 2008; Tucker 2015; Whitfield 2015). The surrounding settlements served as melting pots for ideological, philosophical, iconographic, culinary, and linguistic customs and styles from throughout the Afro-Eurasian continent. The vast scale of interaction and its web of direct and indirect effects on the rise and development of global cultures is far from fully understood. Subsequently, this field is of great academic interest. Seemingly disparate disciplines engaged with the Silk Roads during different periods and in various ways: historians, anthropologists, curators, art historians, theologians, sociologists, philosophers, archaeologists, and those who specialise more particularly in politics, economics, migration and mobility, technological development, iconography, palaeobotany and palaeozoology, and others.

We often return to these well-worn routes in a quest to better understand ourselves, our collective past, and our shared identities. Nevertheless, material culture studies and archaeological projects dedicated to the Silk Roads are consistently challenged by a myriad of factors, not the least of which are modern regional conflicts. Additional difficulties disproportionately affect (largely archaeological) fieldwork: inhospitable environments, political situations, tenuous excavation permits, or a simple lack of funds, among other challenges, all of which have only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, recent projects are few, highly localised, and necessarily small in scale.

Our Contributions to the Field

It seems the best-documented, most dynamic phases of Silk Roads exchange may be associated with surges in political power and/or explosive populational migrations. Perhaps the earliest clear phase of Afro-Eurasian exchange, the Bronze Age (c. 3000–1177 BC) can serve as a foundation of exchange across the continent, most strongly driven by regions experiencing the surge and subsequent ebb of power: Yellow and Yangtze River cultures, the Indus, Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, and the Aegean, to name only a few. Almost a millennium later, between c. 206 BC and c. AD 220, The Han Dynasty and Rome raced to prominence from either side of the Eurasian continent. Power and influence shifted yet again in another dynamically volatile period, c. AD 618 to c. AD 907, from the Tang dynasty in China and Central Asia to India and on to the Persian Empire. Just as various political groups' power expanded, so did their numerous religions, including but not limited to Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. By the 13th and 14th centuries, Mongols seized control of most of the routes between China and Europe. Even today, one can see the imprints that the Silk Roads left on the physical landscape, which serve as invaluable indices for understanding both the people who lived and travelled through these regions, as well as their relationships with the environment. Both human and physical geography are of particular significance when studying exchange, as they provide integral clues to the peoples who traversed these routes through vastly different and unexpected terrain.

Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that the current corpus of scholarly work that contributes to our fundamental understanding of the types of interactions among people, animals, traditions, cultural environments, and the broader physical landscapes of these routes remains relatively underrepresented. It is from this foundation that the current volume was conceived. The editors hope that this transhistorical, transcontinental collection of essays will serve to help fill a notable gap in Silk Roads scholarship by providing many and various methodologies that allow for the reframing of current and future conceptions of trade and exchange.

Authors' Contributions by Chapter

This series of academic case studies focuses primarily on the ways in which the Silk Roads frontier regions were transformed by the exchange of goods, raw materials, and cultures. What do archaeological landscapes reveal about the formation of habitation sites? How are social identities represented and understood in burial practices? How can iconography offer clues to the earliest vestiges of transcontinental trade? Our contributors engage with matters that are foundational to understanding migratory practices, civilian settlements, belief systems, and the places where they overlap. In doing so, each study provides a context for comparative debate that engages the multifaceted aspects of environment and society cohesively, rather than engaging them each as disparate fields. Such methodologies offer the potential for both broader and more nuanced models and frameworks for understanding these networks and those who populated them.

The studies illustrate the significant exchange among Africa, Asia, and Europe from at least the 4th millennium BC through the 10th century AD. The present volume is unique in both its archaeological focus and broad timespan. Although founded on conventional academic approaches and perspectives in Silk Road studies, this anthology develops a slightly different

framework by offering synthesised archaeological projects on a geographically and temporally large, environmental scale. The resulting array of investigations provide transdisciplinary frameworks that interrogate traditional conceptions of time, place, and identity. This diversity of perspectives emphasises the innumerable paths into and through the study of the Silk Roads, and thus greatly benefits future fieldwork and fieldwork-adjacent projects, from inspiration through implementation and execution to completion and full publication.

Our volume is by no means exhaustive in scope, but rather each case study serves as a methodological example from which others may draw inspiration for their own projects and respective disciplines. Although episodic by virtue of each author's temporal specialty, the breadth of these studies facilitates discussions surrounding the archaeology of the Silk Roads from various complementary and unique perspectives. To gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the waxing and waning of trade and exchange along the Silk Roads, this volume begins in prehistory with comparative material culture studies. To provide consistency, the contributions are grouped into related thematic sections: migrations, settlements, and spiritual traditions. Due to the various types of evidence employed by the case studies, the sections are not mutually exclusive. Each study addresses an environmental or anthropological question connected to movement (people, goods, beliefs, practices) and then uses a range of methods to support cultural or historical interpretation in archaeological contexts to support a range of material evidence.

The first section of this volume is dedicated to human mobility and migration in terms of environmental and spatial patterns. In chapter one, Marie N. Pareja challenges traditional Silk Roads chronologies and proposes that some of the earliest Eurasian exchange occurred during the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods (4th and 3rd millennium BC). Her finds are based in the study of confluence: she recognizes that the movement of people, iconography, raw materials, goods, and even disease (from as far as northern Siberia, Southeast Asia, Southeast Africa, Scandinavia, and the British Isles) are supported by textual sources and material analysis studies. Through this study, she illuminates the presence of prehistoric Afro-Eurasian Silk Roads, which is well illustrated in tandem with travelling monkey imagery.

In the following chapter, Branka Franicevic argues for the inextricable enmeshment of animals with the (re)creation, existence, and subsequent decline of the Silk Roads. She illustrates that animals often literally carry the brunt of responsibility in exchange, whether through literal silk-making, transporting, functioning either as or necessarily with luxury materials and goods, entwinement with religious belief, as military support, and as agents for the spread of disease. Critically, using current biomolecular evidence, she re-evaluates and redefines the centrality of animals to the Silk Road.

In chapter three, Anna Bloxam demonstrates the construction of social identity and transmission of multigenerational social memory in the early British Bronze Age. A combined methodological approach allows her to reconsider atypical funerary rites, which she argues are clear indices cultural mixing between those with deep local roots and those new to the area. Anna's work constitutes the westernmost bounds of the maritime Silk Routes.

Andrew Hutcheson and Simon Kaner explore the roles of religions from the 6th to 10th centuries in chapter four. By comparing large-scale burial monuments in Japan and the North

Sea areas, their findings demonstrate how landscapes of conversion progressed by ruling groups with the adoption of Christianity and Buddhism.

Dulcie Sydney Daffodil Newbury and Karina Croucher (chapter five) examine the concept of feminine impurity in religious and cultural frameworks, particularly in relation to menstruation. The authors analyse the preserved remains of menstrual structures, seclusions, and archaeobotanical remains in central and southeast Asia from c.AD 600 to c. AD 1200. The study concludes that comparable fertility rites and rituals were performed throughout this area, as both demanded by the individuals' or local culture's beliefs and traditions.

The second section of this volume focuses on iconographic and object-based inquiries that re-examine and re-evaluate traditional interpretations of material culture. In chapter six, Marie N. Pareja offers a new possible interpretation of Bronze Age Aegean evidence for the existence of at least one central goddess: a polyvalent Aegean Potnia. She argues that by consciously crafting a syncretic deity and corpus of generalized cult paraphernalia, Aegean Islands (whose survival depends on their function as hubs for trade) could be considered ideologically adjacent to whomever sees a familiar figure in their goddess. Potnia is a paradoxical deity of duality, at once fierce warrior and gentle nature goddess, traits shared with the central Mesopotamian goddess, Inanna. Through a critical re-evaluation of imagery, artefact, text, and historical and religious parallels, Pareja proves that the connections and exchange between these regions are much closer and stronger than traditionally thought.

In the following chapter, Sara Ann Knutson examines silver *Abbasid* coin assemblages from northern Eurasian regions. Her study demonstrates that the circulation of highly portable, relatively standardized items throughout an exchange network can inform economic and social interactions between Afro-Eurasian communities. Such small objects also, therefore, serve to associate people and landscapes, thus further informing modern perspectives on such networks between the 8th and 10th centuries AD.

Emilia Smagur, Riza Abbas, Sitaram Toraskar, and Andrzej Romanowski (chapter eight) evaluate the role of commerce in the development of an ancient *Sopara* port in India from the 3rd century BC through the 9th century AD. By implementing surface survey and geographical information systems (GIS) analysis, the authors emphasise the complexity of landscape use during this 1100-year span, while also addressing both urban planning and the diachronic development of the port.

In chapter nine, Robert Jones re-examines the images of the domesticated horse in China through two lenses: as both physical art object and as metaphysical, supernatural being. Where the flying horse motif appears, a distinct intercultural connection is evident among pre-Hellenic South, East, and Central Asian cultural groups, which were previously thought to be rather isolated from one another.

Ran Zhang, in chapter 10, reconsiders the study of Early Chinese ceramics in the Western Indian Ocean. By revisiting the distribution of three key features (number, variety, and value) of ceramics, the investigation reveals a complex yet interactive long-distance economic contacts between Tang China and the Abbasid Caliphate. With the transregional approach to chart exchange routes and nodal points, it becomes possible to grapple with larger investigations

of intercultural exchange and connectivity between Africa and the eastern regions of the early Silk Road networks. Such studies have implications for mapping the ancient cities and certainly impact matters of global ecological restoration.

Iró Camici concludes the case studies in chapter 11 by considering social change and complexity in the ancient world. By closely examining pottery from the Mycenaean period, she observes changes in ceramic vessels to detect and better understand the indications of a shifting social climate among the inhabitants of Mainland Greece. In particular, she discusses technological traditions as a way of understanding cultural connectivity between production centres and peripheral areas of the early Silk Roads. By combining ethnography and experimental archaeology, Camici illustrates the changing perception of distance, rarity, and value through Mycenaean pottery.

These case studies serve to reconsider traditional notions of the Silk Roads, whether prehistoric or historic, that presupposed too-easily disrupted transportation, centralised trade, and the dislocation and estrangement of societies from their environments. A considerable portion of this volume's value can be attributed to the diversity and novelty of the methodological approach—in many cases, transdisciplinary in nature—undertaken by the authors. Critically, this collection of case studies serves both as a sampling of history and culture from various locales throughout this network of exchange while also serving as a sort of handbook for the various ways of engaging with the surviving material record in light of sociocultural networks. This volume is particularly valuable to the field of archaeology which, as a relatively new discipline that navigates the applied sciences and liberal arts, requires a toolbox of multifaceted approaches. If nothing else, each chapter of this collection may serve as a different tool, requiring a distinct yet related skillset, within the proverbial archaeological toolbox. These collected essays are a testament to our fundamental curiosity as humans about other humans, particularly their migration and movement – together with traditions, goods, practices, and ideologies—within and throughout the environment.

Conclusion

This volume offers new perspectives and approaches to traditional inquiry through the application of a multitude of different techniques and methods. As such, these case studies shed new light on Old World connectivity, the lasting impact of which resonates even today. Dividing the volume into thematic sections allows for unique synthesis of current knowledge from datasets in different contexts, periods, and regions. An array of diverse cultures demanded interdisciplinary collaboration, which is pivotal in striving for greater research potential so that single realms do not omit the bigger picture of network connectivity. From an archaeological angle, the text is curated to showcase the complex histories of the Silk Roads while offering insight into humanity's ability to adapt and innovate. The volume also serves as a basis for establishing a much-needed framework that may bridge the plethora of disparate disciplines that lend themselves to this area of research. Critically, considering Afro-Eurasian ('global') exchange as inextricable with the Silk Roads is of central importance when engaging with prehistoric and historic pasts. In this respect, the book demonstrates how archaeological work can be integrated to deliver exclusive, intersectional, and integrative perspectives of the Silk Roads.

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