A Short History of the Silk Road.

The history of the Silk Road is a unique example of inter-continental co-operation and collaboration not only with material trade, but also in religion, ideas and technologies. It is my intention to explore the history of the Silk Road using archaeological and literature sources.

The Silk Road, or the Silk Route, was an overland and maritime series of ‘roads’ that connected China in the east and the Mediterranean in the west. The Silk Road was made up of two routes, the Northern Route and the Southern. In this article, I will use examples from both routes and make the necessary references to them.

It was this cultural circulation, migration and trade that were the basis of Eurasian advancement for over 2,000 years. It should be stressed that the name ‘The Silk Road’ was not coined until the 19th century by the German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, who named it after the widespread silk trade (Frank, p.2).

In the 2nd century BCE, the ambassador Zhang Qian was sent to gather information regarding the Yuezhi for an alliance with the Chinese Han emperor, Wu Di. Not only was Wu Di interested in forming a treaty with the Yuezhi against the Xiongnu, but was also interested in trade with other civilizations, including the Farghana (modern-day Uzbekistan), Bactria (parts of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and the Parthian Empire.

It was Zhang Qian’s accounts that were recorded in Sima Qian’s *Record of the Grand Historian*, otherwise known as *Shiji*, which gives us valuable information regarding the history of China and central Asia. However, it should be noted that in recent decades, some historians have doubted the accuracy of the information gathered by Zhang Qian.

We can find evidence of the transition of religious, cultural and technological identities throughout the Silk Road. Let us look at the religious influences that are apparent throughout the many civilizations along the Silk Road.

The foremost religious development was that of Buddhism. Buddhism “*as a religion grew out of the teaching of an historic individual, Siddhartha Gautama”* (Barnes, p.165) who lived in north-east India in the 6th century BCE. The religion was transferred from India, to central Asia, China to Korea in the 4th century CE and ultimately to Japan in the 6th century CE. Different forms of Buddhism were practiced, up to 18 according to different sources (Barnes, p.169). “*Both Hinayāna and Mahāyānan forms were spread in all directions beyond India in the early centuries, but many areas saw the predominance of one or the other at different times*” (Barnes, p.169).

As well as the introduction of religious beliefs, technologies were also transferred from India to China along the Silk Road, including medicine. This transition occurred during the medieval period and can be traced to Buddhist canonical literature which occurred when Buddhism was introduced into China during the Han period (25-220 CE).

Xuan Zhuang, between 629 and 645 CE, and Yi Xing between 671 and 695 CE visited India and exchanged the Chinese techniques of pulse taking and acupuncture. On their return journey, they came back with Buddhist works containing innumerable medical references, including knowledge of medical plants and methods of treatment. From this, we can clearly see that the transmission of technologies was in both directions, although it must be noted that the documentation in India could have been better (Deshpande, p.1079).

There is also archaeological evidence of the exchange of artistic ideas between the different civilizations along the Silk Road. An embroidered textile with confronted bird dated to the T’ang Dynasty in the 8th century CE was found. It is decorated with confronted geese or ducks that flank a large leafy flowering stem. Although symmetry is a central element in Chinese design, “*the pattern of a pair of confronting animals or birds on either side of a plant (the so-called sacred tree) was not known in China until the opening of the Silk Road in the second century BCE”* (Valenstein, Watt, Siu, Ford, Lerner & Kossak, p.76). It is probable that the pattern was adapted from a western Asian motif in the early T’ang period (Valenstein, Watt, Siu, Ford, Lerner & Kossak, p.76), and once introduced here, it began to take on the hue of its new environment.

When we look at the migration aspect of cultural trade along the Silk Road, archaeological excavations uncovered a splendid jar called a *ming-ch’i*, an object made especially for burial with the dead, dating from the late 6th century CE. Many of the decorations applied to this jar are related with Buddhist connections. The decorative style has a definite western derivation, *“particularly in the singular motif of pearl roundels containing heads with frontal Central Asian faces”* (Valenstein, Watt, Siu, Ford, Lerner & Kossak, p.75). This design, clearly influenced by the Central Asian Khotanese kingdom, has not been found anywhere else in China. It has been proposed that this object was made for the tomb of an important individual of a community of foreigners living in the northern Chinese capitols during the late 6th century CE.

Reviewing the material, documentary and archaeological, helps to understand that the Silk Road was an important aspect in the development of not only China, but Eurasia and the western civilizations. It was the bridge that linked the East with the West, promoting not only trade goods, but technologies, religious ideas and was an example of mutual co-operation.

Today, the Silk Road is more of a tourist attraction than a serious archaeological project. However, little by little, pieces of archaeological evidence are coming to light which helps us understand more about the history of the Silk Road and its significance in Eurasian development.

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