

*The
Silk Road*



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The
Silk Road

CONTENTS

<i>From the editor's desktop: Paths Less Trodden</i> , by Daniel C. Waugh	2
Xiongnu Constituents of the High Mountains: Results of the Mongol-American Khovd Archaeology Project, 2008 , by Bryan K. Miller et al.	8
On the Chronology of the Noyon uul Barrows , by Sergei S. Miniaev and Julia Elikhina	21
Chinese Lacquerware from Noyon uul: Some Problems of Manufacturing and Distribution , by Michèle Pirazzoli t'Serstevens	31
The Tomb of the Sogdian Master Shi: Insights into the Life of a Sabao , by Albert E. Dien	42
Buddhism in Mongolia Today: Introduction , by Zsuzsa Majer and Krisztina Teleki	51
Continuation or Disjuncture with the Past and the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition , by Zsuzsa Majer	52
Building on Ruins, Memories and Persistence: Revival and Survival of Buddhism in the Mongolian Countryside by Krisztina Teleki	64
<i>On the Road: Over the High Passes</i> , by Frank Harold, with photographs by Ruth Harold	74

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"The Bridge between Eastern and Western Cultures"

PATHS LESS TRODDEN

Lurking in the back of my mind are oft-quoted lines from one of the domestically (if not internationally) revered of America's poets, Robert Frost, about how taking the less traveled road made all the difference (for him, in life...?).¹ I think what conjured up Frost was the lively interchange I had with Frank Harold about his article at the end of this issue, which focuses on what most would agree were historically the most important routes through the Central Asian mountains. Confronting the challenge of routes through difficult terrain is a kind of metaphor for much of contemporary scholarship on the Silk Roads, however broadly or narrowly we may define our subject. This issue of our journal offers examples in all of the articles. The opening report by Bryan Miller and his colleagues informs us of exciting new discoveries on the periphery of the Xiongnu polity and in the excavation of 'ordinary' people's graves. While the following discussion focusing on Noyon uul concerns one of the most famous of Xiongnu elite burial sites, the conclusions substantially revise its commonly accepted dating. The many new discoveries of Sogdian material in China in recent years still leave questions of interpretation open, as Al Dien demonstrates in his analysis of the tomb of the Sogdian Master Shi. And finally, the two articles by recent Ph.D.s Zsuzsa Majer and Krisztina Teleki detail the challenges of learning about Mongolian Buddhism after its destruction of the mid-20th century and the even greater challenges faced by those who would wish to restore it.

Every time I read of a new discovery or re-interpretation, I wonder where the 'field' of studies about the Silk Roads may be in a decade or two, and whether, if I would be able to return in, say, 2090, I would understand any of what then will be written on the subject (assuming that Silk Road studies survive that long). Increasingly I am drawn away from the familiar roads to the paths that historically may have been the ones less traveled, and to the interpretive routes that are not yet permanently etched on the landscape. Perhaps, like Frost's road, their appeal is precisely because they are 'grassy and wanted wear.' What I shall attempt here is

to reflect on some ways that current scholarship is asking us to re-conceptualize traditional approaches which have been used in the study of the Silk Roads and analogous topics and then to speculate on how one might wish to be able to write or re-write their history at some future time. The focus here will be on movement, landscapes, and routes, reflecting that emphasis in two recent, stimulating collections of essays produced by seminars that brought together some of the best experts working on these subjects.

The papers in *The Archaeology of Mobility: Old World and New World Nomadism* (2008), published by the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles, use a wide range of specific examples from various continents to illustrate current thinking about how to go about studying what at one time would have been characterized simply as 'nomads,' people who in the traditional view occupied a pole opposite from that of 'sedentary' agriculturalists. As these essays point out, there is already a substantial literature revising this static interpretive framework. By and large, the participants in the Cotsen Seminar all recognize the fluid nature of mobile societies and economies. 'Pure nomadism' was rare, if it existed at all. Quite simply, we should abandon any idea of a dichotomy between the 'steppe and the sown' and think rather of a continuum.² Yet how we can best document the regional variations and change over time is a continuing challenge.

The first in what is to be an ongoing series of research conferences at the University of Pennsylvania Museum produced *Landscapes of Movement: Trails, Paths, and Roads in Anthropological Perspective* (2009). At first blush this volume might seem to offer less than does *Mobility* to the Silk Road specialist, since most of the examples are New World ones, based on source evidence that in some ways would seem to be unique to the particular cases. However, I would argue that in fact many of the analytical approaches are ones which can be found in recent work on Central Eurasia, and that it is possible here to find inspiration for new ways of looking at such subjects as the routes through those mountain barriers ostensibly standing in the way of long-distance exchange.³ At very least here we are asked to question what the function was of different routes or paths, whose importance might not always be measured by how direct or easy they were or whether they were suited, in the first instance, to the

large-scale movement of goods. Moreover, the paths may be symbolic, not physical ones.

Underlying this discussion are basic questions about evidence and how it might reasonably be used. While we can expect that the range and quantity of source material for our study will continue to increase, we never are going to be in a position where the sources are so abundant as to leave few gaps in the historical record. There will always be differing interpretations of what are often quite cryptic and fragmented bits of evidence. This then raises questions of how to supplement 'hard evidence' with other kinds of sources. If we do not have material contemporary with or of the same provenance as that of our subject, to what extent can comparative observations from a later period or different region be invoked as analogies to 'fill in the gaps?' Of particular relevance is the question of how and whether we might extrapolate from modern ethnographic observation of 'tradition' to learn about a culture centuries earlier, concerning which otherwise we might have at best a few very biased written sources and scattered archaeological evidence. We need to be acutely conscious of the ways in which 'traditions' may be modern inventions and more generally recognize that 'tradition' is very much a moving target.⁴

There is a fundamental problem here in that the written sources, essential for writing real history, for the most part are the work of formally educated urban authors even if they may contain first-hand observation and occasionally transmit what are ostensibly the words of those who did not live in urban environments and had not been trained to write.⁵ To allow archaeological evidence to speak with a full voice, we need written material to contextualize it; so, however much we may criticize the written sources for their biases, we cannot simply discard them. A similar kind of reasoning can be applied to the way in which we might use modern ethnographic material. Often it can provide systematic observation of lifeways, and the informants for the ethnographer can explain that which is being recorded. A ritual object by itself really has no voice or at best may speak in a language we do not yet understand. A ritual object in the hands of a living person may have an interpreter, even if we then must analyze carefully what he or she says in order to establish its value in answering our questions. How we pose those questions is in itself problem-

atic. To what degree we then can extrapolate from the answers to an earlier and silent period may vary considerably from case to case.

Apart from invoking anthropological models and interrogations, among the current approaches which are undertaken to enhance our understanding of material objects is 'experimental archaeology.' That is, there are efforts to replicate the techniques used by earlier craftsmen to reproduce the same objects which archaeology uncovers. Such efforts may include the chipping of stone tools, the effort to replicate wear patterns on the finished tools, the making of pots, or the construction of boats.⁶ The example of ceramics is of particular significance for Inner Asian history and pre-history. New classificational approaches and new analytical techniques involving chemical analysis may help provide much more concrete markers than we have had for determining provenance and patterns of movement and exchange and placing them in a solid chronological framework. An important question under discussion currently is whether one can even expect 'nomads' in the traditional sense to have used heavy and fragile ceramic vessels (as opposed to containers fashioned from reeds, leather, etc.), and if they did, what might have been the circumstances in which they could have produced or obtained such vessels (Eerkens 2008; Barnard 2008). Experiments to replicate ceramic manufacture do in fact show that in certain circumstances it could have been undertaken among mobile pastoralists. Certainly if we look at burials of the Xiongnu, we find extensive remains of pottery, a fact which of itself should reinforce our growing perception that we may here be dealing with multi-resource economies and complex societies involving some kind of fixed settlements.

Given the fractured landscape of our different kinds of sources, it should come as no surprise that the picture we can develop of a society from one category of evidence may be impossible to corroborate by looking at a different category. *The Archaeology of Mobility* provides some striking examples from the Middle East. Of particular interest is the case of the Amorites in the late third and early second millennium BCE. The written sources, none of them produced by the Amorites themselves, suggest they were 'nomadic,' albeit originally probably a settled population; yet to date there are essentially no securely identifiable 'Amorite' archaeological remains (Buccellati 2008). Analo-

gous challenges confront us if we turn to the pastoralists of Inner Asia. For the Bronze and early Iron Age (roughly, 2nd – 1st millennium BCE), there are no indigenous written sources. Until recently, much of the archaeological evidence has been that excavated in elite tombs. There one finds evidence about long-distance exchange, the evolution of the use of domesticated animals, and much more, even if its interpretation is still very much subject to dispute. What has been needed is more evidence to document settlement patterns and develop an understanding of socio-economic change.

Several of the essays in this volume provide good summaries of recent research which may eventually expand considerably our understanding of the world of Inner Asian pastoralists. Claudia Chang summarizes results of the very interesting work she and her Russian and Kazakh colleagues have undertaken in southeastern Kazakhstan in recent years, documenting within a relatively small region a considerable diversity in settlement and economic activity (Chang 2008; 2003; *Gold* n.d.). Michael Frachetti's project in the Dzhungar Mountains southeast of Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan explores what he calls 'pastoralist landscapes' (Frachetti 2008a).⁷ Apart from locating many new settlement sites, the effort has been made here to document most probable routes from the valleys into the neighboring mountains and to correlate this material with ethnographic observation and calculations of such factors as the 'carrying capacity' of pastures. While the modern data are removed from the period of the archaeological record by some three millennia or more, the fact that there seem to have been at most relatively small changes in the local climate and ecology in that long period encourages us to believe that the modern data can shed significant light on the lives and movement of the Bronze-Age pastoralists. An important aspect of this work is to emphasize the dependence of movement and settlement patterns on localized factors and on the annual cycle of seasons, considerations that certainly also need to be kept in mind in any discussion of the 'Silk Road' routes across Inner Asia. Other essays in *The Archaeology of Mobility* employ analogous considerations from 'landscape archaeology' in order to try to understand the sedentary-nomadic continuum, be it in the Great Lakes region of North America or in the Middle East.

Esther Jacobson-Tepfer's essay in the volume

summarizes very well the work of the American-Russian-Mongolian project that extended over a decade between 1994 and 2004 and focused on documenting 'the ecology of ancient cultures in the Mongolian Altai' (Jacobson-Tepfer 2008, p. 208, n. 18).⁸ As is the case with other essays here, the carefully nuanced conclusions leave us with more questions than answers, since so much additional research is needed to document the contexts in which the major rock art sites in the Altai and other parts of Inner Asia are situated. To date, relatively little has been done to excavate burials; the location of settlement sites is still pretty much a blank page. We can certainly agree that the rock art documents locations of often a very long-term presence of pastoralists, even if the chronology can only be approximated. Moreover, as some of the studies in *Landscapes of Movement* reinforce, the location of petroglyphs may be one of the ways to trace routes and paths of historic importance, even if the identity of those who used them may as yet be difficult to establish. The symbolic importance of the imagery is one aspect which this project has been considering.

An important example of how such evidence is changing our knowledge of routes through the 'impenetrable fastness' of the mountainous knot in the center of Asia is in the ongoing research concerning what Jason Neelis terms the 'capillary' routes in what is now Northern Pakistan (Neelis 2006; 2002 [2006]). The construction of the Karakorum Highway in the 1970s, connecting Kashgar with Gilgit via the Khunjerab Pass, facilitated access to many of the important sites of rock art (granted, many of them associated with people who display formal literacy) and brought to light widely dispersed material, which, in the absence of other kinds of documentation, at least confirms the use of a multiplicity of routes connecting South and Central Asia. While it may well be the case that movement of large quantities of goods over many of these routes was unlikely, nonetheless, we know for certain that they were involved in the transmission of Buddhism and that Sogdian traders seem to have frequented certain of them. All this, well prior to developments of early modern and modern times in which expansion and control of many of these routes occurred in conjunction with political developments in places such as the Hunza Valley (Stellrecht 2006). Clearly there are major gaps in this history, but I think one important

cautionary lesson which emerges from what we now know is that our modern perceptions of the routes may very well reflect primarily their 'recent' history; and that history may not necessarily be a reliable gauge of any particular route's importance in earlier historical times.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the new research on routes connects both with the study of 'landscapes' and the study of mobility of nomadic pastoralists. For even if we lament the apparent absence of hard evidence concerning locations inhabited by the pastoralists, the paths themselves must be considered artifacts of human 'construction.' In some places they may be worn into the landscape (and in certain conditions analysis of soil samples may document their antiquity). Once paths by dint of frequent use have become 'inscribed' in the minds of the users, they may be further marked by 'materialization': petroglyphs, cut steps, supports of wood and stone on steep cliff faces, *obos* (cairns) at the tops of passes, even paving or control gates, especially as they approach political centers (Snead 2009, esp. pp. 46-48).

Yet beyond this physical documentation there is another type of evidence which might be helpful in allowing us to reconstruct what these 'built features' signified in the lives of those who traveled the paths. For the examples in the American West, one important source of documentation that has been mined is oral history and literature (Darling 2009; Zedeño et al. 2009). Song cycles may be keyed to particular seasonal or ritual travel along certain routes; in the texts there are often concrete references to prominent features of the landscapes through which the paths led. The purpose of the travel and identity of the travelers might mean, of course, that there would be substantial differences in how the paths and landmarks registered in the perceptions of the travelers themselves.

Whether and how we might use such evidence for the Silk Roads is certainly an open question. But recent studies by ethnomusicologists remind us of how much landscapes (physical and spiritual) and the natural environment find a place in oral literature of the Mongols, Tuvsans and other Central Asian peoples (Pegg 2001; Levin 2007). Theodore Levin (2007, pp. 149-158), citing the work of Emma Bunker on the ancient animal-centered art of 'steppe peoples,' cautiously suggests that the modern ethnomusicological material may

help us to reconstruct the cultural context in which such work was produced and circulated.

Should such ideas eventually lead us to write a semi-fictionalized version of the history of the ancient peoples of the Silk Roads as a new kind of "history"?⁹ Many would object, even if to undertake that might in fact not be a vastly different enterprise from the invocation of ethnographic observation which already animates some of the studies which are appearing. We cannot, of course, expect to be able to ride along with the Xiongnu or Wusun listening to their songs (if they had them) evoking particular sounds or images of nature along the paths through steppes and mountain. Yet it might not be unreasonable to 'reconstruct' that such groups which lacked an indigenous written culture had in their oral traditions responses to their surroundings analogous to those which can be documented in modern times as deeply-rooted cultural traditions of peoples who now inhabit the same territories.¹⁰ Perhaps then there is a way see through the eyes of the early travelers and bring to life travel along the Silk Roads in a way that to date has not been done. In the process we might then incorporate more fully the paths less traveled which constituted an integral part of the networks connecting the disparate parts of Eurasia.

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Notes

1. Frost's 'The Road Not Taken,' first published in 1920, is readily available on the Internet, e.g., at <<http://www.bartleby.com/119/1.html>>, accessed December 26, 2009.

2. However, this does not mean, as Christopher Beckwith would have it in his new book (Beckwith 2009), that that societies in Inner Asia were no different from those on its periphery. I discuss this and the many other problematic aspects of Beckwith's bold book in an extended review, 'Central Eurasians Everywhere,' forthcoming in *Mongolian Studies*.

3. Probably Timothy Earle (2009) would disapprove of my somewhat loose usage of terminology (roads, routes, trails, paths, etc.), just as I find his analytical categories a bit rigid. Nonetheless his concluding chapter to the volume lays out very clearly ways that we might conceptualize the material for meaningful comparisons across cultures. One should note that by his definitions, the 'Silk Roads' were largely not roads at all.

4. The starting point for many discussions of the 'invention of tradition' is the stimulating collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (*Invention* 1983/1984). Of particular interest in *Archaeology* 2008 is Benjamin A. Sidel's essay demonstrating that the 'traditional' Bedouin tent may be a modern construct. Fortunately for the trellis tent (yurt or ger), we have reliable evidence for its considerable antiquity (see Stronach 2004).

5. This is one of Beckwith's very legitimate concerns about the way in which the history of Central Eurasians has commonly been treated. The biases of, say, the Chinese annals regarding the Xiongnu or the Arab and Persian historians regarding the

Mongols, are, of course, well known. Careful analysis of modern historical narratives about early history that have been taken as 'authoritative' may well reveal the shallowness and weakness of their source base, especially if those sources themselves are of relatively recent date and may at best represent a kind of vague oral tradition. See, for example, the illuminating discussion in Holzwarth 2006.

6. For the last of these, an example which is of some relevance for our thinking about medieval trade routes, see Larsson 2007. Experiments using the construction techniques suggested by a careful analysis of all the archaeological evidence have enabled the reconstruction of Viking boats that more realistically might have been of the type used in river portages than would be the case if we take as our models the large and heavy ships found in some of the famous Viking burials. These reconstructed boats have then been used in travel along some of the historic routes in western Eurasia, including the tracing of routes across the Caucasus which arguably were of importance in the Eurasian trade.

7. For an earlier overview of his project, see Frchetti 2004; for his important monographic treatment, Frchetti 2008b, which we hope to treat more extensively in a future issue of our journal.

8. For an earlier overview see Jacobson-Tepfer 2006. Major publications of this project's results are now available. For more information see the extensive and technically sophisticated website, 'Archaeology and Landscape in the Altai Mountains of Mongolia' <<http://img.uoregon.edu/mongolian/index.php>>, accessed December 26, 2009.

9. An example of such an approach, where the fictional elements are somewhat awkwardly grafted onto composite biographies based solidly on historical materials, is Whitfield 1999, to date one of the best introductions to the Silk Road for the general reader.

10. Perhaps the best known example of historical 'reconstruction' in recent decades using, among other things, the insights drawn from anthropology, is Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*. The book has been criticized for its 'excess of invention,' a criticism which Davis feels was not merited. See the review article by Robert Finlay and her rebuttal in *American Historical Review* 93/4 (1988): 553-603. To be somewhat cynical here, I think professional academics are particularly alarmed (yea, even envious) when one of their colleagues has the rather rare talent to produce a serious book which reaches a popular audience and becomes a best-seller. It did not hurt in this case that the film version, on which Davis consulted and which starred Gérard Depardieu, preceded the book. Of course we should not pretend there are no boundaries between fact and fiction or fictionalize simply for the sake of a higher ranking in Amazon.com's tracking of sales.