

## Citation style

Shi, Xueliang: Rezension über: Victor H. Mair (ed.), Reconfiguring the Silk Road. New Research on East-West Exchange in Antiquity, Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2014, in: Journal of Ancient Civilizations, 33 (2018), 1, S. 131-135, DOI: 10.21245/rec.ant.1131737900



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Review article:** Victor H. MAIR et al. (eds.). 2014. *Reconfiguring the Silk Road: New Research on East-West Exchange in Antiquity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. ISBN: 978-1-934536-68-1, pp.136, 31 color, 9 b/w illus, \$59.95.

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Since “The Belt and Road Initiative” reviving the ancient trade land and maritime trade routes was proposed by the Chinese state at the end of 2013, the routes linking East and West by land and sea, whereby silk, spice, and glass were transported by ship or camel, are frequently mentioned. From East Asia to Europe, it garners increasing attention from institutes, think-tanks, and forums in different countries.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the past of the so-called Silk Road(s) gains interest, both among the lay public and in academia. Marvelous discoveries such as that of Loulan at the beginning of 21st century attracted a great deal of attention among scholars, and some of the current research collected in *Reconfiguring the Silk Road: New Research on East-West Exchange in Antiquity* sheds new light on the complicated prehistory of what is nowadays called the Silk Road(s).

In his introduction (pp. 1–4), Victor H. Mair makes clear that the purpose of this collection of articles is “to reassess the Trans-Eurasian trade and migration routes” (p. 1). Previous research had produced a “simplistic picture of a neat trade route,” (p. 3) mainly based on recovering long-dead languages like Tocharian, and showing similarities to the better attested trade routes from the 2nd century BC to the 10th century AD. But that is only half the story. So how about the prehistory of the Silk Road(s)? In dealing with such issues, the present volume applies a multi-disciplinary approaches.

The volume begins with two chapters on the so-called Silk Road(s) in classical Antiquity. In “At the Limits: Long-Distance Trade in the Time of Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Kings” (pp. 5–14), Joseph G. Manning argues for a *longue durée*-perspective, showing the continuity of those trade routes in their Mediterranean and Eurasian context. Indeed, long-distance trade in scattered networks had already existed in the Ancient Near East by 2000 BC. Later, the Persian Empire mediterraneanized the inherited trade routes (p. 7). Then, knowledge and information on the trade routes passed throughout the Hellenistic

<sup>1</sup> In reponse, an alternative was put forward by Japan in 2015, see: [http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2015/0521\\_01.html](http://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2015/0521_01.html) (31.03.2018).

Age, initiated by Alexander the Great an going onwards, down through the Roman Empire. Consequently, long-distance trade flourished particularly during the so-called *Pax Romana* in the 2nd century AD, where trade via Roman Egypt was normal. Manning highlights the often ignored historic stages of the Silk Road before the 2nd century BC, which was usually the starting point of Silk Road research in earlier studies.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter two, “The Silk Road in Late Antiquity” (pp. 15–22), Peter Brown examines how trade routes developed in Late Antiquity under “the heavy gravity of the distinctive societies” (p. 16). Applying the concept of “archaic globalization” coined by Chris Bayly,<sup>3</sup> Brown argues that, with regard to cultural contacts, societies along the Silk Road pursued “difference” rather than “influence” as falsely claimed in models of cultural interchanges (p. 19). “Difference” occurred by juxtaposing the known of the local and the exotic of other cultures and religions. For instance, the Manichaeans, persecuted in the West, were very successful in the Tarim Basin. Manichaeans in the East helped distinguish the local kingdoms from Chinese neighbors, and the court of the *qaghan* from his Buddhist fellows. The causes which made those elements of the “archaic globalization” noticeable, according to Brown, is the continuous diplomacy and warfare instead of the invisible hand of the market (p. 20). However, one still needs to reconsider to what extent the routes as such were not only paths of cultural exchange and diplomatic contacts but also economic corridors.

After looking at the Silk Road in the classical world, the following chapters deal with archaeological findings and anthropological topics along these routes. In chapter three, “The Northern Cemetery: Epigone or Progenitor of Small River Cemetery No.5?” (pp. 23–32), Mair claims that both the recently excavated Small River Cemetery No. 5 (Xiaohe Mudi) and Northern Cemetery (Beifang Mudi) of the Bronze Age in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region belong to an identical culture context. This conclusion is drawn from his comparative examination of both cemeteries, practices of burial, and configuration of tombs. Due to climate change between 3000 and 2000 BC, the ancestors of both groups went to the Tarim Basin across the steppe, and the people burying those corpses found in Small River Cemetery No. 5 can be identified as “the main trunk of the Aeolian sand-mound-building culture” (p. 30). However, the hypothesis that the first settlers arriving at the Tarim Basin came from the adjacent Afanasievon people, and that both shared an identical

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Liu Xinru 2010; see Hernández 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Bayly 2002.

culture, was reconsidered in a recent survey.<sup>4</sup>

In “More Light on the Xinjiang Textiles” (pp. 33–39), Elizabeth Wayland Barber addresses the development of textiles based on the relics found in Xinjiang, dating to about 1800–1000 BC, by directly scrutinizing the exhibited fabrics. The techniques of weaving and processing of colors changed from early simple forms to the later sophisticated style. On the one hand, meticulous observations made on the tapestry, brocade, and brocade reveal that warp- and weft-faced weaving methods were extensively used, and the looms used for weaving them have been recently identified as ground loom without heddles.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, dealing with colors in clothes or ornaments also saw a similar development. Without any chemical dyes at this time, the textiles at the early stages were colored by sorting out of different natural yarns, and in later times advanced techniques like embroidery were used to add colors to the products, such as the trousers of the Yingpan Man as well as the clothes of the “Lady of Beauty from Xinjiang,” which articulated an amazing aesthetic expression. It is worth noting that, in contrast with misunderstanding or misrepresenting the various terms of textile, so far Barber offers a more detailed and exact description of the technical terms in the textiles of Xinjiang.

Based on field work at Begash, in the South-East of Kazakhstan, Michael D. Frachetti argues a formative role for Inner Asia rather than the mere transposition usually ascribed to it in scholarship (“Seeds for the Soul: Ideology and Diffusion of Domesticated Grains across Inner Asia;” pp. 41–53). In the Inner Asian Mountain Corridor, Begash is situated at a critical spot within the related network. According to Frachetti, the excavated domesticated grain and broomcorn millet played an important role in ritual practices and burial ceremonies. And notions of ritual values and practical utilities embedded in the domesticate grains from Begash, once treading on the roads of the pastoralist interaction networks, became something like “packets” of information and meanings, which traversed the Inner Asia Mountain Corridor, and transferred both their ideological and practical employment into the new soils. Thus, evidence from Begash strongly supports the view of a peripheral role once assigned to it needs to be revised.

In chapter six, “Horseback Riding and Bronze Age Pastoralism in the Eurasian Steppes” (pp. 55–71), David W. Anthony and Dorcas R. Brown recast the opening of the Eurasian steppes at the end of 3rd millennium BC by focusing on the role of horse. In the Northern Steppes, ranging from the Ural steppe to the West of the Alai, new data support that Botai, in the Northern Kazakh Steppe, is the important place where horse domestication occurred about 3600–3500 BC.

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Binghua and Wang Luli 2016.

<sup>5</sup> He Jingjing and Wang Bo 2017.

Typically, in this region horses were used more in ritual and feasting than as foodstuff by herders. When wagon transport was introduced to, and adopted by, horseback riders in 3300 BC at Yamnaya in the Western Steppes, a new kind of pastoral economy emerged. Pastoral forms were also present in the Eastern Steppes, like in the Tarim Basin, Djeitum culture, and Sarazm. The interchange and contact across the Steppes covering this span of time were fragmentary and indirect, until new routes had been eventually created at the end of 3rd millennium BC by pastoralists with recently invented weapons like the javelin and the chariot. And the expansion to Central Asia and Iran was documented with the new cuneiform word “ass of the mountains” (p. 67) by scribes of the Ur III Dynasty about 2100 BC. Anthony and Brown thus provide an indigenous explanation of southward interchange from the Steppes rather than the usually stressed influences from civilizations of Iran and Central Asia.

Afterwards, James P. Mallory re-evaluates Anatolian farming as well as the Euro-sian steppe hypothesis with regard to the ongoing polemics over a supposed location of the Indo-European homeland (“Indo-European Dispersals and the Eurasian Steppe;” pp. 73–88). Centering on the Pontic-Caspian region, he examines three models proposed in detail, i.e. the demographic model one and two, and the social model, and argues plausibly that the Pontic-Caspian region developed independently in its own territory, whence the Indo-European language then spread to the West and the East, an argument supported by a series of relics preserved in agricultural vocabulary.

Taking up the foreword by Colin Renfrew (“The Silk Roads before Silk;” pp. xi–xiv), the final chapter “Concluding Comments: Reconfiguring the Silk Road or When Does the Silk Road Emerge and How Does It Qualitatively Change over Time” (pp. 89–94) by Philip L. Kohl reconsiders some meta-issues of Silk Road studies, for instance, the known and the unknown, the way to interpret negative evidence, non-archaeological evidence or models, and the perplexity of the Indo-European problem. As a conclusion, Kohl states that the real Silk Road began in the Iron Age at the end of 2nd millennium and the beginning of 1st millennium BC, and that the qualitative change of its paths still needs further exploration.

The book includes carefully prepared color inserts facilitating its argument, however, it is odd, to say the very least, that the person who coined the term *Seidenstrassen* (Silk-Roads) is not listed in the index, and there are several typos, too. In sum, the volume offers a set of mostly unknown materials and fresh thoughts on the prehistoric and historic Silk Road(s). Putting the chapters together, the remoteness and complexity of its precursors, through literature, archaeology, and anthropology, come to light. Yet, further excavations and the employment of advanced techniques are waiting for contributing more

substantially to still unresolved issues such as the homeland of the Indo-European and the roles played by the Steppes in the formation and interchange of civilizations.

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