

Silk Road Cities: A Historical Introduction

Silk Road Cities: A Historical Introduction

At the centre of the Eurasian continent lies the Central Asian steppe, a vast expanse of rugged pasture land and desert bounded to the south and east by the mountains of northern Iran, the Hindu Kush, and the Pamir and Tien Shan ranges. Two rivers water this region, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, known to antiquity as the Oxus and Jaxartes. They flow north from the mountains and empty into the inland Aral Sea, creating fertile valleys through the steppe. The former of these two rivers gave the region its Roman name of Transoxania, 'the Land beyond the Oxus'. Central Asia was the home of nomadic pastoral peoples, Aryans, Turks and Mongols, who poured into China, the Middle East and Europe when their numbers grew too great for the steppe to support. It also served as the main corridor between Europe and Asia, conveying peoples, ideas and commodities, the most famous of which was silk, from one end of the continent to the other through the passes created by the Jaxartes and Oxus.

The transient nature of steppe life and its location at the heart of the Eurasian landmass mean that it has traditionally stood at the confluence of cultures, religions and empires. Successive empires from Alexander to the Arabs, Mongols and Russians have all incorporated the steppe and contributed to its cultural, architectural and political history. From ancient times, their aim was to protect and foster the Eurasian trade from raiding nomads, and to that end they constructed great, fortified cities along the trade routes. At other times, the nomads of the steppe constructed their own cities. In either case, the city has been as important to the steppe as the nomad.

The identity of the earliest inhabitants of the steppe is mysterious but between 3000 and 1000 BC Aryans moved into Central Asia. They had already domesticated the horse and soon domesticated the Bactrian camels of the steppe. The mobility this gave them enabled them to develop the great commercial route from the Near East to China. During the Graeco-Roman period a regular trade in silk, horses and metals flowed along the route using a series of staging posts, forerunners to Samarkand and Bukhara. The nomads were Shamanists but soon other religions entered Central Asia. Zoroastrianism became the major religion of the cities while Christianity and Buddhism also gained converts.

In the early 8th century Muslim armies from Marv in Khurasan crossed the Oxus and founded garrison cities alongside earlier trading centres. Cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent were established to garrison the frontier and exploit the Central Asian trade but they also disseminated Islam throughout the steppe using the Persian language and became the nuclei for successive Muslim principalities, theoretically subject to the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. One of the first such principalities was Samanid Samarkand and Bukhara (819-999).

During the 10th century, Turkic nomads from the over-populated eastern steppe began to move west into the Muslim steppe, the Near East and Asia Minor. The largest group was the Ghuzz Turks who converted to Islam and established new Turkic Muslim principalities throughout the eastern Islamic world. One such Ghuzz lineage, the Qarakhanids (999-1211) took Samarkand and Bukhara from the Samanids while the Saljuqs established themselves in Khurasan and the Near East. Although sometimes disruptive the Turkic takeover of Central Asia was a peaceful process, the Turks introduced an important new ethno-linguistic strand but as a result of their conversion to Islam maintained the existing Persian tradition.

In the 12th century, newcomers began to arrive from the eastern steppe and a Chinese Khitan prince

established the non-Muslim Qara Khitai Empire north of the Aral Sea. Qara Khitai subjected the Muslim principalities of Transoxania to its authority after defeating the Saljuqs near Samarkand, Meanwhile a Saljuq lineage known as the Khwarazm Shahs (1077-1231) took control of Khwarazm. In the early 13th century the Khwarazm Shahs constructed an ephemeral empire in Central Asia, which was destroyed by the next wave of incoming nomads, the Mongols.

The Mongol invasions were considerably more violent than the preceding Turkic migrations but the Mongols were also acculturated over time. Although Mongol armies destroyed Muslim cities in Khwarazm, Transoxania and Iran with enormous loss of life, within a couple of generations Mongol regimes in Iran (Ilkhanids), Central Asia (Chagatai) and the Crimea (Golden Horde) converted to Islam, adopted Persian and rebuilt the Central Asian entrepots to connect their Chinese and Near Eastern possessions. The cycle of violence was repeated by Timur (Tamerlaine) who sought to recreate a Mongol empire in the Near East and Central Asia. Under Mongol patronage, Central Asian architecture flourished, reaching its apogee during the reign of Timur (1370-1405) who embellished Samarkand and Bukhara and transformed them into the artistic models for successive Central Asian cities using craftsmen from all over the Near East whom he forcibly transported to Central Asia. The Timurid dynasty lasted until 1500 when Uzbek Turkish lineages gained control of the Central Asian steppe and established khanates centred on Khiva (Khwarazm), Bukhara, and Kokand which continued to direct trade between the Near East and China. By this time the population was extremely heterogeneous, several Turkic groups such as the Turkmen, the Shaybanid Uzbeks and the Kazakh Uzbeks intermingled with Persian speakers known as Tajiks. The Central Asian khanates were destroyed in the mid-19th century as the Russians advanced south into the Crimea and Central Asia into Iran to forstall British expansion from the south. When the Russians incorporated the Central Asian steppe into their empire, they divided it into Muslim republics named after the majority ethno-linguistic groupings in each area, the Turkic Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Turkmen and Uzbeks, and the Persian-speaking Tajiks. After the dissolution of the USSR the five Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, gained independence.

Silk and Ceramics in Central Asia

The history of Silk and Ceramics in Uzbekistan is as old as the Silk Road itself. Silk was traded through the corridors of Tianshan Range into the Ferghana valley. The introduction of silk to Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley is lost in legend. One story has it that it was brought there by a Chinese princess who was betrothed to a Ferghana prince as part of a matrimonial alliance made to ensure safe passage for Chinese caravans. China for long had kept silk production secret. The princess, who could not resist her passion for silk, is said to have concealed silk worms in her elaborate coiffure and by doing so exported the art of silk making on her marriage journey to Central Asia. She then started sericulture and the production of silk fabric in her new home. Silk sericulture soon moved beyond the Ferghana Valley to other regions of Uzbekistan.

Initially we see marked Chinese influence in local production as Chinese silks was still dominant. Slowly, however, Central Asian motifs began to take hold and a distinctive set of patterns and colours were applied to regional dress. The Mongol invasions at first stopped silk manufacture and trade and then promoted it by assuring peace along the caravan routes. With the expansion of the Russian empire eastwards political change again temporarily disrupted the local silk industry. Nevertheless, during the hey day of Soviet power a consistent effort was made to revive and preserve local crafts. South Indian silk weaving techniques and patterns helped greatly in the revival of silk production in Ferghana and other parts of Uzbekistan. The notable indigenous silk patterns and techniques were Shokhi, Adras, Abr and Bekasab and during the course of time these patterns underwent changes with new designs taking root like Banoras (Benaras, India), Khan Atlas and the revival of the Bekasab and Khan Atlas types. Today centres producing silk by traditional methods are Margilan in Ferghana, Shakre Sabz, and Bukhara.

The history of pottery in Uzbekistan goes back to antiquity. In the first and second centuries AD large quantities of local earthen ware were produced. A sophisticated, delicate pottery was developed by riverine communities. Glazed pottery and ceramics were readily adopted for the reproduction of patterns introduced by the Chinese. We can see Chinese influences in such motifs as the dragon and clouds in Central Asian wares. Also, Persian influence is marked in ubiquitous blue pottery decorated with floral and bird motifs. Ceramics thrived in the Ferghana Valley near Rishton where material was readily available from nearby riverine beds. Foreign elements mix with local traditional designs like pomegranate buds, Persian eye or flame and chili motifs. Other notable centres for production of ceramics in Uzbekistan are Rishton, Gudjevan, Bukhara and Khiva.

