

## “...DESTROYED, [THE SILK ROAD] IS NO MORE.”

Valerie Hansen. *The Silk Road: A New History*. Oxford etc.: Oxford University Press, 2012. xvi + 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-515931-8.

So might one adapt the words of a famous “ancient Sogdian letter” with reference to the most forceful conclusions of this important and long-awaited book. In the author’s own words (p. 234): “The Silk Road was one of the least traveled routes in human history and possibly not worth studying – if tonnage carried, traffic, or the number of travelers at any time were the sole measures of a given route’s significance.” The qualifier here is crucial though, leading to the next sentence: “The Silk Road changed history.” Indeed, the contemporary documents which are the focus of the book contain very little on large-scale, long distance trade and the engagement in it of private merchants. Yet, as we also learn (and have long known), the same locations where these documents were found contain ample evidence about cultural exchanges embodying long-distance transmission of ideas, religions, languages, art and much more. So it is not as though the Silk Road has been destroyed. Rather, one may need to re-calibrate what one might have thought it involved.

The book is written, it seems, for a general reader, but as the dense notes in the back indicate, it is based on substantial research, much of it in Chinese sources, and at every turn, the author is impressively generous in acknowledging her personal debt to many experts. Serious students of the Silk Roads will find much of value here, whether or not they read some of the key languages. My review will focus on the economic aspects of the subject, while admitting that there is much more here which should draw our attention.

To a considerable degree, the image of the Silk Road which Hansen disputes is a straw man. Yes, the NTK-CCTV extravaganza of a quarter century ago opened with images of a camel caravan plodding across the desert keeping pace with the monotonous strains of Kitaro’s music and concluded each of the thirty segments with the litany that the roads all led to Rome. The grand finale shows the NTK vehicles arriving at the Colosseum. Popular images, but hardly the focus of most serious work on the subject designated metaphorically by Richthofen’s evocative phrase, one which he himself quickly abandoned. Surely few have been so reductionist as to distill the Silk Road

merely into the activity of private merchants traveling in large caravans loaded mainly with silk westward and all the way across Asia. Rhetorical exaggeration may be valuable to highlight the argument and make readers sit up and take notice. However, there also is a danger here that flogging a putative “large” scale of commerce may unduly diminish the significance of something that indeed may have been much “smaller.” Her designation of merchants as “peddlars” is accurate in its own way, but, as we know from the historiographic disputes over the application of that term in other contexts, may be misleading about the scope and sophistication of what many of them did.

The book deserves an ovation for its emphasis on the value of studying local or regional history, something which arguably has not been sufficiently appreciated in previous attempts to encompass the “Silk Roads.” Hansen structures her account around the histories which can be documented from a few key centers of activity, all but one (Sogdiana, in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) located in what is today China. Her criterion for the selection is places from which there is local, written documentation, however fragmentary and chronologically narrow it may be. Thus we start with Kroraina (the kingdom whose centers included Niya and Loulan in the Tarim Basin), from which some of the earliest such documentation has survived in the period from roughly 200 to 1000 CE, and eventually end up back in the Tarim at Khotan where the Karakhanid conquest and imposition of Islam allegedly marked the beginning of a new era. There is a kind of loose chronological and thematic progression here, though each chapter lurches often wildly over the centuries, and from detailed summary of a single document through excursions on modern discovery, asides on what the modern visitor might see, and so on. At times a bit more discrimination in the selection of detail would have been in order, but overall the account is eminently readable in part because so much of it emphasizes the human and mundane dimensions of the history. Hansen has an enviable ability to elicit from the often fragmentary written sources evocative images of real life. The documents tell about the size of caravans (invariably small), a range of products (mostly local, practically no silk), domestic dramas, the roles of local officialdom, language usage, and much more. Again and again we are reminded that individuals designated as merchants rarely appear in the sources,

and the ones that do generally seem to be involved in “short-haul” trade. Whether we should expect some of the documentation to refer to merchants (and thus find their absence to be significant) is a good question though.

Her thread connecting regions into a larger picture of interaction is people, in the first instance those whom she sometimes mis-labels as “refugees.” People moved, settled, brought with them ideas, religions, skills, languages, and, in some cases did maintain connections with the places of their (or their ancestors’) origins. There are no real surprises here — the Kuchean translator Kumarajiva, pilgrim monks such as Xuanzang and Faxian, Sogdian functionaries in Chang’an who had absorbed some aspects of Chinese culture while retaining (if in altered ways) some of that from their ancestral homeland in Central Asia.

Hers is not an argument *ex silentio*, which leaves those who might wish to defend ideas about large-scale, long-distance Silk Road commerce with a challenge. One cannot simply say it must have existed even if the sources are silent. Yet are all the sources really silent? Much of what she says would seem beyond dispute, even if her interpretive emphasis is a bit one-sided. That is, she insists that the local economies were largely “self-contained,” even as a great deal of her evidence perforce invites us to consider how they may in fact have had much wider connections. Some of her merchants ranged from what is now the western end of Xinjiang down into nearly central China. (No one I can think of ever said they went to Rome.) The Sogdian networks crisscrossed Asia. At one moment, a product of Khotan in Dunhuang is “local,” yet in the next breath we are reminded the two towns are separated by 1325 km. of treacherous desert terrain. Objects made in Chang’an end up in Turfan. Fragments of Chinese silk (accompanied even by a bit of Chinese writing) have been found as far away as the northern Caucasus, raising at least the outside chance Chinese brought them there. I treasure having her two and a half pages tabulating one year’s scale fee tax receipts at a single checkpoint near Turfan ca. 600 CE (pp. 100-2) with its breakdown of goods, quantities, names of buyers and sellers (a great many of them apparently Sogdians). However, I find it hard to obtain a clear picture of what the “collapse” of the regional economy may really have meant with the end of the huge T’ang military subsidies in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

There are some pretty loose generalizations about a monetized economy being replaced by barter exchange (even granting that, in certain circumstances, silk or grain were the equivalent of “money”). Everyone probably can agree that at least for a time Sasanian silver coinage may have actually been used as money

in the Turfan region — a fact of some significance for an understanding of larger commercial exchange networks — but we miss here some of the subtleties which details of the find distributions reveal. That the few Byzantine gold coins in China were never used as money or provide no evidence regarding trade with Rome may hardly merit discussion. Yet was the situation any different in Panjikent, where she cites approvingly authorities who feel the few Byzantine coins and their imitations found there attest to the actual use of them in trade? Her specific examples in fact point to just the opposite (p. 123).

In these discussions of the economy, the role of the government looms large. As she makes clear, if there was such a thing as large-scale, long-distance trade, more likely than not it is to be connected with official initiatives. Perhaps indeed conventional ideas of the scale of Silk Road trade need be given some credence. I think it has long been recognized that official embassies and gifting in many cultures can be a form of commerce. As her examples make clear, the evidence in the “Silk Road” region though is quite mixed. Some embassies, it seems, involved pitifully small quantities of “gifts,” whose importance may have been mainly symbolic, though possibly the commercial activities of the participants on the side could have been greater and undocumented. There are a few documented cases of very large embassies and what would appear to be huge gifts that presumably would have had substantial commercial value, even if we can know at best only indirectly what happened to them on reaching their destination. “Large” and “small,” of course, are fuzzy concepts. At certain periods, the Chinese government shipped huge quantities of silk and coin to the borderlands to support garrisons. Undoubtedly Hansen is right to emphasize that much of these subsidies seems to have been spent on local provisioning and services. Yet there are unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions as to whether all that investment just disappeared like a river into the desert sands. There is little attempt here to explore possible transactions which would have connected sedentary oasis centers with others located in the steppe or mountain pastures. We know that very substantial quantities of silk and other valuables paid for horses, for example. Did the pastoralists simply redistribute the luxuries within their polities? Even if we cannot quantify things, we certainly know that they obtained products produced in distant places.

For many important questions about economic exchange, we probably have to admit we will never have really hard evidence beyond that which documents immediate and local transactions. In general for the pre-modern world, there is a paucity of records to document the mechanisms of international

trade. Yet any attempt to discuss whether or not there was really meaningful economic exchange over long distances across Asia cannot simply focus on the few regions in East and Central Asia for which there is local documentation. There is still much to do in trying to test models of networking connecting the regional centers into larger patterns of exchange. Hansen's book provides a building block which can be used in the foundations for such a larger study.

Even if we agree that her rather circumscribed account of the overland "Silk Roads" indeed demonstrates they were economically insignificant, what are some of the missing parts of the larger picture of Eurasian exchange which invite elaboration? The "steppe roads" certainly need attention, as do the maritime routes. Hansen is not oblivious to the maritime routes. Yet, the evidence regarding them which she discusses mainly revolves around the human interest tales of two pilgrim-monks. It might have been more rewarding (and, I think, useful for the larger argument in the book) to have devoted greater attention to evidence about maritime economic exchange, especially since the work of historians dealing with that subject contains stimulating conceptualization of networks and how they interact. Yet admittedly, fitting this into the structure of the book as she has defined it would have been impossible.

Apart from the economic issues, she is concerned especially with religions and language but deliberately avoids saying much about art (a subject, she argues, that has been the focus of a great many other "silk road" studies). So in her section on Dunhuang, which she rightly touts as the single most important Silk Road center one might visit, she devotes a lot of space to the so-called "library" of Mogao Cave 17, spending perhaps a bit too much time on the tale of how Aurel Stein connived to obtain a good chunk of it, and discussing some of what its manuscripts reveal. The visitor to Dunhuang will see, of course, the empty room where the manuscripts and banners were, but otherwise will be exposed primarily to the remarkable paintings, which are not really discussed here. Yes, we see perhaps the most famous depiction of a merchant caravan (in one of the T'ang-era paintings of the miracles recorded in the *Lotus Sutra*), and learn about the depiction of Mt. Wutai in Cave 61, which correlates with various indications in texts about pilgrimage there, but there is no serious effort to explain why Mt. Wutai was so significant. To the extent that she refers to the paintings, it is primarily for what they reveal about local patronage and the wider connections of those who ruled Dunhuang in the waning days of the T'ang Dynasty, important topics to be sure. In her chapter on the Sogdians, her discussion of the imagery they left behind at Afrasiab and Panjikent

is similarly limited and will disappoint those who would wish to learn more about Sogdian culture. I, for one, am not persuaded that the near absence in those paintings of anything relating directly to commercial activity deserves the significance she attaches to it. Fortunately, as Hansen recognizes, other sources can easily be accessed to supplement her account.

One of the book's great virtues is its maps, drawn with crystal clarity. Yet, curiously, geography sometimes is ill served. While on the one hand Hansen enlivens her narrative with personal impressions from having visited many of the sites she discusses, there are occasional infelicities about locations. Today's Tokmak (if indeed that is where Xuanzang visited the Türk qaghan) is not right on Lake Issyk Kul. As annotators of his account have noted, when Xuanzang then headed south to Samarkand, there is no reason to think he would have gone out of his way to traverse the Kizil Kum desert, even though he mentions it. Sven Hedin certainly could not have floated on to Kucha had the onset of the winter ice not stopped his progress by boat down the Tarim (cf. p. 60): to get to Kucha from where he stopped would have meant backtracking and then going up a tributary to the foothills. Stein crossed the Kilik, not the Mintaka Pass on his way into Xinjiang, and "Karakoram Pass" normally refers to one on the route between Leh and Yarkand, not to one at the north end of the Hunza Valley.

Of course any book on the "Silk Roads" invites the picky critic, anxious to flaunt the little he knows, to complain about details or ask for something that is not there. While Hansen's focus here is on particular regions and often fairly narrowly defined periods in their history, she demonstrates a laudatory concern to try to explain changes in patterns of exchange over nearly a millennium. One of the more important topics she might have addressed in this connection is climate change, where we are beginning to obtain data that can be correlated with the rise and fall of certain routes and centers of activity. One might cavil about her rather abrupt ending of Khotan's history with the imposition of Islam by the Karakhanids, given the fact following upon the extension of Muslim rule in Central Asia were periods in which the overland trade routes seem to have flourished. And, if one accepts the arguments of Johan Elverskog's recent book on Islamic-Buddhist interaction, there may not be such a sharp cultural break as it is customary to assume. Of course to get such matters requires writing a very different and much larger book.

On a more trivial note, I can never forgive the absence of a bibliography, leaving the reader to search through the notes to find the first and full citations

of a book or article. One can always, of course, think of some additional resources which might have been cited to cater to the interests of general readers. It is not as though in saving a few pages Oxford otherwise stinted on production values. There are a good many quite decent black-and-white illustrations (many being historic photos from the early excavations), and there is an insert section of high-quality color plates. The Silk Road Timeline is nicely laid out.

Everyone interested in the Silk Road should read this book, even if not as the first introduction to the

subject. It is remarkable in its thoughtful distillation of a large topic and the vigor of its arguments, which I hope will indeed be the stimulus for re-thinking how we might best continue to explore a subject of endless fascination. Any number of developments may have "changed history." Whether the Silk Road merits special distinction in this regard remains an open question, which is all the more reason for us to continue to follow its multiple branches leading to yet unanticipated discoveries.

– Daniel C. Waugh