

Outreach

Expedition Silk Road: Treasures from the Hermitage

1 March - 5 September 2014,
The Hermitage,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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IN 1877, when the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen introduced the term 'Great Silk Road' for the trade routes between the Far East and the West that ran through Central Asia, it became clear to the world that beneath the sands of these forgotten regions, lost cultures could be found. It was a time when archaeologists were making great discoveries, and in the late nineteenth century they turned their attention to Central Asia. The earliest expeditions, organized by Russia, Great Britain, Germany, France, Sweden and Japan, competed for the most spectacular finds. Lost cities and monasteries were unearthed and caves discovered in Mongolia, western China, and later in the present-day Central Asian republics exclusively by Soviet archaeologists. Unexpected sites proved to hold treasures spanning many centuries, from long before Christ to the Middle Ages: Buddhist images, traces of Christianity and Judaism, silk, silver, gold, wall paintings, sculptures, and jewellery, all of high artistic quality and bearing witness to astonishing interactions between cultures and religions. Lost countries, cities and empires acquired names: Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Parthia, Khara-Khoto. This was the discovery of the Silk Road, a magical world where treasures ranging from long before Christ to medieval times attest to unprecedented cultural interchange.

The world's largest trade network for more than 1,700 years

The origins of the Silk Road are said to lie in the second century BC. China was under regular attack by nomads, the Xiongnu, and responded by building the Great Wall of China. In search of allies in this struggle, the Chinese emperor Han Wudi sent a diplomatic mission led by Zhang Qian to the west in the late second century. Zhang Qian's reports included descriptions of all the regions, kingdoms, and city-states that he visited. His journey resulted in China's earliest trade relations with the peoples to the west and Chinese products such as silk gradually spread to such far-off places as Rome. This was the start of a network of trade routes linking China to the Mediterranean over a distance of 7,000 kilometres. It branched to the north and south of the inhospitable and mostly barren Taklamakan Desert, running through the almost impassable mountain ranges of Pamir and Tian Shan to the fertile regions around the Oxus and Jaxartes Rivers (now known as the Amu Darya and Syr Darya). From there, it went south to Persia and north to the Caspian Sea, and through the Caucasus to Asia Minor.

Crossroads of civilizations

In the ancient and medieval worlds, Central Asia was at the crossroads of several great civilizations: India, Persia, China, and the Roman Empire. In the north, it bordered on steppes where nomadic peoples dwelled. The oases and kingdoms of this vast region played a crucial and welcome role as way stations and marketplaces. The Silk Road was not a single, fixed route, but a network of trade routes that grew out of China towards the west. And it carried much more than just silk. Besides silk,

the products from China in the east included lacquer, paper, bronzeware and later porcelain and tea. Traders also brought glass, wool, and linen (often in the form of tapestries) from the Mediterranean region in the west. Fur came from Siberia in the north, while topaz, emeralds, perfumes, henna, and exotic animals were brought from India in the south. Every part of the Silk Road traded leather, paper (a Chinese secret until the 8th century) and chemicals such as ammonium chloride, used in polishing metal and treating leather. In Central Asia, halfway along the Silk Road in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, lay Sogdia, a pivotal trading post and a source of highly valued silver vessels. The Sogdian craftsmen also produced fine silver that was in great demand. Sogdian merchants settled in various locations along the Silk Road and played a dominant role in trade. Their elite led lives of luxury, dressing in elaborate silk clothing and using beautifully decorated dishes and vessels at their banquets, as a superb mural in the exhibition shows. Their interest in the good life encouraged the advancement of the applied arts to a very high level. Sogdian kings built palaces whose majesty has been uncovered by archaeologists. One of the exhibition's many highlights is a nine-metre-long mural from the Red Hall of the palace of the kings of Bukhara in Varakhsha.

The Silk Road: an early technology highway

Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood

IN RECENT YEARS there have been many books, articles and exhibitions about the so-called Silk Road and how 'it' was used to transport goods and ideas, notably silk and Buddhism, from one part of the world to another. Yet, this series of merchant trade routes also had another function. It enabled technology to move from one region to another.

An example of how the 'Silk Road' acted as a technology highway can be seen in the 'history' of one particular type of weave, and in the way its form changed as examples of the cloth gradually moved from Western China to Egypt and the Mediterranean. The type of cloth in question is technically known as a compound weave, namely a weave in which the weft or warp is divided into two or more series, which appear both on the face and on the reverse of the cloth.¹ The design produced is identical on the front and the back of the cloth, except that the colours are reversed.

The earliest known examples of compound weave textiles come from Western China and are of the warp-faced variety, in which the warp threads (the vertical, tension bearing threads on a loom, contrary to the weft threads, which are passed

under and over the warp threads) are combined into series and the patterns appear in the warp.² They belong to the Warring States and the Han periods. These textiles were produced in their thousands and then sent in the form of small bales as wages, trade goods and so forth, to cities and communities living in Central Asia and beyond.

Until the coming of (warp-faced) Chinese silks in Central Asia, the local weaving technology seems to have favoured cloths in which the pattern is in the weft. In addition, wool was widely used for textiles rather than silk. It would appear that some unknown weaver(s), being confronted with the warp-faced compound weaves imported from China, started to experiment and produced a technique for weaving compound weave textiles in the weft form using both silk and wool; examples of this type of textile have been found at sites such as Lou-lan, in Xinjiang.³ And weft-faced forms in wool (rather than silk and wool) were found at Niya, also in Xinjiang, dating to the first quarter of the first millennium AD.⁴ These and other pieces suggest that weft-faced compound weave textiles in either silk or wool (or both), were being produced in Central Asia sometime in the first to third centuries AD. Interestingly enough, shortly afterwards weft-faced forms of textiles started to appear in China, as these textiles and their technique travelled eastwards again.

But the story of the compound weaves does not end at this point in time. Both the (Chinese) warp and the weft-faced forms from Central Asia travelled along the Silk Road to the Middle East and the Mediterranean, in the form of actual textiles

or by weavers talking with each other, or indeed both.

Of particular interest are the weft-faced compound weave textiles that were found at Roman-period sites in Egypt. Examples come from Mons Claudianus in the north of Egypt, from Qustul, Akhmim, as well as Qasr Ibrim and Gebel Adda in the far south of this vast land. The compound weaving technique was used for particular textiles, including cushions, mattress covers and wall hangings.⁵ These were made in wool, while compound weave curtains were generally made of wool and linen.⁶

In addition, archaeological evidence and extant textiles show that the compound weave was also used and adapted in Iran and beyond, during the Sassanian period (224-637 AD). These include the famous textiles with large circular designs often including singular or paired birds, animals or people, that are encircled by small discs or pearls. This form was made in both wool and cotton, as well as in silk. Examples of silk weft-faced compound weave textiles of the Iranian style, for instance, were found at the Syrian site of Palmyra (destroyed 273 AD) and Halabiyeh (destroyed sixth century AD).⁷

The production of weft-faced compound weave textiles continued well into the Medieval period, when wool with cotton versions (Iranian influence?) are found at Egyptian archaeological sites, notably at Fustat (the early capital of medieval Islamic Egypt) and Quseir al-Qadim, an obscure port on the Red Sea coast of Egypt. And the tradition still continues.

Fig 1: Head of a monk (Buddha's pupil Ananda?). Dunhuang, China, 8th-9th century. Loess, clay, painted. Fig 2: Hand of a Buddha. North-Bactria, Karatepe, 2nd-3rd century. Plaster. Fig 3: 'Sakya-knights'. Kucha, Xinjiang, 6th century. Loess, clay, plant fibres, wood chips, painted. All images © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

The spread of Buddhism

These trade routes became the site of an unprecedented exchange of goods and ideas. We can see the results in the magnificent wall paintings found in many places along the routes. Often wall paintings in a wide range of styles were found on the same site. Buddhism was one of the first phenomena to spread along these routes, from India towards China by way of Gandhara (modern-day southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan). Centuries later, Islam began moving eastward, replacing Buddhism in many places. It followed the same routes as the Silk Road traders. Christianity and Judaism spread into Central Asia in the same way, as shown by artefacts such as an incense burner with Christian iconography and a ring with a scene of Daniel in the lion's den. Many remains have also been found of Zoroastrianism – the first world religion, which was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra).

The end of the Silk Road

The conquest of Central Asia by the Mongols under Genghis Khan ushered in the region's last golden age, as part of a vast, centrally controlled empire and continued well into the fourteenth century, despite the fact that the Mongol Empire was separated into minor principalities. In the fifteenth century, China's Ming Dynasty stopped exporting silk. The maritime roads along the coasts in the Indian and Pacific oceans were known since antiquity, but it developed rapidly after 1488 when the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias discovered a sea route around the Cape of Good Hope, which soon replaced trade routes on land. The rise of companies for maritime trade, such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC), brought the story of the overland Silk Road to an end. By this time, Islamic culture was for a long time dominant in Central Asia, and the mosques and mausoleums along the Silk Road could be recognized by the blue colour of their domes and outer walls.

The expeditions and the collection

The cultures of the Silk Road were not rediscovered until the late nineteenth century, when Russia, Great Britain, Germany, France, Sweden and Japan organized the earliest expeditions and competed for the most impressive finds. The Russian expeditions hit their stride after 1905 under the leadership of scholars such as Mikhail Berezovsky, Sergei Oldenburg and Pyotr Kozlov. Dozens of expeditions headed by Russian archaeologists set off for Mongolia, western China, and, in the Soviet period, to the now independent Central Asian republics. In numerous places, they uncovered treasures spanning many centuries, from long before Christ to the Middle Ages. In the Hermitage in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), these were put on display as ancient treasures of the Soviet Union with its many peoples, as well as the past of the nations of communist China and Mongolia. To this day, the Hermitage has continued its excavations in Central Asia – for instance, in the Sogdian city of Panjakent in Tajikistan. These projects are now led by experts from the Oriental Department of the State Hermitage Museum, who are also involved in the making of this exhibition.

Martijn van Schieeven, press and publicity coordinator
Arnoud Bijl, exhibition staff member

By the beginning of the 21st century two main lines of production in the Middle East can be identified, namely the Egyptian and Iranian forms. The Egyptian versions are now totally in cotton, rather than wool or linen. The Egyptian form is loosely woven and flexible, which is not so surprising, as this type of cloth was and is used for bed spreads. A little more surprising, however, is that some of the designs being used can be traced back to Roman period forms. This form of compound weave cloth is often called 'Akhmim,' after the middle Egyptian city of Akhmim where archaeological examples of this type of weave have been recorded from the Roman period. They are still being produced here, thus continuing a tradition of almost two thousand years.

As noted above, the second line is the Iranian form. They are now called *zilu* and were being produced in various centres, notably, until today, in the city of Maybod in Central Iran close to Yazd. *Zilus* are made in cotton and are produced on vast upright looms. These hardwearing textiles are used as rugs and large floor coverings and were popular in mosques, where they lasted for decades. Although these textiles were in widespread use in the 20th century, by the beginning of the 21st century virtually every *zilu* loom in Iran had ceased to work and many were broken up and burnt. Their demise after nearly two thousand years of history was due to another form of technological and trade development, namely the import of vast quantities of cheap, machine made textiles,

Right: A *zilu* loom from Maybod, Iran. Photo by Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2000.

The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia

Jonathan Silk

NOTHING CERTAIN IS KNOWN of the Buddha or his earliest communities. The reasons for this are numerous, beginning with the absence of writing in India until several centuries after the Buddha's lifetime (setting aside the Indus Valley inscriptions, which may be writing, but if so, remain undeciphered). Whatever the Buddha may have preached, and whatever was said about him, therefore, was transmitted only orally for a long time.

The result is that we have a good idea of what certain communities believed about the Buddha, but we know nothing historical. In terms of his community, putatively originally nomadic, at some unspecified time it began to establish settled monastic institutions, but it was likewise hundreds of years before, what we assume to have been, the earliest monastic architecture in wood – long decayed into oblivion – gave way to edifices in stone. Therefore, even the earliest material remains of institutional Buddhism in India are forever lost to us. It is not until the time of the great emperor Aśoka in the early 3rd century BCE that we begin to obtain concrete information, much of which comes to us from the inscriptions the emperor had erected throughout the Indian subcontinent. These provide our first clues of the geographic spread of Buddhism, and indicate that already quite some time after the Buddha lived and taught in the North central Gangetic valley, his tradition had spread toward the Northwest, the area now known as Pakistan and Afghanistan, ancient Mathura and Gandhara. This region has also yielded our earliest written Buddhist manuscripts. While there is no question that Buddhist scriptures (sutras) were transmitted orally, originally and even after the innovation of writing, the states in which those oral texts existed were naturally entirely ephemeral. Even when we have texts, transmitted in Pali in Sri Lanka for instance, which may in origin have been older, these have been subject to generations of revision. The Gandhari Buddhist manuscripts, written on birch-bark, provide us with our oldest sources of Buddhist literature, and demonstrate the highly literate and sophisticated state of Buddhism in the Northwest of the subcontinent from around the first century BCE.

A relay race

Given the geography of Asia, the routes that Buddhism followed in its spread naturally followed the contours of the land, the paths already traced out since time immemorial by traders. These are commonly, although in some respects no doubt misleadingly, referred to as the Silk Routes. But of course, it was much more than silk that was traded. Moreover, refined silk is a Chinese product, and the implication that the trading routes invariably linked China with lands west is also misleading, for these routes were certainly, in terms of volume, much more interregional networks of short-distance trade. This has implications for the transmission of Buddhism

too, since it is very much the exception rather than the rule that individuals would travel long distances. We should think rather of a relay race, with a baton being handed from one runner to another, each member of the team remaining within a relatively limited area.

Most of the attention paid to the spread of Buddhism across Central Asia concentrates on its progress north out of the Bamiyan valley, through mountain passes, then eastward, along either the northern or southern borders of the Taklamakan desert, through the oasis towns there, to the north through Kashgar, Kucha, and Turfan, to the south through Khotan, Niya, and Miran, joining in the now-famous Dunhuang oasis. However, Buddhism in fact also spread west, into Bactria, the Greek lands once conquered by Alexander, to places such as Termez along the Amu Darya (Oxus) river. We do not actually know quite how far Buddhism spread west, or why, when and where it stopped, and this remains an interesting topic for future research.

Multilingual literature of Buddhism

As Buddhism – its teachings, its scriptures, its practices, and ultimately even its monastic institutions – spread, one important issue was that of language. In what language would believers receive the Buddha's word? There are two models: either scriptures were preserved in the 'Church Language', in the same fashion that Jews generally preserve the Bible in Hebrew no matter what language they speak, or the texts may be linguistically localized. In Buddhism's trek across Central Asia, we find both of these models, and not infrequently, we find them together. That is, texts might be revered in Sanskrit, but as this medium remained foreign to Central Asian people, the texts were either translated, paraphrased or rewritten in a local language – often though with the preservation of a significant Sanskrit vocabulary, just as we do when we talk of the Buddha, his Dharma, of Zen and the like. This led to the production of a multilingual literature of Buddhism across Central Asia, in languages like Khotanese (Middle Iranian), Sogdian (another form of Iranian), Uigur (Turkish), Tangut (a Tibetan language, written in a variant of Chinese script), Tibetan, and of course, Chinese. The Chinese, as is well known, were relentless in their quest for Buddhist scriptures, and engaged, albeit entirely unsystematically, in the greatest translation project in world history, rendering huge numbers of often very arcane texts into an evolving form of written ('classical') Chinese.

At the same time, we must remember that Buddhism is far from only its scriptures, and in fact the most vivid and easily 'accessible' artefacts of Buddhism and its spread across Asia is found in the often remarkable physical objects produced: sculptures, wall-paintings, banners, and so on. The latter were often produced on silk, a product that the artists could only have obtained in China. But that does not mean necessarily that the objects themselves were produced even within the sphere of Chinese cultural, much less military and political, control. Rather, it is a tribute to the vitality of trade that such goods – luxury goods that they may have been – were widely available along these corridors.

The exhibition now on show at the Hermitage in Amsterdam highlights a variety of aspects of the presence of Buddhism along the so-called Silk Routes of Central Asia. Anyone with the slightest interest in this fascinating episode of human history is warmly invited to visit this stunning show.

Jonathan Silk is Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies. (j.a.silk@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

from, among other places, China. But the *zilu* tradition in Iran still continues. Some years ago I laughingly bought a *zilu* rug at a petrol station near Maybod. Made of plastic.

Dr Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, director of Textile Research Centre, Leiden. (www.trc-leiden.nl)

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