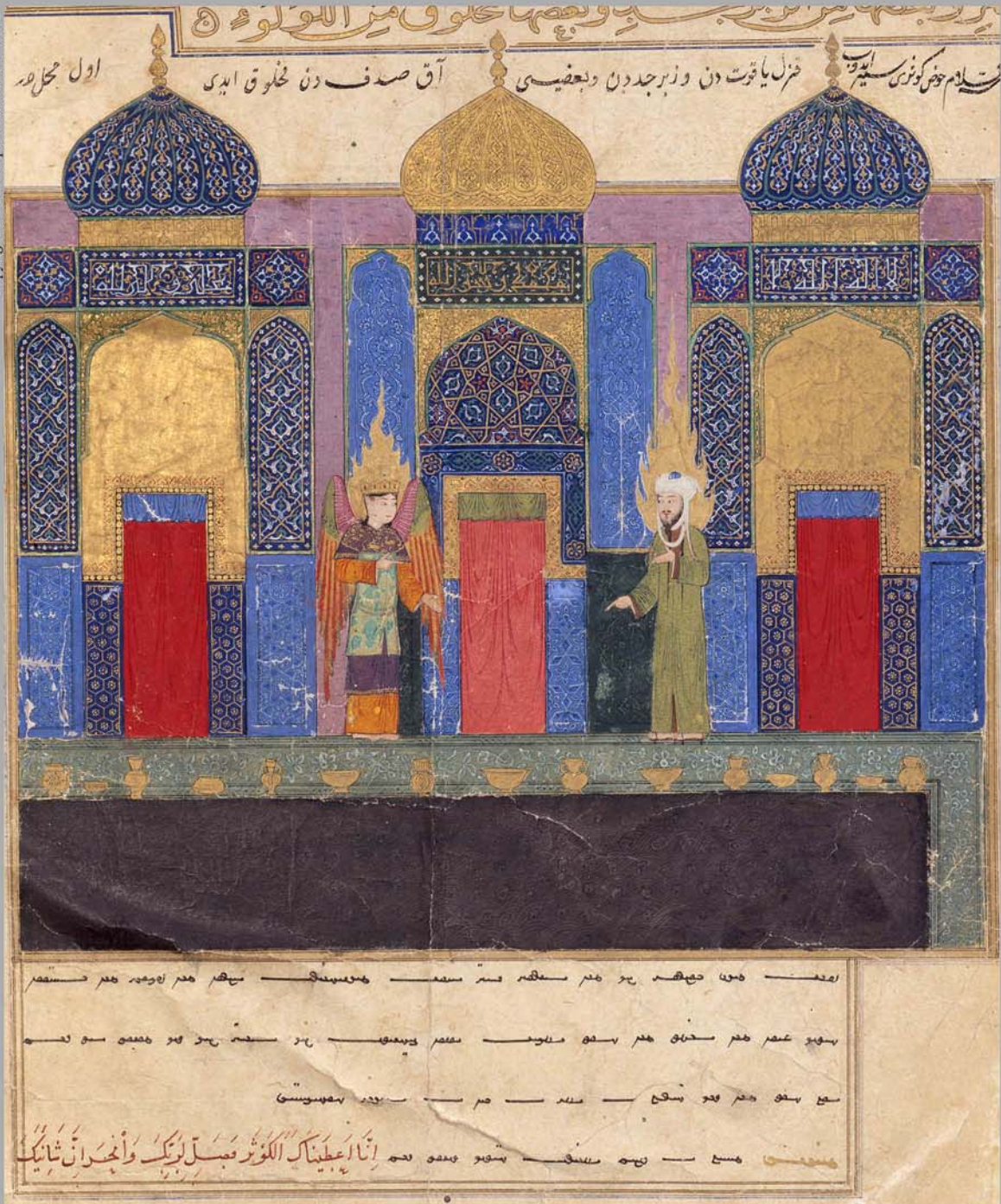


The

Silk Road

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Volume 10

2012

The Silk Road

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2012

Contents

Dedication	[iii]
The Image of the Wheeled Vehicle in the Mongolian Altai: Instability and Ambiguity, by Esther Jacobson-Tepfer	1
Vehicles of the Steppe Elite: Chariots and Carts in Xiongnu Tombs, by Bryan K. Miller	29
Yuezhi on Bactrian Embroidery from Textiles Found at Noyon uul, Mongolia, by Sergey A. Yatsenko	39
Production Sites in Karakorum and Its Environment: A New Archaeological Project in the Orkhon Valley, Mongolia, by Ernst Pohl, Lkhagvadorj Mönkhbayar, Birte Ahrens et al.	49
Preliminary Report on the Ceramics of Chinese Origin Found East of the Old Mongolian Capital Karakorum, by Anne Heussner	66
Bactrian Historical Inscriptions of the Kushan Period, by Nicholas Sims-Williams	76
The Bibi Khanum Mosque in Samarqand: Its Mongol and Timurid Architecture, by Elena Paskaleva	81
<i>Featured Museum. Arts of the Islamic World in the Louvre: Experiencing the New Galleries,</i> by Daniel C. Waugh	99
Töwkhön, the Retreat of Öndör Geegen Zanabazar as a Pilgrimage Site, by Zsuzsa Majer	107
Cultural Thieves or Political Liabilities? How Chinese Officials Viewed Foreign Archaeologists in Xinjiang, 1893-1914, by Justin M. Jacobs	117
Agriculture on the Mongolian Steppe, by Doeke Eisma	123

(continued)

“The Bridge between Eastern and Western Cultures”

Water Wealth and Energy in the Indian Himalayas, by Kelly D. Alley	136
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Review essays

Eurasian Steppe Bronzes (Re)discovered [John Boardman; Ulf Jäger and Sascha Kansteiner] by Catrin Kost	146
<i>(by Daniel C. Waugh:)</i>	
XiongNews: Fourscore Years since the First Excavations at Noyon uul	151
Archaeology and Landscape in the Altai Mountains of Mongolia: Celebrating Two Decades of Achievement [Jacobson-Tepfer, Meacham, and Tepfer]	154
Farewell to the Marauding Nomad [<i>Nomads and Networks; Steppenkrieger</i>]	158
"...destroyed, [The Silk Road] is no more." [Valerie Hansen, <i>The Silk Road</i>]	164
Epilogue to the Silk Roads? [Stephen Dale; Giancarlo Casale]	167
Revisiting Borderlands of Empires in Western Asia: Reviews and a Photo Essay [Dura Europos; Zeugma; Qusayr 'Amra]	171

Reviews

Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia, ed. Luo Xin & Roger Covey.
Rev. by Valerie Hansen 187

Samuel N. C. Lieu et al. *Medieval Christian and Manichaean
Remains from Quanzhou (Zayton)*
Rev. by Joel Walker 188

(the following reviewed by Daniel C. Waugh)

Tjalling H. F. Halbertsma. *Early Christian Remains of Inner
Mongolia* 191

The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures from Han China. Ed.
James C. S. Lin 193

Shipwrecked. Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds, ed.
Regina Krahl et al. 194

Jonathan Karam Skaff. *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-
Mongol Neighbors* 195

Rashmita Jadav. *Understanding the Morphology of Leh
Town* 196

Book notices (written/compiled by Daniel Waugh) 198

L. R. Kontsevich. *Khronologiia stran Vostochnoi i Tsentral'noi
Azii. Addenda* [Chronology of Far Eastern and Central Asian
Countries. Addenda].

A. V. Simonenko. *Rimskii import u sarmatov Severnogo
Prichernomor'ia* [Roman Imports among the Sarmatians of
the Northern Black Sea Littoral]

N. I. Kuz'min. *Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki khunno-sian'biiskogo
vremeni* [Mortuary Monuments of the Xiongnu-Xianbei Pe-
riod].

E. B. Barinova. *Vliianie kul'tury Kitaia na protsessy inkul'turatsii
Srednei Azii i luzhnoi Sibiri v do-mongol'skoe vremia* [The Influ-
ence of the Culture of China on the Processes of Incultura-

tion of Central Asia and Southern Siberia in the pre-Mongol
Period]

Jason Neelis. *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*.

E. B. Smagina. *Manikheistvo po rannim istochnikam* [Man-
ichaeism according to the Early Sources]

Haji. *Journey to the Heart of Islam*, ed. Venetia Porter.

Dan Gibson. *Qur'anic Geography*.

Richard W. Bulliet. *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Is-
lamic Iran. A Moment in World History*.

al-Iakubi. Kniga stran (Kitab al-buldan). Intr., tr., commentar-
ies, indexes by L. A. Semenova.

V. D. Goriacheva. *Gorodskaiia kul'tura tiurkskikh kaganatov na
Tian'-Shane Iseredina VI-nachalo XIII v.* [Urban Culture of the
Turkic Kaganates in the Tian-Shan (mid-6th-beginning of the
13th centuries)]

E. D. Zilivinskaia. *Ocherki kul'tovogo i grazhdanskogo zodchest-
va Zolotoi Ordj* [Essays on the Religious and Civil Architec-
ture of the Golden Horde]

I. K. Fomenko. *Obraz mira na starinnykh portolanakh.
Prichernomor'e konets XIII-XVIII v.* [The Image of the World
on Old Portolans. The Black Sea Littoral from the End of the
13th-the 17th Centuries].

Shakh-Makhmud ibn Mirza Fazil Churas. *Khronika*. Ed. and
tr. O. F. Akimushkin.

Art, Architecture and Religion Along the Silk Roads, ed. Ken
Parry (Silk Road Studies, XII).

*The "Silk Roads" in Time and Space: Migrations, Motifs, and
Materials*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Sino-Platonic Papers no. 228).

Bulletin of the Asia Institute, Vol. 21 (2007/2012).

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Yuqi.

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“...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 8th 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

EPILOGUE TO THE SILK ROADS?

Stephen Frederic Dale. *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*. Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiv + 347 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-87095-5 (hardback); 978-0-521-69142-0 (paperback).

Giancarlo Casale. *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xx + 281 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-987404-0 (paperback).

These books – a textbook survey and a scholarly first monograph – complement one another in interesting ways. Both should stimulate readers to re-think the conventional periodization which ends the history of the “Silk Roads” in the late 15th century with the advent of the European “Age of Discovery.” The Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals all controlled significant economic resources and invested in their development. They engaged in cultural exchanges in ways that suggest continuities with what has been documented for earlier periods of Eurasian encounters.

Published in a series entitled “New Approaches to Asian History” whose books are “intended as introductions for students to be used in the classroom,” Steven Dale’s volume is an impressive feat of compression, lucidly written and offering some interesting ideas even for those who might have some previous knowledge of the subject. Whether it really achieves the stated goal for the series is another matter – writing a successful “textbook” presents challenges that are not always readily overcome, especially when the subject is as complex as the one tackled here.

Dale brings to the task substantial expertise. His book on Indian merchants in the Eurasian trade published nearly two decades ago opened for many a new and very important subject. His more recent book on the founder of the Mughal empire, Babur, has been warmly received. He defines the subject of the volume under review as

a short history of culturally related and commercially linked imperial entities from their foundation, through the height of their power, economic influence and artistic creativity and then to their dissolution. It focuses on monarchs and the aristocratic elite... It necessarily gives short shrift to a variety of topics, most particularly the daily life of non-aristocratic urban and rural Muslim families, their religious rituals and social life... Women and members of non-Muslim communities also receive relatively little attention... Finally, limitations of space have made it impossible to do justice to the full range of architecture in these empires or to discuss gardens... [pp. 7–8].

Indeed, in many ways his approach might seem old-fashioned, though I think he is absolutely on the mark to focus on particular reigns and rulers under whom these empires achieved their greatest success. While he gives a passing nod to Max Weber’s pronouncements on bureaucratic rule, he wisely dismisses as largely inaccurate such labeling as “gunpowder empires” and “early modern.” Even if a great deal here concerns political history, one of the virtues of the book is its serious attempt to discuss important aspects of high culture: religion, architecture, literature, and painting.

Many readers will find the abundant details of political history here to be a tough slog – I am afraid

too much of it reminds one of why a “textbook” can dampen, rather than stimulate student enthusiasm. The compensation is Dale’s emphasis on explaining the basis for political success and in particular his discussion of the various ways in which the rulers sought to legitimize their rule. Despite the fact that the ruling elites (and the states themselves) were “Muslim,” to a considerable degree religion was subordinated to practical, secular priorities of attaining and staying in power and managing economic resources. While all three empires drew upon a common Turkic political, linguistic, and tribal heritage, there were substantial differences in how they developed politically. In his telling, the role of religion in politics was significant, ultimately, only the case of the Safavids. To say that, however, may be to understate the importance for the Ottomans of their control over the Muslim holy cities in Arabia. The exhibits even today in the Topkapi Saray (and some of the discussion in Casale’s book) suggest that the Ottomans were very serious in their role as successors to the Caliphs..

Perhaps the best chapter, for its distilling of what was really important, is the one on the economies, highlighting the importance of natural resources and agriculture, but at the same time underscoring the ways in which all three regimes promoted commerce. The governments invested in infrastructure. Political borders and frequent episodes of hostility (especially between the Ottomans and Safavids) were no obstacle to international commerce. Importantly, as Dale stresses, only in the case of the Ottomans might one make the case that the empire’s decline economically might be connected with the deprivations inflicted by the growing European presence in the Asian trade. (Casale’s different perspective here largely reflect his focus only on the period of Ottoman florescence, not the subsequent decline.)

Dale’s treatment of what we might loosely term “cultural” history is somewhat uneven, reflecting perhaps accurately the level of the author’s investment in the various subjects. We learn quite a bit about the importance of Sufism, though the conscious decision not to delve into aspects of daily life leaves us with little feel for what this may have meant in practice. Dale gives due emphasis to the Persianate literary traditions in all of the empires and provides at least some sampling of poetry. Architecture is one of the areas in which he readily acknowledges his dependence on a few key secondary treatments, but then, unfortunately, the result often reads like a catalogue rather than a considered analysis derived from standing back from those sources and viewing the buildings in their settings. The impression left by his discussion of painting is similar – somewhat mechanical.

Perhaps the problem here is the format, with its inevitable restrictions of space and production cost. Including cultural subjects is laudatory and essential if we are going to be able to appreciate why these empires should attract our interest. Yet, can one really convey a feel for the culture effectively, especially if it is impossible to illustrate properly its visual components? Yes, the book has a good many illustrations, the architecture in photos taken by the author, the painting mainly from work in the Sackler and the Los Angeles County Museum. At least in the paperback edition of the book the grayscale reproductions are often muddy. One might wish for some different choices – “interiors” means here courtyards, but not the real interior spaces under the domes, where, in the case of the famous Ottoman architect Sinan (represented here by only a portion of an external façade) one finds some of the most striking evidence of his genius. For Isfahan, to choose not to discuss “city planning” is certainly unfortunate; the grayscale views of the mosques simply cannot convey the stunning visual impact of their tiles. Given the importance of Firdawsi’s *Shahname* and its illustration, it is unfortunate that we see so little of its visual evocations, and then only indirectly via Nizami.

It seems likely that Cambridge will eventually make this book available electronically, as it has done for others in the same series. That, however, is unlikely to meet the needs of today’s students, for what we have here is what we might characterize as an “old-fashioned” textbook, not something that ultimately might take advantage of the possibilities offered by, say, an iPad. Now don’t get me wrong – I still believe in print books and reading text; I would be the last person to advocate we abandon them for an ephemeral world of often superficial visual experience. It is possible to imagine how this good book could fit into a course which also required primary source readings, had its own website with links to good image collections, and provided the inspiration of lectures by a broadly expert professor such as Dale, who would undoubtedly incorporate rich visual material into a compelling narrative. Cambridge could have provided some of the necessary support for this, but at least so far, has chosen not to. The book has, thank goodness, a good many clear, if small, maps, a glossary, dynastic lists, index and a fairly generous bibliography. Yet unlike what we find in analogous textbook series from Oxford University Press, nary a website is listed, even though there are some good choices of ones that have some of the first-hand accounts from which Dale cites snippets and have generous selections of images in brilliant color for the arts.

Comparing a textbook by an established scholar with a first monograph that is not too many years removed from a dissertation may seem a bit unfair to both. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, if anything the comparison works in favor of Casale's superbly written book. Of the two, his is by far the more compelling read, something that too rarely can be said about most first scholarly monographs.

Not confined to the straightjacket of a textbook, Casale is able to focus sharply on a forceful argument, and a provocative one indeed. By analyzing the development of Ottoman policy regarding the Indian Ocean in the 16th century and contextualizing this with reference to the development of Ottoman geographical knowledge, he asserts that we should

put to rest once and for all the notion that the empire was somehow a victim of the first era of European overseas expansion. Quite to the contrary, the Ottomans were among the most direct beneficiaries of that expansion, and in the end were victims of only one thing: their own success [p. 203].

Conventional discussions of Ottoman expansion focus on the concern over the empire's land frontiers, with a supposed lack of vision about the wider world or any significant maritime involvement with it. By contrast, the story of the rise of Portugal and its role in opening the age of European Discovery casts Henry the Navigator in visionary terms, reading back into the beginnings the commitment which led to the creation of a farflung colonial empire. Casale does not shy away from the terminology used to discuss the Age of Discovery. Indeed, he finds striking parallels between the Portuguese and Ottoman experience: both began with little knowledge of Asia, and in both cases the initial steps which ultimately led to its "discovery" and economic engagement were limited in scope and vision. Casale questions whether there was an economic advantage to the sea route around Africa; in fact, the Portuguese really were hoping to be able to take control of the Red Sea route via Egypt to the Mediterranean, recognizing that it had distinct advantages. In both cases, part of the rationale for expansion was religious. I think Casale is quite right (*pace* Dale, whose book he could not have read) that Ottoman control of the Muslim holy cities was extremely important in the development of an Ottoman rationale of world empire.

Before reading Casale, I had never appreciated the degree to which it was the Ottomans in the first instance, not the emerging European maritime powers, who provided the main threat to Portuguese interests in the Indian Ocean. While it may be that he too readily identifies distinct Ottoman political

factions advocating or opposing a forward policy in the Indian Ocean, clearly the success or failure of the Ottoman efforts depended a lot on court politics; certain individuals played a key role in devising visionary plans for what the Ottomans might be able to achieve. In the end, logistical challenges, overreach in conquering distant provinces that proved to be ungovernable, and the pressures of trying to wage war successfully on too many fronts doomed the efforts to maintain a foothold on the Indian Ocean and expand Ottoman influence even to Southeast Asia. For a time though, some remarkable successes were achieved, and there was a real potential for a different historical outcome.

Despite what we might term political failure, the Ottomans had considerable success and economic benefit from controlling a significant part of the spice trade – either by direct government intervention or by creating favorable conditions for private enterprise. Part of Casale's argument is that the private involvement became so successful as to obviate the need for continuing government involvement in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese seem never to have been able to cut off the trade through what had now become Ottoman territory. It is not Casale's purpose to go very deeply into the economic history, which is too bad, as we are left wanting to know a lot more details about this trade.

Casale's treatment of Ottoman geographic knowledge should also open many eyes. There has long been awareness of some striking achievements in 16th-century Ottoman cartography, combined though with a tendency to dismiss Ottoman geographic knowledge for what it apparently did not include. He makes the case that there was impressively rapid change from a situation in which the Ottoman rulers and elite had a very limited understanding of the wider world (not even knowing much about the very substantial accomplishments of medieval Arab geography) to one in which they not only translated some of the Arab and Persian classics but also began to keep abreast of the latest European discoveries. Even what were ostensibly secret Portuguese records of voyages came into the Ottomans' hands with little delay. It turns out that the Ottoman government had descriptive accounts of the Indian Ocean and even China which were better than most of what was available in Europe. And that was what was important for Ottoman policy, not the acquisition of details about the Americas. There is suggestive evidence that this interest in the wider world was not just confined to policy makers but spread more widely amongst the educated Ottoman elite. While these are not Casale's comparisons, my impression is that in England, where at the beginning of the 16th century there was a similarly limited interest

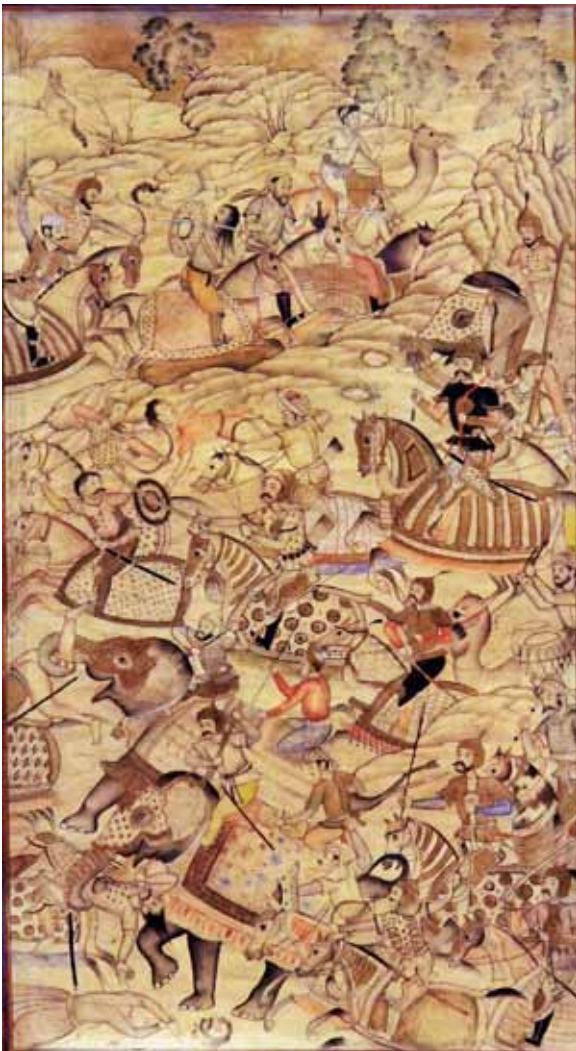
in the wider world, it took somewhat longer to reach the level of awareness the Ottomans achieved, even if by the end of the century, thanks to the fact the English had printing and the Ottomans did not, the spread of geographic knowledge in Britain took off. For parallels with a culture where printing of geographic literature still lay long in the future, we might look at Muscovy. Muscovite “backwardness” makes the Ottomans look very good indeed.

One of the virtues of the book is its extensive use not just of Turkish material (including manuscripts) but of major published series of Portuguese archival documents. So, while we might instinctively impute to Casale some rhetorical exaggeration about Ottoman accomplishments from his read of the often frustratingly incomplete Turkish materials, the Portuguese sources fill in many gaps and provide contemporary assessments which certainly support his argument about the impact of what the Ottomans attempted. Some decent schematic maps, images of 16th century maps, illustrations from manuscript

depictions of sea battles and engravings of port cities complement the discussion.

The boldness of Casale’s conclusions should prod others to take his arguments seriously, even if to argue with him. Both Casale and Dale should prompt those interested in the larger patterns of Eurasian trade to consider more carefully the interrelationship between the maritime and overland routes, to examine more closely the history of specific regions and not just generalize for larger polities, to take seriously the active role of governments in developing infrastructure to support trade, and above all to reexamine the impact the European “Age of Discovery” on what we call for convenience the “history of the Silk Roads.” Perhaps the end of the 17th century is more defensible than the end of the 15th to mark the closing of an era. Of course whether we can ever agree on a periodization is less important than how much we can learn about mechanisms of exchange and cross-fertilization of cultures.

– Daniel C. Waugh



(left) Babur (1483-1530), founder of the Mughal Empire, in his conquest of India in 1526. Miniature from late 16th-century manuscript of the Akbarnama. Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection 46.28.



(above) Ottoman Sultan Selim I (1467-1520), whose conquests in the Middle East paved the way for the Ottomans to move into the Indian Ocean. Modern statue in Selim’s home town of Trabzon, Turkey.

(below) Safavid Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) receiving Vali Muhammad Khan of Bukhara, who came to Isfahan seeking aid. Chihil Sutun Palace, Isfahan, 17th century painting renewed in the early 18th century.



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