



chapter one

What is the Silk Route?

A Bridge between East and West



▲ This partly gilded silver plate from northern India shows an animal from Iranian myth. This type of metalwork was made by Sasanian craftsmen from Iran during 4-8th Century CE and even reached China via the Silk Route. The Chinese often copied Sasanian motifs in their own art and clothing.

► Paths on the Silk Route would often be as broken and difficult as this mountain pass in Iran.



Did you know?
Although the Silk Route was in regular use for over 1600 years, it was never known as the Silk Route during this period. In fact, it had no overall name at all. A hundred years ago the German explorer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen referred to it as *die Seidenstrasse*, which in German means 'The Silk Route', and the name stuck.

'There is snow both in winter and summer, winds, rain, drifting sand and gravel stones. The road is difficult and broken, with steep crags and precipices in the way. The mountainside is simply a stone wall standing up 10,000 feet [3,000 metres] . . . on going forward, there is no sure foothold.' This passage is taken from the writings of the 5th Century Chinese pilgrim, Fa Xian. It describes some of the terrifying conditions he met as he travelled along stretches of the Silk Route on his pilgrimage to India from China.

This ancient route linked China in the East with Europe in the West, crossing through the heart of the Asian landmass. Its interlocking paths covered a distance of over 8000 kilometres! Many different people lived along the Silk Route's paths. These included not only the Chinese and the Europeans, but the many peoples of Central Asia and

Middle East: Huns, Mongols, Iranians, Arabs and Turks to name but a few. During the 1600 years of its existence, the Silk Route acted as a channel of communication between these diverse cultures.

But why did this extraordinary route come about? The simplest answer is trade; the buying and selling of goods. Since earliest times, people have traded goods with their neighbours. Certain prized goods were passed on from one tribe to the next, causing distinct trading routes to emerge. Gradually, these routes joined together to extend over huge distances. Each separate tribe or community was like a link in a chain and the trade brought wealth and prestige to each link.

It was around the start of the first century before the Common Era (100 BCE) that the many different links in a long trading chain came together to form what we now call the Silk Route. For the first time, European gold could buy the luxuries of China, including the silk that gives the route its name. But it was a difficult exchange: as Fa Xian describes, the route crossed some dangerous terrain and the traders also faced the possibility of attack from marauding tribesmen and bandits. The Silk Route was safest and most successful when its paths were protected by powerful empires. Thus the history of these empires, their rise and fall, directly affected the fortunes of the Silk Route, from its early origins until its final decline around 1500 CE, when the sea routes took over as the main trade links between East and West.



▲ The Silk Route had to cross one of two high mountain ranges in Central Asia, the Karakoram or the Pamirs. This peak in the Karakoram is over 7800 metres high.



In its turn, the Silk Route had a deep effect on history. Before its coming, the Chinese and the Europeans had no idea of each other's existence! Along the paths of the Silk Route travelled not only goods but knowledge – knowledge of different lands and people, of their cultures and beliefs. It is this knowledge that has been the Silk Route's greatest influence on history and its most lasting legacy for us today.

▲ A trading caravan of merchants and camels. This detail is taken from a 14th Century map called *The Golden Road to Samarkand*, which was based on information brought back to Europe by Marco Polo, the most famous of the Silk Route explorers.



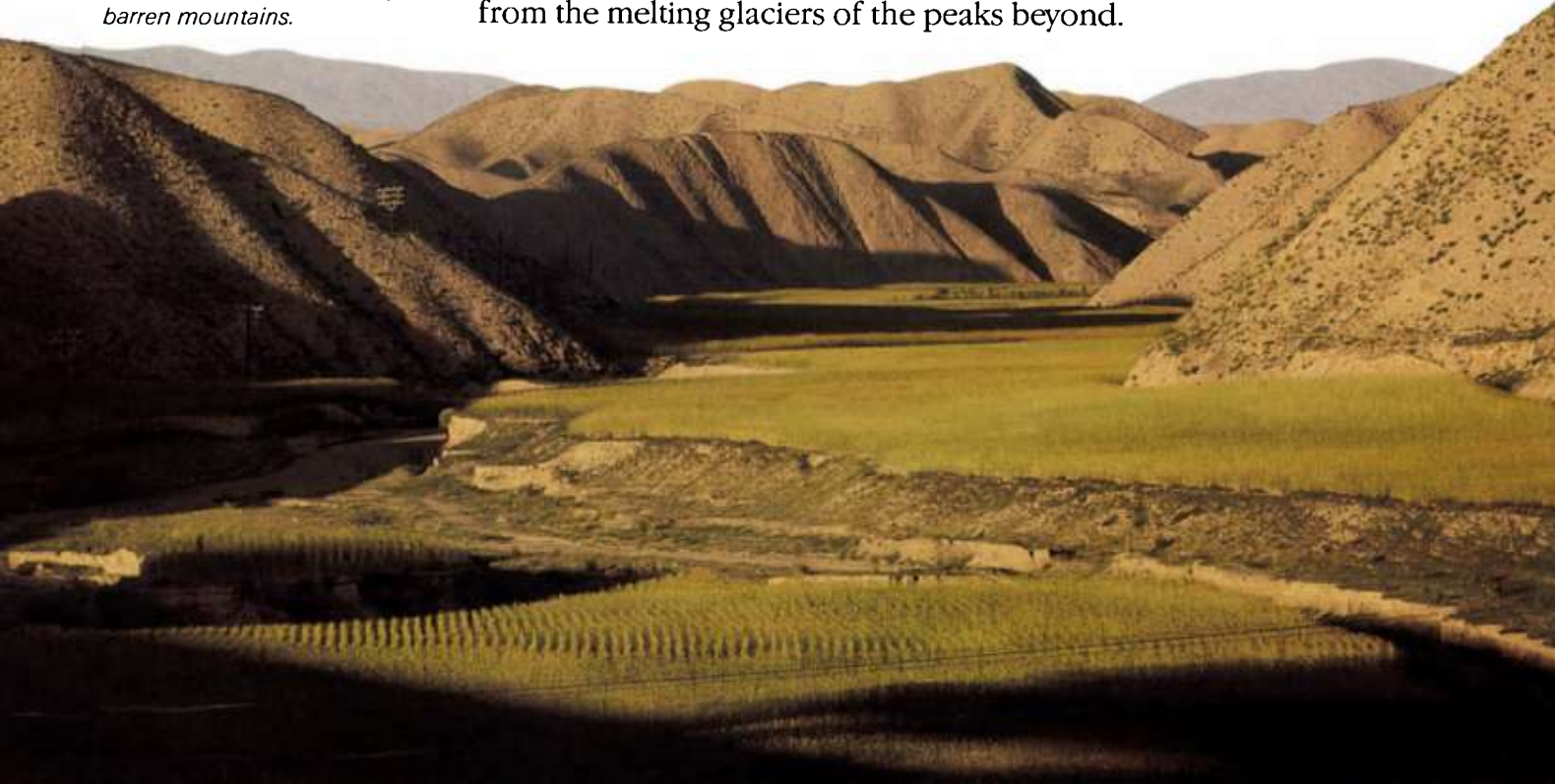
To the Roof of the World

The eastern starting point of the Silk Route was Changan (modern-day Xi'an), the ancient capital of the Chinese Empire. From here the traders and their caravans of camels set out west along the Gansu Corridor, a strip of fertile land which stretched over 800 kilometres to Dunhuang. This city was at the western end of the Great Wall of China, which the Chinese had built to protect themselves from the war-like tribes to the north. For the ancient Chinese, Dunhuang was considered the edge of the civilized world.

The next stage of the Silk Road crossed one of the most inhospitable stretches of terrain on the surface of the globe: the Tarim Basin. This vast natural basin today forms part of the north-eastern Chinese province known as Xinjiang. It is over 1500 kilometres long and 750 kilometres wide and is surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges rising to over 6000 metres. Its eastern end opens into the Gobi Desert. In the midst of the Tarim Basin lies the Taklamakan, a desert of high, shifting sand dunes that over the centuries have buried entire cities. Mongolian, Turkic, Iranian and Chinese people inhabit this desolate region. They live in small, isolated cities on the edge of the Taklamakan at the foot of the surrounding mountains. The patches of fertile ground around these cities are watered by the spring torrents from the melting glaciers of the peaks beyond.

▲ *The Silk Route was not just used by trading caravans but travelling pilgrims such as Buddhist monks and friars. This picture shows one such friar. It is part of a 9th Century mural from Dunhuang, on the Silk Route, where a famous Buddhist shrine grew up.*

▼ *The fertile strip of the Gansu Corridor is so-called because it is hemmed in on two sides by barren mountains.*





◀ *Brightly coloured silks are still sold today in the market place at Kashgar, just as they were over 2000 years ago.*

Travellers on the Silk Road could choose to skirt north or south around the Taklamakan Desert, covering the long hazardous journey in a series of stages from oasis to oasis. This part of the journey was very hard. Temperatures could range from -20°C to over 40°C and swirling sandstorms were a constant hazard.

From the southern path, it was possible to cross over the Karakoram Mountains into India, but the main north and south trails met up again at Kashgar, which marked the half-way point of the Silk Route. Still a thriving community today, this city lies at the foot of the Pamir Mountains. These have peaks which rise to over 7500 metres. Their height and central position on the globe have led them to be called 'The Roof of the World'.



▶ *Map of the main paths of the Silk Route from Changan to Kashgar.*

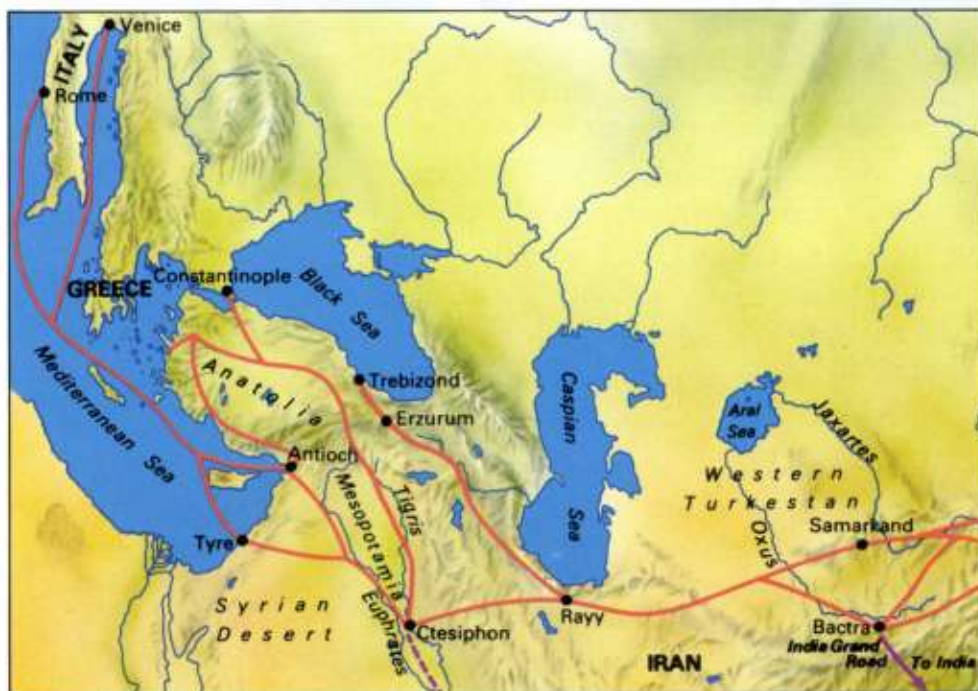
The Silk Route caravans now had to cross one of the high passes over the Pamirs to continue their journey to the West. Here the trail often consisted of little more than narrow rock ledges, 4500 metres up along the sides of sheer cliffs. The caravaners, with their precious cargoes of silk, were forced to battle their way through snowstorms and faced the danger of avalanches and falling rocks – often with only the thought of the vast profit at the end of their journey to keep them going.



The Route to Europe

After crossing the snowy passes of the Pamir Mountains, the trails of the Silk Route descended through a series of narrow valleys to the plains of Western Turkestan. Today this area lies in northern Afghanistan and in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, south of the Aral Sea. Here the Silk Route passed into a pleasant land of green fields, gardens and orchards watered by two great rivers: the Oxus (now known as Amudar'ya) and the Jaxartes (or Syrdar'ya).

► Map of the main paths of the Silk Route from the Pamirs to the Mediterranean.



▼ The rich pastures of the Anatolian Plateau in central Turkey, through which the Silk Route passed on its way to the Black Sea and Turkey.



The Silk Route continued to follow several trails at this point. Many of the caravans would trade in goods from India and so continued down the southern trail to Bactra (later called Balkh). For centuries the Indian Great Road, the trading route up from the Punjab plain, ended here. This meeting of two great trading routes made Bactra into an important trading centre. In its bazaars and markets, goods from as far afield as China, Malaysia, the Middle East and Europe were exchanged. For a time, the trade enabled Bactra to become one of the world's great cities, an equal of Rome, Baghdad and Changan. But as the sea routes to India gained in importance, so overland trade dwindled and with it the wealth that made Bactra great.

The main northern trail of the Silk Route passed through Samarkand (now in Uzbekistan, part of the former Soviet Union), and then continued up onto the Iranian plateau to Rayy (which is just outside modern-day Tehran, the capital of Iran). From here the Silk Route divided again. One route turned north to Trebizond on the Black Sea; the other descended into the fertile land of Mesopotamia, watered by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. During the centuries the Silk Route passed through this region, many great empires rose and fell: amongst these were the Parthian and Sasanian empires of Iran and the Muslim caliphates. Each of these empires came to rely on the wealth created by the Silk Route trade.

After Mesopotamia the Silk Route continued north-west, skirting the Syrian Desert, before splitting once more into several trails. Some routes headed north across Anatolia (in modern Turkey) to Constantinople (now Istanbul), from 330 CE the capital of the eastern Roman Empire. Other trails fanned out to ports such as Tyre and Antioch, on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. In these ports, silk and other valuable oriental merchandise was sold for gold and transported by ship to Rome, or, in later times, to whatever great European cities had wealth to squander on the luxuries of the East.



▲ *Funerary bust of a rich man from Palmyra carved between 50-150 CE. Palmyra was a Roman city in the Middle East made wealthy by trade with the East.*



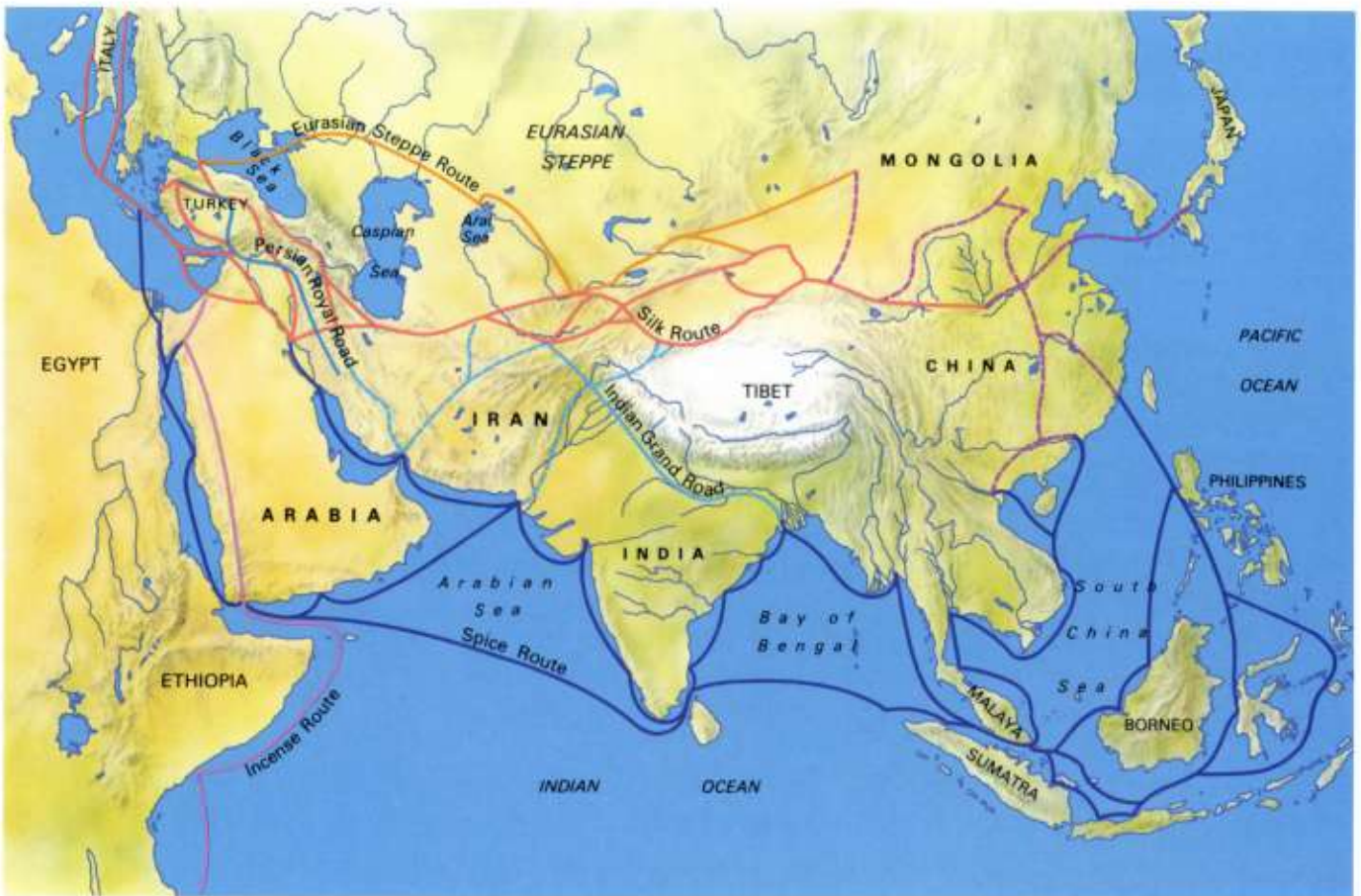
◀ *Many castles, such as this one in eastern Turkey, were built along the Silk Routes. Most gave protection to the trade caravans but some were home to the bandits who made a living by attacking and stealing from the traders.*



▲ The ruins of Sardis in Turkey. This ancient city was the starting point for Darius' Persian Royal Road.

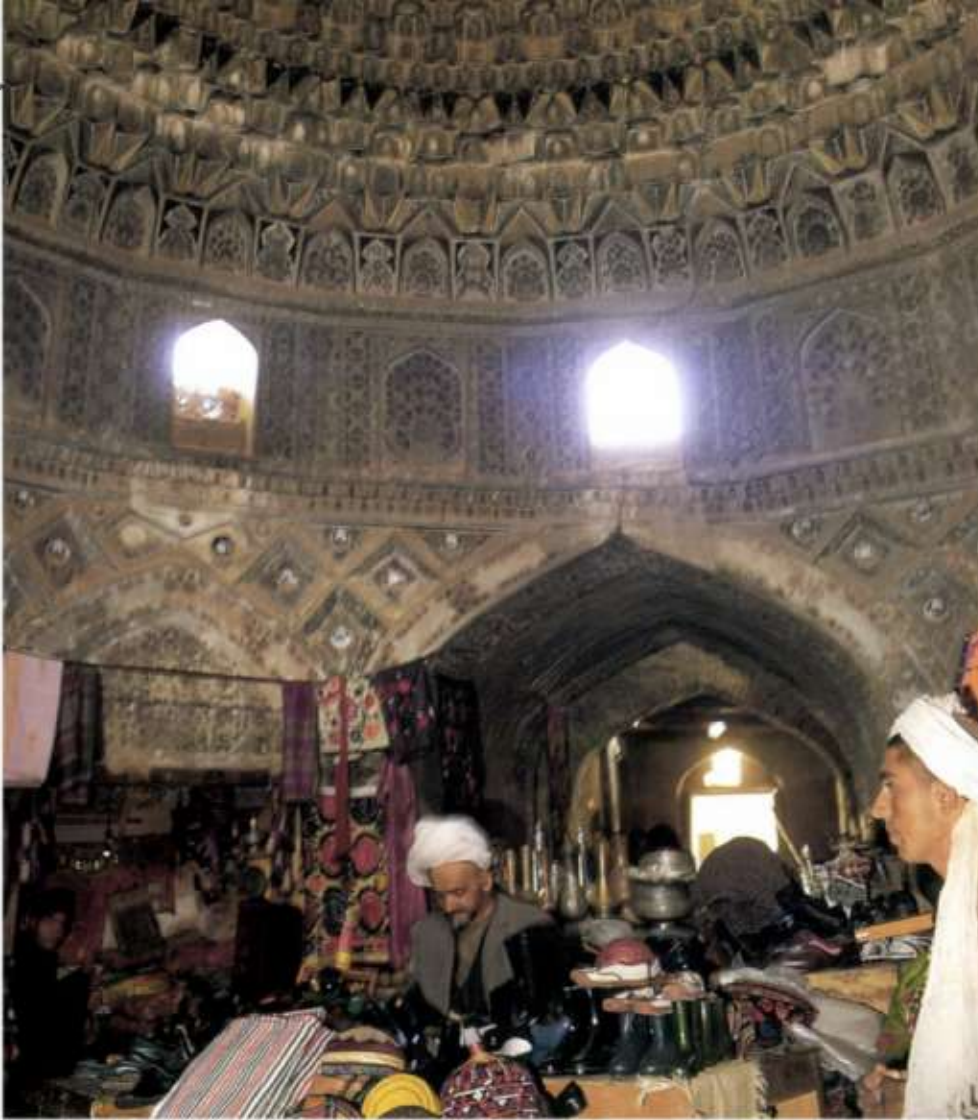
The Many Roads of the Silk Route

As we have seen, the Silk Route consisted of more than just one single road linking East and West. At certain points it divided into a number of side routes. It split to avoid the hazards of the Taklamakan Desert. It crossed the Pamir Mountains by a number of different passes and followed several distinct routes across Western Turkestan. And at the western end it forked into different routes: to the eastern Mediterranean shore, overland through Anatolia (in modern Turkey), and up to the shores of the Black Sea. These alternative routes would wax and wane in importance depending upon which was safest, or who held power in the regions they crossed.



▲ Map outlining the many trade routes that linked East and West.

The overall title 'The Silk Route' also includes such important tributaries as the Eurasian Steppe Route. This route crossed central Asia through the vast Steppe lands to the north of the Tian Shan Mountains, which lie on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin. Joining the main route briefly in Western Turkestan, it then headed



▲ Colourful spices, such as these, formed a major part of the trade across Asia and gave their name to the sea routes.

◀ A covered bazaar in Afghanistan. Money and goods would change hands many times in bazaars and markets such as this, linked across Asia by the trade routes.

north-west across what used to be the southern Soviet Union. It passed north of the Aral and Caspian Seas and arrived on the northern shores of the Black Sea.

The Silk Route incorporated part of an even older overland route, the Persian Royal Road. This was established at the turn of the 5th century BCE by the Persian Emperor Darius. This road travelled over a thousand miles between Darius' capital Susa in Persia and Anatolia, and Darius encouraged trade to pass along it. In 331 BCE, the route found a different use: Alexander the Great and his Greek army travelled over stretches of it on their long march of conquest into Asia.

The Silk Route also linked up with several other great trading routes. The Indian Grand Road brought spices up from the Punjab over the Hindu Kush to join the Silk Route at Bactra. The Incense Road, carrying oriental perfumes, led up from the southern shore of Arabia to join the Silk Route at Damascus. Here in the Syrian heartland the Silk Route was also joined by a branch of the Spice Route. This was largely a sea route, which led down the Red Sea, across the Indian Ocean to India, and beyond to the south coast of China. This was the Silk Route's main alternative in trade with the East. During the periods when the Silk Route was too dangerous for traders, silk would often come from China by ship along this much longer (but often much safer) route.



▲ This 13th Century flask, made in Afghanistan, was sent to India, probably via the Indian Grand Road.