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Silk Road between Iran, Central Asia and Western China

Bruno Genito

Department of Asia, Africa and Mediterraneum, University "L'Orientale", Napoli, Italy.
ISMEO-International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, Rome, Italy.
E- mail: bgenito@unior.it

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Abstract

The main aim of the author in this article is to emphasize how little of the "silk" product up to now was recognized and identified at the level of material culture archaeologically collected in the places and sites from the areas connected to the Road, and to highlight, on the contrary, how much a wonderful and almost untouchable imaginative and often unrealistic narrative about those routes, took over. To do this, the author necessarily starts with an outline of the historiographical concept of the *Silk Road* and of the way it was used in the scientific tradition. The author also deals with the term Silk Road which, as is known, then, conventionally refers to a network of trade roads across the Eurasian regions, traditionally considered linking the Chinese and Roman political-imperial formations. The study of these roads in the last century has often utilized also some other names including those of *Spice Road, Incense Road, Cotton Road, Amber Road,* which, in different epochs, have chronologically and geographically, partially, indicated different branches of routes, also whether in a way, to the first ones related. Any way, with the historiographic use of the term *Silk Road* in the 19th cent., a new era in the relations between East and West, the Roman, the Persian and Chinese empires, was definitely considered opened. Silk sooner or later became the most important commodity traded, and the western names of China were clearly related to its production which is also in details described by the author. Finally, the decline of the terrestrial *Silk Road* was brought about by the discovery and the adfirmation of the sea routes to and from India and China.

Keywords: History, Silk, Archaeology, Roads.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

Within the more or less controversial scholarly debate on the *Silk Road,* and especially in view of the fact that it involves several macroscopic political entities, such as ancient Rome, Iran on the one hand, and China on the other (Sima and Watson 1961), it is appropriate to make some clarifications that will immediately free the field from obsolete interpretive tendencies that are, therefore, no longer easily usable. Particularly since between these two last geopolitical giants lies the vast territory of Central Asia, in which, in turn, several other particular political formations were born and developed, playing their own active role of cultural encounter and mediation.

As is well known, there are a large amount of publications on the *Silk Road*, and it is impossible to list them all here; we will, however, mention many of them during the course of the work, amonst which it is noteworthy to cite first, now, the important book by Kuz'mina, which deals with the so-called prehistory of the *Silk Road* (Kuz'mina 2008). The author intentionally clarifies the historical importance of the Eurasian ecology in enlarging the economic potential of those routes in the development of Eurasia, emphasizing also the protohistoric origin of most of them. This aspect has been also underlined by most other recent contributions dealing with the history of the char and chariots as well, traditionally some of the best means of transportation, with also the exchange of arms and weapons, tragic vehicles of knowledge and commercial needs as well.

Last but not least, it is also noteworthy to highlight the UNESCO's extensive recent work

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activities on the *Silk Road* (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b; 2012), which, in turn, emphasise its role as an indelible cultural heritage to be enhanced and preserved for the future of the mankind. It is also worth highlighting the projects and contributions of Williams (2013a; 2013b), who is on the same wavelength as UNESCO's works[1].

The crucial importance of the *Silk Road*, as a whole set of itineraries, is also due to the fact that as historiographical category, between a kind of romantic mysticism, conflicts and mysteries, it has been preserved in the imagination as a sort of globalisation *ante litteram*, of which the "silk" product, has become the symbol. The possible comparison of the historical *Silk Road* with Chinese new political and economical concept of *Silk Road* (in Chinese: "one belt, one road initiative"), suggests that those economic, political and cultural ties and ideas, have remained almost intact in the human mind, despite the passage of several millennia (Thubron 2006), beyond any completely and historically different geopolitical considerations.

Within the history of the concept of *Silk Road*, the centrality and the territorial importance of settlements, resting places, military garrisons, fortresses and ideological-religious buildings or caves at a certain point incredibly increased and widespread over those trade roads, acquire, in the opinion of most of scholars, a role and a function that go beyond their own original ones, and were proposed as a Unitarian sign of relationships between these remains and the given geo-environmental conditions. In this sense, the better definition of the phenomenon with plural use of *Silk Roads* may help to consider them, as one the vastest political trade constructions, based on the work organisation at different levels and on to different specialities. All this practically "invented" a kind of a more modern economy, dominated by the market and no longer by the state powers' control. It is precisely for this reason that trades have been able to adapt with agility and skill amongst the much more rigid, still present, state economies, such as those of the countries mentioned above (de La Vaissiére 2024).

Silk Roads have, furthermore, as is known, always evoked adventure, exoticism, journeys to distant lands and emotions, because in an ideal line connecting Xi'an and Rome, the two possible eastern and western extremes, we can observe that we are facing immense long distance, which by air alone, reaches aproximately from 8,000 to 10,000 km. (Figure. 1).

Many other important scientific contributions, articles and books on the topic, even some of the recent ones (Liu 2022; Genito 2022a) clearly include, in this long story of trade and commercial activities, the areas of many differing present countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Egypt. Those areas with their cities, villages and peculiar settlements such those of the oases recognizable here and there, almost always located between sedentary and nomadic worlds, true islands of "paradise" amidst the climatic-environmental torments of the deserts (Ligabue and Rossi-Osmida 2007). These publications have tried, in a certain sense, to recognize an unpublished "global" character in those trade routes in a period in which, in truth, the very modern concept of "global" was completely unknown.

The first concept and words relating to the *Silk Road* were introduced in the West in 1877, by the German geographer, geologist and Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (FVR) (1877; 1883; 1886; 1903), who first used the term *Seidenstraße* as an introduction to one of his works (1907). He did so in order to refer to the relationships between East and West, with the southern and northern routes, most of which passed through historic cities such as Wuwei (Gansu), Anxi (Fujian) (China) (where the possible first bifurcation could begin), Kashgar (Xinijang, China), Kokand, Samarkand (Uzbekistan), Teheran (Iran), Baghdad (Iraq), Palmyra (Syria) (where the possible second bifurcation could begin as well), on the one hand, towards Damascus (Syria), Gaza (Palestinian Territories), Cairo, Alexandria (Egypt) and, on the other, towards Aleppo, Antioch (Syria), Angora/Ankara, Izmir, Istanbul (Turkey), Athens

[1] One cannot forget to mention some important exhibitions on the *Silk Roads* held in Italy in the last thirty years (Lucidi 1994; VV.AA. 2010; D'Arelli and Callieri 2011). The author, in the emantimee, has dealt with differing lectures on the topic, among which the most important are: the first, in 2010, in Italian language, with the title *Globalizzazione nell'antichità e sviluppi culturali tra l'Asia centrale e la Cina lungo la* Via della Seta. *Grandangolo, Forum Italo-Cinese, Scienza, Cultura e Sviluppo, da Chang'an a Roma, l'Ovest e l'Est nell'Era della Globalizzazione, 15 marzo, Sala dei Convegni, Camera di Commercio, Industria ed Artigianato ed Agricoltura, Via S. Aspreno 2.* Napoli; the second, also in Italian language in 2011, *Vie della Seta, Popoli, Storia e Archeologia tra l'Iran e la Cina.* Istituto Confucio di Napoli; the third, one in English language, in 2012, SEECHAC *Archaeology of the Silk Roads, routes, images and material culture*. Paris.

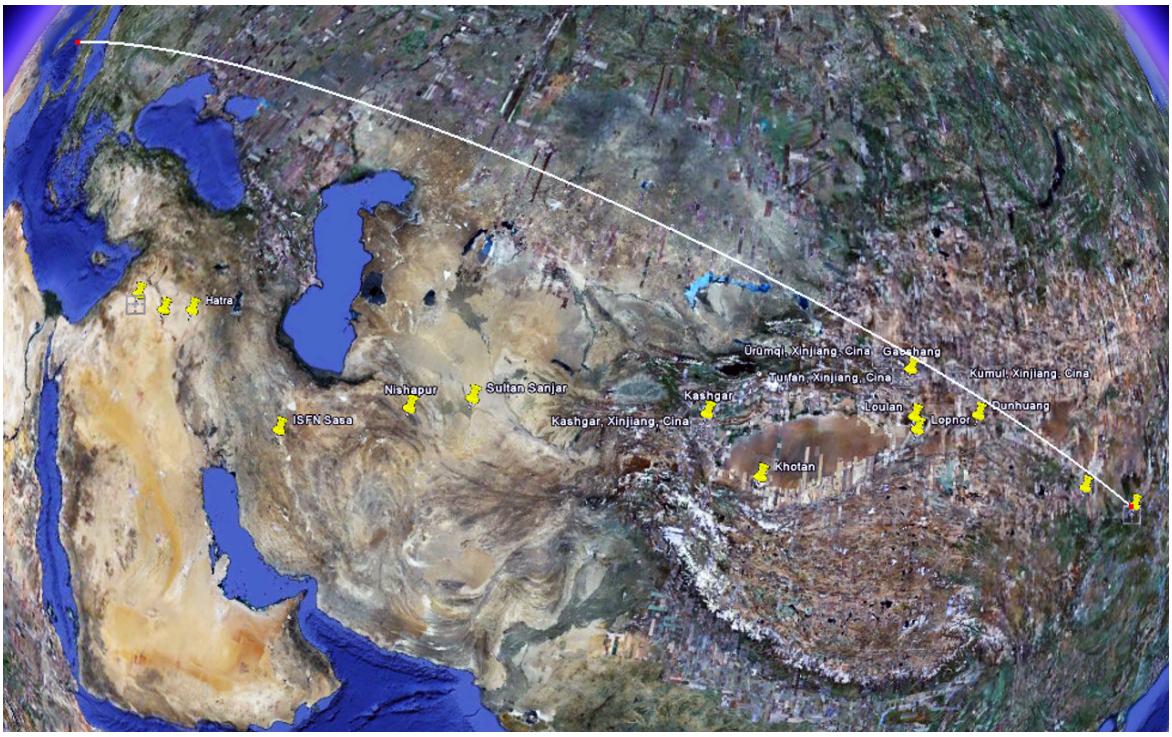


Figure. 1 : *The aerial long distance between Xi'an (Shaanxi province, China) and Rome (Italy), the two extreme imperial cities ideally linked each other through those trade routes, After: Google Earth 01/ 01 /2022. modified by the Author)*

(Greece), to rejoin Rome and Venice (Italy) by sea. In the mid-19th century, FVR was one of the first westerners to explore large parts of China, and as a geologist he undertook several journeys, in search of mineral resources and ways to exploit them for industrial development. FVR's travels took him to many places, particularly in the Chinese provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi and Hebei. FVR's writing can be a little tedious at times, especially as he likes to go into long descriptions of all the different types of soil and coal beds he comes across.

History, Antecedents and Travellers

There are countless other sources, as historical reconstructions, maps, legends, drawings and as diaries of ambassadors, travellers, explorers, merchants, missionaries, warriors, scientists and artists who spoke and wrote about the trade routes latere defined as *Silk Roads*, starting from the famous Italians Marco Polo (13th cent. -14th cent.) (1977)[1] , Matteo Ricci (16th cent.) (Bortone 1953), Giovanni Caboto (15th cent.) (Violante 2022), Giovanni da Verrazzano (15th cent.) (Hagge 2023) and Giuseppe Castiglione (17th cent.) (Loehr 1940).

In this more general perspective, it is of course necessary to remember the role and importance of other scientists such as Sven Hedin (1898a; 1898b; 1903, 1944; 1937; 1940; 1942; 1943; 1955)[2] and Nikolaj Mihajlovič Prževalskij (1870-

[1] In Iran and Iraq, for example, Marco Polo testifies to the urban and cultural qualities of cities such as Kerman, Isfahan, Tabriz, Baghdad and Mosul in a much later period. Tabriz was a very active commercial centre; beyond it you entered the area controlled by Venetian and Genoese merchants. Baghdad was a great commercial centre whose western city was without walls, while the eastern city was fortified. From Mesopotamia, one could choose different directions to reach Western Europe. You could follow the trade routes of classical antiquity, passing through Dura-Europos, Palmyra or Antioch, or Acre, and then cross the Mediterranean. Or one could reach Constantinople, now Istanbul, either from the Crimea or from eastern Turkey, and then cross the Black Sea and reach Italy, again by sea.

[2] At the height of the "Great Game", a term used to describe the conflict between Great Britain and Russia in the Middle East and Central Asia throughout the 19th century, which was characterised above all by diplomatic and secret service activity, the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin decided to follow in the footsteps of Ferdinand von Richthofen and Nikolaj Mihajlovič Prževalskij and, between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, set out on an epic journey through the then unknown or poorly explored regions of north-western China. Hedin crosses the Taklamakan Desert (place of no return), makes important archaeological finds and arrives very close to Lhasa.

1873)[1] authors of many and differing contributions on the topic, to name but a few. At the same time, it is necessary to underline, at the moment of the flourishing time of those routes, the decisive role of the nomadic populations of the Central Asian steppes, who have always maintained cultural contacts between East and West, at least since the Iron Age. We can mentions peoples such as the Saka, as they are called in the old Persian sources, or the Sai, as they are called by the Chinese ones (Yu 1998; 2000; 2014), or other peoples of a later period, of different ethnic origin, such as the palaeo-Turkic Xiongnu and Wusun (Ivanov 2016, 67-86; Semenov 2010, 99-110), or those of a more problematically uncertain ethnicity, the Yuezhi, and others. The role of such intermediate populations, which has already been much emphasised, was in fact ambiguous in itself, depending on the given historical conditions; sometimes they were an irreplaceable intermediary with whom it was necessary to negotiate possible transactions, and sometimes they became insurmountable obstacles, not without permanent conflicts, even military ones.

The aspects that can be glimpsed behind the historical-geographical category of the *Silk Roads* are mostly related to the birth and development of new socio-economic and political realities, geographically intermediate between and outside the control of traditional empires. (Roman, Persian and Chinese) (Hill 2009). However, those trade routes, as is well known, preceded the spread and distribution of the product "silk", and for a long time, as is the case of jade[2] , especially in western China, spread over the trade routes of the Chinese section of the *Silk Roads* in the Bronze Age, and with *lapis lazuli* [3] (Figures. 2 and 3), widely used and traded, especially on the so-called, already mentioned, *Khorasan Road*. The trade routes along which jade and lapis lazuli were exchanged are some of the best-known antecedent trade routes within Western China and China proper on the one hand, and Afghanistan and the ancient Near East on the other. As it has already been said before, however, it is also necessary to remember other trade routes experienced and used in other periods and in different geographical contexts, such as, depending on the main products traded between Europe, the Indies (Miller 1974). Egypt and Greece[4], and denominated e.g. as the *Salt Roads,* the *Perfume Roads*, etc.[5]

[1] At the time of Russia's rapid expansion into Central Asia, the Polish-born geologist, adventurer and colonel Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalsky was happy to accept a commission from the Russian government to explore and map the regions of Mongolia, Tibet and China. He gathered a few companions and set off for the shores of Kuku Nor also known as Qinghai Lake. All this kept him abroad for many years and led to the discovery of some previously unknown animal species. As the great Swedish scientist Linnaeus had not included the horse in his system of nature, it caused a sensation when Przhevalsky heard of wild horses in the towns of south-west Mongolia during his travels. On a second trip, the colonel brought back a skull of a wild horse given to him by a border guard as proof, and on a third trip he himself saw two herds of the animal in the mountains of Tachin Schara Nuru near the Gobi Desert. Later, in the *Systema naturae*..... by Linnaeus (1758), the name of a new species is always the name of its discoverer, so this wild animal was given the complicated name of Przhevalsky.

[2] The material "jade", mineralogically a hard stone belonging to the silicates, is inextricably linked to Chinese civilisation. Jade usually refers to nephrite, a calcium and magnesium silicate, and jadeite, a sodium and aluminium silicate. Nephrite is found in East Turkestan and Siberia, in the area of Baikal Lake, while jadeite comes from Burma and only reached China *via* the provinces of Yunnan and Guangdong in the second half of the 18th century. All ancient jade is, therefore, exclusively nephrite and often has a green/greenish hue. For some forty centuries, the Chinese have given this magnificent stone an inestimable value and a true cult. Paradoxically, however, this mineral does not exist in ancient China proper and has always been imported almost entirely from its western part, the present autonomous "Uighur" province of Xinjiang.

[3]Lapis lazuli is one of the hard stones that has been considered precious for the longest time in history. Its oldest archaeological documentation dates back to the 5th millennium BCE, when it was widely used to make jewellery found in pharaonic tombs in Egypt. It has an intense blue colour, hence its name, from the Latin *lapis* (stone) and *lazuli,* the genitive of the medieval Latin *lazulum*, which in turn comes from Arabic (*al-lazward*) and Persian *lāzhward,* meaning "blue". See the articles by Hermann (1968), Tosi (1974), Hermann & Moorey (1983) and Casanova (1994; 2000) on short- and long-distance trade between Iran and Central Asia in protohistoric times.

[4] For the silk archaeological remains in Egypt, see Lubec *et al.*1993, and in Greece Richter 1929.

[5]For all these issues, see the 42nd volume of *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan*, edited by Alison Betts and Fiona Kidd in 2010, where some articles [including those by Amirov (2010), Kaniuth (2010), Good (2010), Stark *et al*. (2010), Yatsenko (2010), Vagodin (2010)] range from protohistory to the Islamic period. In the volume, the question of a new archaeological approach to the concept of the *Silk Roads* was strongly raised, especially in the light of the finds of *lapis lazuli* and silk in the pre-Han period in Europe, notably in the Hallstatt culture in Germany, in the *Keraimikos* (cf. also Margariti *et al*. 2011) cemetery in Athens, and also at Sapalli Tepe (Askarov 1973).



Figure. 2 : *Fragment of raw jade from Khotan*

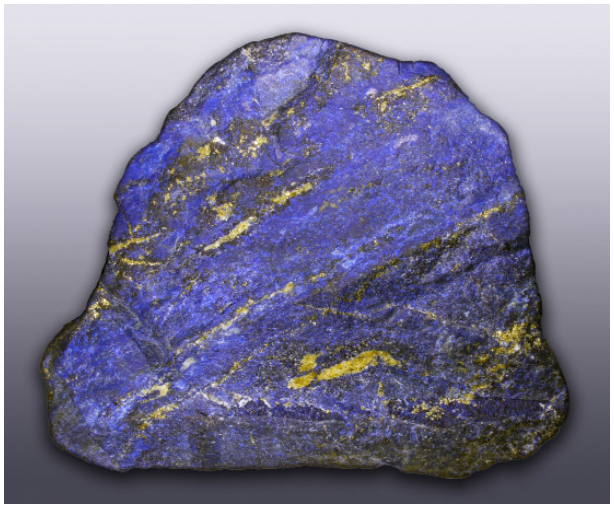


Figure. 3 : *Fragment of raw lapis lazuli.*

On the basis of these considerations, the enlargement of the concept of *Silk Roads*, both in a chronological and historical-cultural, as well as in a geographical sense, may become now in itself a methodological tool and an interpretative key for approaching this field of research in a different way from that widely considered acceptable for at least one century. In fact, it seems more and more evident that a closer look at these routes reveals that they were not only a means of transmitting the ideological-religious beliefs of the Buddhist, Christian-Nestorian, Manichaean or Zoroastrian elites, in a specific historical period, in crucial geographical areas and at the centre of complex and articulated geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Indeed, it seems increasingly plausible to imagine centuries-old, if not millennial, routes of commercial exchange, more easily recognisable, only at the turn of 2nd cent. BCE and 2nd cent. CE, amongst ethnically and culturally and perhaps geographically as well, very different populations. These trade roads have, of course, had many branches due to the innumerable and differing geomorphological and geoclimatic conditions of the areas crossed, which have always hindered or facilitated a certain linearity. The very harsh climate in winter and the scorching heat in summer, for example, in the depressions of the Taklamakan desert in western China, could not fail to put a strain on the men and animals who crossed it, since the caravans could also run serious risks, exposed as they were to predatory attacks from other different human groups. The decline of the *Silk Roads* began with the competition of a new commercial artery that was faster and safer than the land routes: the sea route to and from India and China, which started some time before, but flourished only in the 16th cent. (Guan 2016; Billé *et al*. eds., 2022). In short, these routes were a decisive opportunity for encounters between the civilisations of East Asia (especially the Chinese), the countries of the Middle East (Iran and Central Asia), the Near East (Palestinian territories, Giordania, Syria, Iraq and Turkey) and the Mediterranean (Rome and Europe). To the east of Central Asia lies the Chinese Empire, with its extreme western regions from Xinjiang to the eastern province of Gansu, crossed by the famous Hexi Corridor, a natural passage that led from China to Central Asia and vice versa, crossing the province of Shaanxi to Xi'an. Much further west of China, from the 6th century BCE, the Achaemenid political-imperial formation was established, followed further east by the political entities of Bactria (mainly north-western Afghanistan) and Sogdiana (mainly the Zeravshan valley, between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan): the former, famous as the land of origin of the camel (*camelus bactrianus*), the latter as a land of skilled merchants, between the eastern Iranian world and the palaeo-Turkish world and beyond (de La Vaissière 2002; 2005; 2007a).

The Roads

Central Asia had always been crossed by ancient caravan routes, which had not always been used only by nomadic tribes, but had been trade routes for thousands of years, for socio-political communities of very different degrees and levels of development. Enriched by new economic potentials

and stimulated by hitherto non-existent political demands, a series of itineraries and routes crossed the relevant regional areas around the time, which, probably significantly, came to be known as part of the Silk Roads. The routes followed by travellers varied over time, but some of them remained unchanged for centuries. Based on the important written records of the Chinese royal annals, in particular the Han Shu (Ban 1962; Hulsewe 1979) and the Hou Han Shu (Chavannes 1907; 1967; Fan 1965), one of these roads started right in China and its capital Chang'an (modern Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province) and extended in a northwesterly direction towards Central Asia. At Dunhuang, prefettura di Jiuquan, Gansu province, the road split into two main routes, following the northern (*bei dao*) and southern (*nan dao*) borders of the Tarim Basin (Huang 1958) and the Taklamakan desert[1] (Figure. 4), reuniting at Kashgar (Xinijang province). This road was necessary to avoid the vast gravel desert to the west of Dunhuang, the Taklamakan[2] . The northern road from Dunhuang and Gansu province passed through the cities of Hami and Turfan, the Ili River valley in Alatai province, and Dzungarian Gate, and reached the steppes of Kazakhstan[3] . A western route was certainly that from Ferghana (now between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) to the city of Kashgar[4] . Another road finally reached Dunhuang (Gansu), starting from the Indus valley and the slopes of the Karakoram, in the hilly areas of Punjab and Swat, and continued along the Indus, through Gilgit, the Hunza valley, up to the 5,000 metre Mintaka and Kilik passes[5] , and then down to Kashgar. Minor

[1] Marco Polo, who travelled through this desert, described it (1977, XLV, pp. 47-48) and we know from him that near the Lop Nor salt flats there was the Loulan oasis, which was abandoned in 400 CE, perhaps because of drought. Numerous fragments of silk and other fabrics, both Chinese and Western, were found among the ruins of the oasis, which also contained human remains. Thanks to the peculiar phenomenon of natural mummification caused by the extreme aridity of the region, the Loulan desert has indeed yielded dried bodies of individuals dating not only from the Han and Tang periods, but from much earlier times (Mair 1995; Jaeger 1998; Mallory and Mair 2000; Dazheng 2003). From Lop Nor, the southern route continued through the oases of Ruoqiang, Qiemo, Khotan and Yarkand to Kashgar at the western end of the Taklamakan Desert. The landscape between Lop Nor (Huang 1948) and Khotan is one of the most inhospitable imaginable. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang travelled through it in 645 CE on his return from India, and described it as follows: *A great desert of quicksand. The masses of sand have a monstrous extension: according to the whim of the wind they gather and separate. The travellers find no human traces and many of them get lost. On every side the desert extends to the horizon, and no one knows which way to go. The travellers therefore pile up animal bones to indicate the path. Neither water nor vegetation is found, and fiery winds often blow* (Bianji yuan zhu and Xianlin deng jiao zhu 1985:1030-1031).

[2] Of the two caravan routes that started from Dunhuang, the southern one crossed the Lopnor Desert to the west, a semi-dry lake whose contours and position have been altered by wind and alluvial deposits.

[3] The Hami oasis was visited by Marco Polo and Xuanzang. The Venetian merchant tells of the place and the adventures he had there, and also describes the habits and pastimes of the people of the oasis (1977, XLVII, 50, 51). The description is entirely consistent with the reality of the Hami region. The province of Tangut mentioned in the Million (XLVI, 48) refers to the Kingdom of Xixia (1038-1227), whose territory included the present-day Ningxia Autonomous Region and Gansu Province. Continuing northwest for about 800 km, the caravan routes reached the deep depression of the Turfan oasis, the most important and ancient centre of all the northern routes (Huang 1954). During the Han period, the Chinese made it one of their strongholds in Central Asia. Its inhabitants are descendants of the ancient Turkic populations of Central Asia, and its surroundings are rich in places of remarkable historical and artistic interest, where there are monuments that testify to the ancient past of the oasis. To the west are the impressive ruins of Jiaohe, a military outpost in the Han era. To the east, the ruins of Gaochang are equally evocative, and nearby, on the side of the so-called Fire Mountains, it is possible to admire the remains of the complex of Buddhist caves of Bezeklik. Another important site in the area is the cemetery of Astana, where the illustrious inhabitants of Gaochangwere buried; many silks have been found in the tombs, preserved thanks to the dry climate of the area.

[4] From Kashgar, the *Silk Roads* could take different directions depending on commercial needs. After crossing the Pamir Passes, the caravan routes continued on to India, Iran and the West. The Kashgar oasis was vast, with villages that were important cities at the time. Although far from the borders of China, Kashgar was at times under the political and military control of the Chinese, who fought against the Turks of Central Asia to maintain possession of the place and thus control the links with the West. From the 10th century Kashgar became an active Muslim centre; in the 18th century it returned to Chinese control, but even today aspects and cultural characteristics of an Islamic type can be found, especially in the architecture. One of the characteristics of the oasis, whose soil is sandy and stony, are the open-air markets where, as in past centuries, oriental and western products are still exchanged: camels, fabrics, horses, donkeys, fruit, goats.

[5] Kilik Pass (4827 m above sea level) is a mountain pass in the Karakoram Mountains, 30 km west of Mintaka Pass, between Pakistan and Xinjiang, China. The two passes were, in ancient times, the two main access points from the north to the upper Hunza Valley (also called the Gojal Valley).



Figure. 4 : *Tarim Basin and Taklamakan desert,*

(After: Kmusser- Own work using Digital Chart of the World and GTOPO data, labels based on GEOnet).

arteries developed in every direction: some paths went up from Chilas to the Mintaka Pass, others along the Satpara and Kapunlu valleys, others to Ladakh, the Punjal and the Yasin valley, connecting Gilgit with Chitral. In these much older arteries are the traces of human passage. Rock carvings, calligraphies, inscriptions, in a historical sequence and in different styles and artistic forms, recall the history of different populations and their cultures, developed over a period of about five thousand years. In the northern areas, the most important archaeological stations begin in Chilas (Kashmir), where there are numerous representations from the Achaemenid (6th century BCE), the Parthian (2nd century BCE) and the Gandhara culture (2nd century CE), without forgetting the remarkable examples of petroglyphs from the Bronze Age. The artistic styles change until they reach their most sophisticated forms in the Gandhara areas and in those depicting stupas and Buddhist deities. As one can easily imagine, these routes, in addition to trade, were the backdrop to the intersection of cultures, religions and languages, a melting pot in which very different cultural experiences met and merged (Stein 1944; Jettmar 1979; Jettmar 1989a; 1989b)[1] .

Sericulture

We cannot fail to make some observations and reflections on the product "silk", in relation to the decisive moments of its production and the symbolic and financial value that has always been attributed to it. Silk, a very expensive and precious fabric from the very beginning, whose origins are shrouded in mystery, helped to raise the quantitative and qualitative level of the trade. Thanks to the travels of numerous merchants, the Romans also came into contact with this product, which they called *serica* because it was made by the distant *Seri* people, as the Chinese were called in Rome. In the same way, Buddhism arrived in China around the middle of the 1st century CE[2] . At the beginning of the same period, Shandong[3] was the most prosperous production centre, along with Sichuan, which has always produced silk of excellent quality. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Nanjing became the capital of silk fabrics, and today Khotan (Stein 1907) (in

[1]Since 1979 over ten thousand petroglyphs and thousands of inscriptions were systematically explored in the Northern Areas of Pakistan (consisting of the districts Gilgit, Baltistan and Diamir) and at the northern fringe of Indus-Kohistan. In this area, rock-carvings have been known for at least eighty years, of which Aurel Stein (1944:16-24) had studied a small but important sample. Jettmar was certainly not the "discoverer" of this complex, but he instigated for the first time a systematic and extensive investigation of such monuments, as first presented during the Fourth International Conference of South Asian Archaeologists, held at Naples in 1977 (Jettmar 1979: 917-925).

[2]From the lower Yellow River basin, sericulture had spread to the central and southern provinces, which are now the main producers, while the central-northern provinces, Henan and Shandong, currently specialize in the manufacture of tussor (a very light silk fabric).

[3] It gave its name to shantung, a coarse type of silk taffeta (see note 23), a stiff, rustling fabric used especially for women's dresses.

Xinjiang) is one of the main silk production and export areas, especially in Central Asia, Pakistan (Figure. 5). A noble textile fibre *par excellence*, silk has been the most aristocratic of fabrics. Since the West discovered it, it was seized by a real passion for it, and in Rome Pliny was amazed by the fact that one could cross the entire universe then known, and at the cost of a thousand dangers, "*so that a Roman lady could show off her charm under a transparent gauze*" (Naturalis Historia, VI. 54) (Eichholz 1962) (Figure. 6). In the eternal city, silks were literally worth their weight in gold. The monk Dionysius Periegetes (3rd century) (Amato 2005) expressed his admiration for this product:

The Serici make precious elaborate clothes, whose colour resembles that of wild flowers; they are so light that they compete with spider webs. (Οικουμένης περιήγησις; see also Priscus of Panion, *Ἱστορία Βυζαντιακή* (Blockley 1983: 222-400).



Figure. 5 :*The Hotan Ancient Jiya Atlas Silk Factory.*

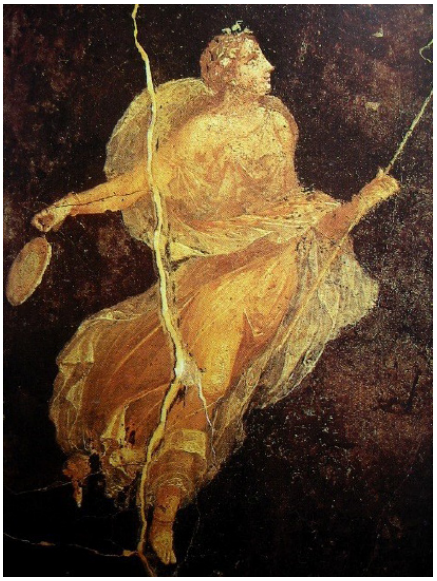


Figure. 6 : *Dancing Maenad, in a silk dress. Fresco of the 1st cent. from the Casa del Naviglio in Pompeii, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.*

The Chinese were, probably, the first to extract silk from the cocoon of the *Bombyx mori* caterpillar, a silkworm that feeds on the tender leaves of the mulberry tree (*Morus*). According to tradition, it was the legendary Emperor Xuanyuan Gongsun (Huangdi), known as the Yellow Emperor, or rather his wife Lei Zu, who taught the Chinese how to breed silkworms in 2698 or 2697 BCE, and it was she who had the idea of weaving fabrics with these strong threads, which were then used as strings for musical instruments (Cohen 2012: 1-13). At first, only members of the imperial family and the court were allowed to wear silk clothes, but as production increased, from the 7th century BCE, the right was extended to anyone who could afford it[1] . By the 2nd millennium BCE, the inhabitants of the Yellow River valley seem to have domesticated it, and in 1926 a cocoon was even found in a Neolithic tomb[2] . From an archaeological point of view, the systematic breeding of silkworms and the development of the textile industry can be traced back to the 14th century BCE, two dozen centuries before the West, which from the beginning of the Christian era was full of admiration and eager to discover the secret of the manufacture of this marvellous material, fine, soft, smooth, tightly woven, supple and exquisitely fresh.

Silk owed these qualities to the superiority of its fibre, which was exceptionally long; a silk thread could be kilometres long, while other textile fibres do not exceed a few tens of centimetres! The great variety and complexity of the fragments of silk fabrics from this period that have been found suggest the use of looms and extremely sophisticated techniques, with transmission systems driven by belts designed to convert rotary motion into linear, longitudinal motion and vice versa[3] . The internal

[1]The trade routes to the West, including the *Silk Roads*, linked China to Iran, India (Good *et al*. 2009; Gulati 1961), the Hellenic and then the Roman West, and were of fundamental importance for its civilisation; it was through these roads of Central Asia that Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity penetrated China in the first centuries of our era, and then Islam from the 8th century onwards. Customs duties were levied on goods in transit and the caravan network was used to transport local products to foreign markets.

[2]This would be an example of protoforestry suggested by the discovery, in a controversial stratigraphic context, of a half cocoon of Bombyx mori (silkworm) at the Xiyincun site (Ciarla 2002).

[3]The crank and the reel would have been two Chinese creations, waiting for the transition from the so-called stick loom to the so-called shuttle loom. The first was a horizontal frame loom from the outset, equipped with a system comparable to that of the shuttle looms.

examination of the fabrics shows that this type of loom existed from the Shang period (1600-1100 BCE). The so-called shuttle loom, which allows the design on the weft (and not on the warp), probably appeared around the year 500, judging from the sample fabrics found or preserved[1].The Chinese were fiercely protective of their secrets, such as how to make cloth and how to extract silk from the silkworm. Revealing these secrets, exporting eggs or cocoons were acts punishable by death. In the 5th century, it seems that a young Chinese princess sent to marry the king of Khotan[2] , an oasis principality on the Silk Road, was killed because she had hidden silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds in her hair[3]. More recently, around 550, two monks seem to have succeeded in sending some seeds and eggs to Byzantium, hidden in a hollow bamboo stick, according to Procopius of Caesarea (*Ιστορια,* I, 583) (Dewing 1914). Until this date, the silk fabrics produced in Byzantium for two centuries could only exist thanks to the very expensive threads imported from China. It is, therefore, understandable that China was soon referred to as the land of silk, and that the first names given to it referred to it; it was called *Serinde*, a name that now refers more to the region of Xinjiang. China was also the *Serica,* the *Sericum*, the land of silk (*si* in Chinese) and the Serici. Homer, Aristotle (Henerson and Peck 1970), Herodotus, Strabo (Aujac 1969), Varro, Seneca, Pliny the Elder, Martial and many others mention silk and its trade. A Greco-Roman trader, *MäesTitianos*, secretly sent his agents to search for the *Silk Roads* in order to prevent intermediate peoples, such as the Parthians in Iran, from jealously monopolising the trade. This itinerary to the Sera Metropolis, the Chinese capital of the time, namely Chang'an, now Xi'an, has been handed down to us by Ptolemy[4] (Ronca 1971).

The Technique

Bombyx mori is a species of butterfly in the family *Bombycidae* (Linnaeus 1758). Its larva, known as the silkworm, feeds exclusively on mulberry leaves; it produces silk, which is composed of proteins in two glands parallel to the inside of the body, and is extruded from two openings on either side of the mouth, the *seriptera*. The very thin mucus solidifies in contact with the air and, guided by figure-eight movements of the head, arranges itself in layers to form a cocoon of raw silk, made up of a single continuous thread of silk of variable length between 300 and 900 metres[5]. Silkworms eat mulberry leaves day and night, without interruption, and grow rapidly as a result. Their diet is interrupted only four times, the "sleeps", corresponding to as many sheds. The four moults divide the larva's life into five "ages". After the fourth moult (or in the fifth age), the body of the silkworm becomes yellowish due to the swollen silk glands inside the body and the tighter "skin"; at this point, the silkworm is ready to wrap itself in its silk cocoon[6] (Figure. 7). The filaments begin to unravel; they are 600 to 1200 metres long. Six or seven of these filaments are joined together to make a thin silk thread, while up to twenty or thirty are needed to make a thicker thread. Silk was not only used to make fabrics, but also bowstrings and musical instruments, fishing lines and all kinds of laces[7] .

[1]This loom allowed the automatic repetition of drawing effects and their rapid reproduction; the decorations are varied, complex and sophisticated. The Chinese illustrations of these looms are unfortunately quite late (the first known is from 1270), and the loom designed by Leonardo da Vinci is practically a reproduction of a Chinese model.

[2]The city of Khotan was located in the most important oasis on the southern route. It was here that carpets, thin felt and silk fabrics were made and, above all, white and green jade was extracted, which was one of the main riches of the oasis.

[3]The 'silk princess' of legend was worshipped as a goddess in Khotan.

[4] MaësTitianus (2nd-1st century BCE) was an ancient traveller of Hellenistic culture who is said to have travelled extensively along the Silk Roads from the Mediterranean world. In the early 2nd or late 1st century BCE, during a lull in the Roman-Parthian war, his party reached the famous Stone Tower of Tashkurgan in the Pamirs. Nothing is known of him except a brief mention in Ptolemy's Geography (1.11.7), whose knowledge of Maës comes from an intermediate source, Marinus of Tyre (Berggren and Jones 2000).

[5] Microscopically, the thread is made up of two proteins: two parallel threads of fibroin covered by sericin. It takes the silkworm 3-4 days to produce the cocoon, which is made up of about 20-30 concentric layers of a single continuous thread, after which it transforms into a chrysalis and then into a butterfly.

[6]In the vernacular, the silkworm "goes to the woods" because the cocoon is built around dry twigs.

7 Silk balls were used to stuff winter clothing. And silk rag paper, used for writing and painting, was in use from the 7th century BCE. As for fabrics, there were many types: gauze, crépon, brocade, velvet, tussor, etc. The long tradition of damask, which dates back two thousand years, recalls some tone-on-tone weavings in which the same motifs appear on one side in satin on a *taffeta* background and on the opposite side in *taffeta* on a satin background. It is one of the most beautiful silk fabrics, with a plain weave characterised by a warp density greater than that of the weft. It has a dense, almost rigid structure, a lustrous and luminous appearance, a rustling hand with the slightest movement, very light and brilliant. The term comes from the French *taffetas*, which, in turn, comes from the Persian *taftah*, the past participle of the verb *taftan* (to twist, to interlace, to weave). Sometimes the term taffeta is mistakenly used instead of canvas. The term "satin" also comes from the great emporium of Catun/Zaiton, mentioned by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, which was probably the port of Citong (now Quanzhou), north of Amoy, opposite Taiwan. In the 12th and 13th centuries, this extremely active port was home to various foreign merchants, buyers of porcelain and silk. For Ibn Battuta, it was "*a large and very important city, where they manufacture velvet and satin fabrics, known by its name (zeitounyyah) (olives)"* (Tresso 2006: 700-701).



Figure. 7 : *One of the steps in the silk production activity in Hotan.*

Archaeological Evidence[1]

Although archaeology has never been a primary source of silk evidence on these trade routes, in recent years there has been a particular increase in the objects coming from excavations which, in some way, contribute to enrich and to complete the historical-artistic and linguistic-literary evidences which was already abundant for the period. In addition to the first evidence of this textile industry dating back to the Neolithic period in China, in the form of a cocoon found in a tomb, the existence of silk is attested by palaeography; the ideograms of the silkworm are found on the divinatory bones of the Shang dynasty (17th-11th centuries BCE) (Keightley 1978; Kuhn 1982, 369-370; Jaeger 1998; Xia 2024a: 293-323). Imprints of silk decorated with embroidered diamonds have also been found on some bronzes of that period or of the Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE to 256 BCE) and its successors, in particular on an urn and an axe. The earlist known examples of silk fragments date from the Warring States period (453-221 BCE) (Høisæter 2017: 339-363); there are fragments found also in Central Asia, in Altai, in Pazyryk, in particular a smooth silk saddle cloth decorated with a phoenix, and an elaborate fragment decorated with a herringbone pattern dating from the 5th-3rd cent. BCE (Stepanova 2016: 1-18). For the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 CE) always in China, the situation is much better; we have hundreds of fragments that testify to the widespread use of silk fabrics and, above all, to their excellent technical and artistic quality. They have been found in China (Xia 2024b: 333-347), of course, but also in Korea (Jisoo and Youngjoo 2023:191-213), in northern Mongolia (Noin-ula) (Yatsenko 2012: 39-48), in Crimea (Kertch) (Granger-Taylor and Wild 1981: 302-309), in Kyrgyzstan and even in Palmyra. In many cases they are shreds of precious silk brocades of the kind so admired in the Greco-Roman world. Silk began to leave China with some regularity towards the end of the 3rd century BCE, both as part of the goods plundered by nomads on the Chinese territory and as official gifts sent by the first emperors to the nomad leaders. The Roman historian Lucius Florus (2nd century CE) is responsible for the first mention of silk in Western literary sources, when he recalls the unusual fabrics used to make the banners flown by Persian soldiers (Epitome of T. Livius, *Bellorum omnium annorum* DCC, II.VIII.34) (Forster 1929)[2]. The commercial spread of silk on an international scale began as soon as the Chinese began to control the trade in this precious material, especially after they had brought Central Asia and its trade routes under their political control. Thanks to caravans, goods were sent in all directions. Silk was the most important commodity, and its selling price at destination was many times higher than its purchase price in China. After deducting transport costs, which were about the half pf the the purchase price, the merchant could expect to make an extremely high profit. It was good practice not to leave empty-handed, but to take goods in exchange: horses (also useful for transport), cloth and linen. It is clear that the merchants who travelled to China took with them the goods that were scarcest in the East, and so, in addition to gifts for the emperors and Chinese state officials travelling to China, there were also numerous products: spices and other substances (coriander, cloves, sandalwood, nutmeg, cardamom, myrrh); products for aesthetic needs such as lapis lazuli, indigo, henna; precious stones such as coral, pearls and diamonds, which were used as cutting stones, glass objects. China exported mainly silk, but also spices such as ginger, ginseng, turmeric, cinnamon and, last but not least, tea, which spread over the West thanks to the mediation of the Arab countries (de La Vaissiére 2007b; 2008; 2012).

Iran and China

It is well known that one of the profound reasons for a major development of trade routes

[1]See different contributions of the author for a general archaeological overview: Genito 2018 and 2022a; for a related mediaeval topic, Qi Dong and Genito 2018, Genito 2018, Genito 2019; Genito 2022b; 2023; Genito in press; Genito and Cerullo in press).

[2]It is a rhetorical paean to the greatness of Rome. Almost historically worthless, it was much used in the Middle Ages.

between China and the West have been considered by most of the scholars the new military needs of the Chinese Han dynasty. Those new trade routes made it possible to travel safely on roads that had not been travelled before, and Western merchants were able to export their typical products such as horses, cattle, skins, furs, watermelons, walnuts, sesame seeds, figs, alfalfa, pomegranates and perhaps even the method of making wine. At the same time, those from the East were able to export important luxury goods such as ivory and jade, which came from the rich deposits in the mountains around the Tarim Basin, and of course silk, which had by then become a very precious material. This kind of such an globalisation of the markets quickly led to widespread prosperity in all the regional areas involved, undoubtedly helped by the positive balance of the new taxes imposed on the new goods that crossed the vast territories of the area by caravan. After the first Chinese voyages to Fergana, many other ambassadors were sent westwards, one of them, it seems, between 115 and 105 BCE to Parthian Iran. All this may have led to a reciprocal exchange of ambassadors, and this event, perhaps legendarily exaggerated, can only underline the fact that the foundations for new, consolidated trade relations between China and Iran had been laid by this time. In reality, of course, things were more complex, but the episodes make us understand how contact and exchange had become an acquired necessity. On the other hand, after the repeated defeats suffered by the Romans at the hands of the Parthians, the latter became the new masters, exercising full control over the *Silk Roads*. At the beginning of the 3rd century CE, the province of Fars in south-western Iran came under the political control of the local Sasanian dynasty. From 224 CE, the first Sasanian ruler, Ardashir (211-241 CE), defeated the Parthians and took control of the whole area of Iran. With the help of his son Shapur (241-272 CE), Ardashir ushered in a new era. The Silk Roads flourished during this period, and the new dynasty's tight control over trade, led to the imposition of substantial new taxes, the redistribution of which brought prosperity to all countries involved. In the East, the Sasanians shared this role of controllers with the Sogdians in the Samarkand region, and developed industrial activities related to silk, as weaving techniques were no longer protected by the Han dynasty. Rare examples of silk products found their way to Europe, while others were discovered in the many Buddhist caves around the Tarim Basin. Their motifs and styles influenced later Chinese, Byzantine and Muslim textile designs. Other products widely traded along the *Silk Roads* were metal cups and jugs of the Sasanian type (Figure. 8)[1], and vessels made of thick clear glass with elaborate carved designs (Figure. 9) (Chen 2006), which were found as far away as Japan. By the end of the 1st century BCE (Genito 2018), a new power composed of Scythians and Indo-Greeks, descendants of Alexander the Great's army in India according to some, and coming from China according to others, had begun to exercise forms of political control as far away as Central Asia, the Kushans (Yu 2011). After becoming a new political force on the *Silk Roads* as far as the western oases of the Taklamakan, the Indus Basin, Central Asia and the Aral Sea, the Kushans played the role of new masters in the control of this important trade route, albeit for a short time. With their arrival along the new trade artery, there were four political/military powers vying for some sort of supremacy: the Chinese, the Kushans, the Persians and the Romans. The nomadic raids and other military assaults that had terrified the Chinese centuries before would cause the same anxieties in the Iranian world, and then in the Roman one. The objects that began to be produced to adapt to these new military tactics were the result of new functional needs: arrowheads, armour, elements of the horse's harness, the bow and, finally, even metal stirrups. From the *graffiti* of Doura Europos, to those of Mongolia and China, to the rock carvings of the Sasanians, it is possible to see how the new military clothing, starting with the lamellar armour, typical of the heritage of the

[1]In 1983, in the village of Shengou, near Guyuan, in the Ningxia Autonomous Region of China, archaeo-logists discovered the double burial of Li Xian, an important general of the Northern Zhou dynasty (559-581 CE), who, according to biographical inscriptions found in the tomb, had held posts of responsibility and was accorded high rank and titles. He died in 569 CE, at the age of sixty-six, long after his wife, who died in 547 CE. Though the tomb was looted, it contained remarkable objects of "foreign" origin, such as a green Sasanian glass bowl, a gold ring set with an engraved blue stone, and, most important for our purposes, an elegant 37.5 cm tall gilt silver ewer (Figure. 10) embossed with six human figures all around its belly now in the Guyuan Museum. The related bibliography is very ample for this object, here we can cite only the basic articles and publications of Zhuo 1985, Zhuo 1989, Carpino and James 1989, Marshak and Anazawa 1989, Luo 2000, Marshak 2001, Watt *et al*. 2004, and Wu Jui-Han 2004.

catafractarii[1] and anticipation of the later mediaeval chain mail, is obsessively reproduced on different iconographic supports to indicate the epochal sign of a great change (Figure. 10) (Genito in press; Genito, Cerullo in press)[2]. In addition to the sources, the ever-increasing importance acquired by the new trade routes is indicated by the presence and diffusion throughout Eurasia of particular classes of materials. We will point out just a few that, as they can be traced back to the Sasanian world, allow us to draw interpretative ideas relating precisely to the cultural interaction between East and West: silver plates and belt seals. These two classes of materials are not only significant as indicators of cultural relations through objects on which new techniques, styles and iconographies are depicted, but also as expressions of commercial and diplomatic exchanges, on the one hand, and of military-chivalric costume, on the other. Both of these productions are related to that vast and heterogeneous world once called, with happy intuition, 'external' Iran, but which of the concept of Eurasian steppe, perhaps, constituted a reductive and limiting meaning. According to that logic, it would not be absurd to also speak of an 'external' China, etc.

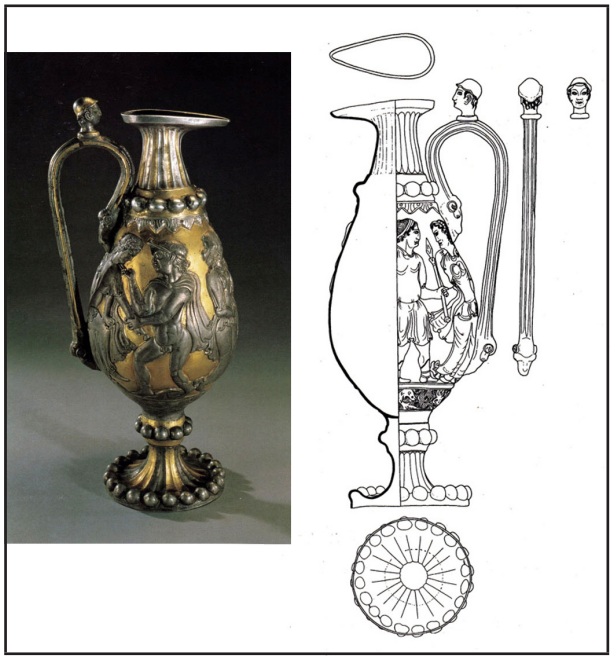


Figure. 8 : *This type of artifact presenting Sasanian characteristics is called "Hu Ping" (barbarian ewer). From the Wei to the Tang Dynasties a large quantity of Sasanian gold and silver ware was introduced into China, sometimes with this particular and very much decorated example, Guyuan Museum,*



Figure. 9 : *Glass Bowl with cut decoration, of Sasanian tradition, in the Guyuan Museum,*
(After: Qi Dong and Genito 2018)

[1]The *equites cataphractarii* or equites *clibanarii* were corps of Roman "heavy" cavalry that were added to the cavalry, especially in the late Roman period, to counter the cavalry of the Parthians and later the Sassanids, as well as that of nomads such as the Sarmatians. They were the only horsemen who were not part of a special scouting team, but a separate cavalry corp. The Roman cataphracts were armed with a double-headed spear and a sword slightly longer than the gladius issued to legionaries. They wore a helmet with a feather and a visor. Their armour also protected their arms and legs (Eramo 2018).

[2]It is known that with the decline of the great ancient empires, and the changes in means of towing and transport also brought with them decisive changes in the so-called art of war, both in terms of tactics and strategies. The Alexandrian Macedonian phalanx had already upset the balance of the different traditional systems of combat, the Roman and the Persian ones. Subsequently, with the advent of lamellar armour from the Scythian world, and then gradually, the use of the everted bow, of cannon and trilobate type arrowheads, and still later, of chain mail, the fixed saddle, and above all the stirrups used in the early Middle Ages by an increasingly "heavy" cavalry, brought about further and more discontinuity. These, if not originating exactly in the first period in which the *Silk Roads* asserted, nevertheless, precisely with them they became fundamental elements of a decisive confrontation/clash between increasingly different and distant populations of the West and the East. The symbolic date of this profound change was the Battle of Adrianople near Edirne in Thrace (western Turkey on the border with Bulgaria and Greece) in 378 CE, where the Eastern Roman army commanded by Valens was annihilated by the cavalry of Fritigern, leader of the Visgoths. It is not necessary to remember that already in 260 CE, a hundred years earlier, in Edessa (today's Şanlıurfa) in southern Turkey on the border with Syria, the Persian emperor of the Sasanian dynasty, Shapur I, defeated the Roman emperor Valerian, who, according to a tradition, was the only Roman emperor dead in captivity. This episode and the even more mournful defeat of the consul Crassus at Carhrae (today's Harran, very close to Şanlıurfa) in 53 BCE, almost three century more earlier, constitute the most important signs of the technical-operational difficulties encountered by the Roman army against completely different methods of combat, made up of assaults, raids on horseback, the use of particular arrows launched from particular bows of the Parthian cavalry first and of the Sasanian later.

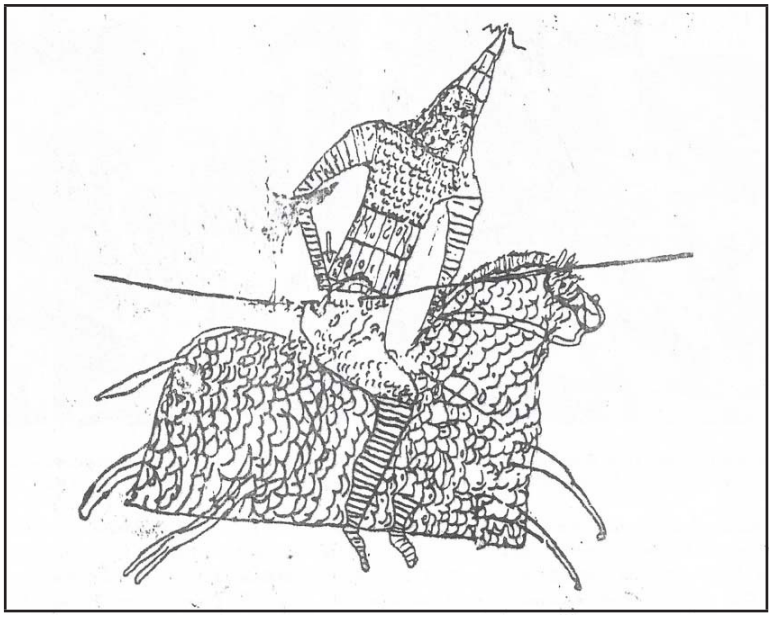


Figure. 10 : *Graffito from-Dura-Europos showing a heavily-armoured cataphract on his horse, (After: Gamber 1968 and Schuckelt 2014: Figure.2)*

It is well known how characteristic and peculiarly Sasanian was the production of silver plates and vases, made according to various techniques and decorated with hunting, investiture or banquet scenes. Most of these objects, found in Central Asia, in Sogdiana and even in China and Japan, are generally considered to be gifts from the Sasanian dynasty during official and diplomatic missions, but their original function and destination remain uncertain. Undoubtedly, they helped to spread the themes and iconographies of a stylistic repertoire and inspired a number of local productions, especially those of Sogdiana, Chorasmia or the Greco-Bactrian Empire. The belt decorations, on the other hand, refer directly to the world of the steppe horseman in both functional and symbolic terms, an echo of which can already be found in Sasanian rock carvings. Their widespread use reflects, on a small scale, the metamorphosis that took place in military tactics and strategies between the 4th and 6th centuries, which was due precisely to the cultural contribution of the steppe nomads and their complex internal evolution from the mnor political formation of the Scythians, Sarmatina to the great nomadic empires fo Gengis Khan and Timurlang. If the socio-economic changes brought about by the steppe cultures had determined a substantial adaptation of these techniques, it is now the horsemen themselves, with their clothing and all the elements linked to the horse's harness, who become the bearers of these new characteristics, both technical and functional, of the new way of standing and fighting on horseback. It is well known that belt trimmings, one of the most widespread material remains of the period, characterise the typical burial objects of high-ranking knights and beyond; on the basis of their workmanship, decoration and style, it has been possible to proceed with historical-cultural reconstructions of the period, also trying to identify a sort of social hierarchy that must have underpinned the deposition of certain objects as burial objects. However, there are still only a few studies on the analysis of burials which, on the basis of indices of status, rarity, wealth, etc., are able to reconstruct the social organisation of the communities whose grave goods were found in abundance in the numerous associated burials. The techniques used to make these objects, from casting in moulds to chiseling and embossing, as well as the choice of decorative themes from the distant animalistic tradition, are all elements on which typological and chronological interpretations have been based. Although it certainly does not constitute a conclusive and definitive interpretation, the analysis of the "late animalistic style", which can also be seen in these objects, can undoubtedly contribute to the understanding and recognition of different schools of craftsmanship and, ultimately,

of different cultural groups. With the migration of the last Asian tribes to the West, the reference period of steppe art is traditionally considered to have come to an end; the artistic production of this period is recognised as a chronologically extreme appendix and certainly much less expressive. The increased multiethnic and multicultural complexity of this period, which is not coincidentally defined as the Age of Migrations, does not, however, prevent us from seeing a direct continuity with the preceding epochs. If the historical-artistic category of steppe art is attributed the meaning and expressive value of a production of a nomadic-pastoral environment, it can and must be recognised that even the enormous quantity of objects found between the middle and the end of the 1st millennium CE and attributed to different peoples, such as the Huns, the Avars, the Khazars, cannot but belong to the same sphere of pre-existing figurative production (Genito 2002). This production, perhaps reductively labelled as the nomadic art of the age of migrations, even if it is expressed through the basic but much simplified forms of the previous one, instead creates and develops a series of new coherent decorative systems, defined by others as geometric ornamentation with sprouts. This, which is recognised as having a more pronounced ethnic connotation than the previous one, is in a sense the final stylistic outcome of the first. The idea that such objects were made, as has been claimed, in the workshops of contemporary sedentary peoples (Byzantines, Persians, Chinese, etc.) does not seem very convincing in this sense; only the greater and more obvious state-imperial consistency of the political organisation of these peoples may have contributed to a reductive perception of early medieval nomadic artistic production. The phenomena of interaction between sedentary and nomadic cultures continued with the same intensity in the early Middle Ages, although their nature was now radically different from the previous one. The figurative expression, still centred on the representation of animals, but enriched with new geometric decorative tendencies, did not lose the elegance and dynamism of the previous period. In recent years, specialist studies have helped to shed light on new aspects of this figurative culture, which has once again become “steppe”. Their contribution has, on the one hand, avoided the development of that nationalistic tendency of interpretation which aims at identifying a material and figurative culture with a specific group of peoples, and, on the other hand, has indicated autonomous technical schools and tendencies of production. They avoid the interpretative dualism between a peripheral nomadic artistic production and another central one, which risks erasing one or the other of the various specific contributions. The material culture of the steppe peoples of the early Middle Ages is still waiting to be incorporated into interpretive categories, similar to what happened in the most ancient era. The new products of this epoch bring with them numerous and unexpected figurative values, which, in order to understand better, it is necessary to bring together the considerable efforts made in recent decades by various scholars and to propose, from time to time, stylistic, detailed and more general analyses.

Conclusion

It is not an easy task to propose and draw conclusions to a ground like the *Silk Roads*. This is not only because the geographical and the chronological span involved in the topic are both rather ample; there is another reason why it is complicated to venture into interpretative shortcuts of more than one phenomenon that intersects with the issues of this set of roads, routes prompted. They were probably first initiated by economic-commercial needs, and later on also magnified by other military, ideological-religious, art-historical, technical, and cultural ones, and by those drives for adventure and knowledge that have always influenced human history on the part of all ethnic and linguistic components. All this, as one can easily imagine, presupposes for the study of such an issue, a very broad scientific knowledge, which must necessarily range from those same disciplinary fields. Perhaps one of the few things that can be taken for granted concerns the nature of those commercial exchanges that, for the first time in the history of Eurasia, take place and are proposed, in some way, outside the rigid schemes of the great political-state formations that until that moment were remaining quite isolated from each other. We will perhaps never know whether or not those great political entities wanted to favor and encourage those commercial exchanges or whether they were, in some way, conditioned by them to undergo them. The fact is that from that moment on, the world of the time began to be, and to be perceived as smaller, less distant, and this alone could have constituted a great advantage for all peoples.

It is important, furthermore to emphasise the cultural centrality, if not the chrono-logical uniqueness of those roads that have so far been categorised within the concept of the *Silk Road*. The plurality of land and sea routes could only be updated with a broader and more appropriate concept of the *Silk Roads*, in the plural.

Although the concept of the *Silk Roads* has traditionally been a necessary step in the history of the historiographical thought, it has never been based, however, on a clear concept, combining different commercial, military, diplomatic and religious char-acteristics in an approach dominated by the historical geography.

The antecedents and contemporary trade routes more or less included within the *Silk Roads* (such as the *Jade Roads, the Lapis Lazuli Roads,* the *Incense Roads*, the *Amber Roads*, the *Cotton Roads,* etc.) should have been considered as determining elements of a much broader and more diversified dimension, encompassing the whole set of ancient trade activities between west and East, Rome, the Near and Middle East, Central Asia and China from the late protohistoric to the medieval period.

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