



chapter one

Linking East with West

Trading Connections



▲ A bronze incense burner of 3rd Century BCE from the south of the Arabian peninsula.

For thousands of years, the Silk and Spice Routes stretched across and around the vast continent of Asia. They linked its eastern lands with those of its west and Europe – the Silk Route by land and the Spice Routes by sea. They were trade routes. Along their many paths, caravans and ships carried precious goods. Spices and incense, silks and porcelain were some of the many luxuries of the East exchanged for western commodities, such as silver and gold and woollen and cotton cloth. There were huge profits to be made.

The Silk Route (or Road, as it is often called) refers, in fact, to several different land routes across Asia. The principal one originated in Changan (modern Xi'an), an ancient capital of China, and passed through the heart of Central Asia to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. Other routes joined it on the way – the Indian Grand Road, the Incense Road from southern Arabia and, in places, the Spice Routes. To the north, the Eurasian Steppe Route provided an alternative link across Asia, at times more popular than its southern counterparts. Although lesser land routes have existed before and since, the Silk Route operated as a major channel for international trade from about 100 BCE to 1500 CE.

It is harder to give the Spice Routes such an exact timespan. A network of sea routes from China to Indonesia, across the Indian Ocean and up the Persian Gulf and Red Sea has existed from as early as 2000 BCE and ships still travel these sealanes today. However, the routes that connected the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean began to decline after the Europeans discovered the route east to India around Africa in 1498. It is no coincidence that this date is close to the time of the Silk Route's final decline. By sailing around Africa, Europeans could trade direct with India and the Far East, cutting out the middlemen of Central and Western Asia who for centuries had formed the backbone of the Silk and Spice Routes' trade. It is therefore the cultures and civilizations of the trade routes before 1500 CE that are the focus of this book, although the story continues right up to the present day.



▲ The Great Goose Pagoda in Changan (modern Xi'an), China, eastern starting point of the Silk Route, built in 625 CE.

For the Silk and Spice Routes were not just the means by which trade goods travelled between East and West, they were also channels for the migration of culture, whilst the wealth they generated encouraged the growth of civilizations. Along these routes, like links in a chain, a string of ports and cities grew up. In their market places, people of many different nationalities met to trade and so exchange the ideas and beliefs that shaped their different cultures. These cultures might be expressed in the goods they had to sell – their designs, shapes and colour – or simply in their lifestyles – the clothes they wore, the food they ate and the religions they practised. Trading connections also encouraged people to employ skilled artisans from neighbouring lands, which led to an exchange of technological skills and styles of art and architecture. By these means the ways that the different societies along the Silk and Spice Routes lived and expressed themselves, that is, their cultures, slowly changed, amalgamated and developed.



▲ Resin from the myrrh tree is used to make incense. From ancient times, this was exported across Asia along the trade routes from Oman and Ethiopia, where myrrh still grows today.

▼ A Buddhist ceremony in Mongolia. Buddhism reached there by way of the Silk Route and has revived as the Mongols rediscover their old cultural heritage after 70 years of Communist rule, closely allied with the former Soviet Union.



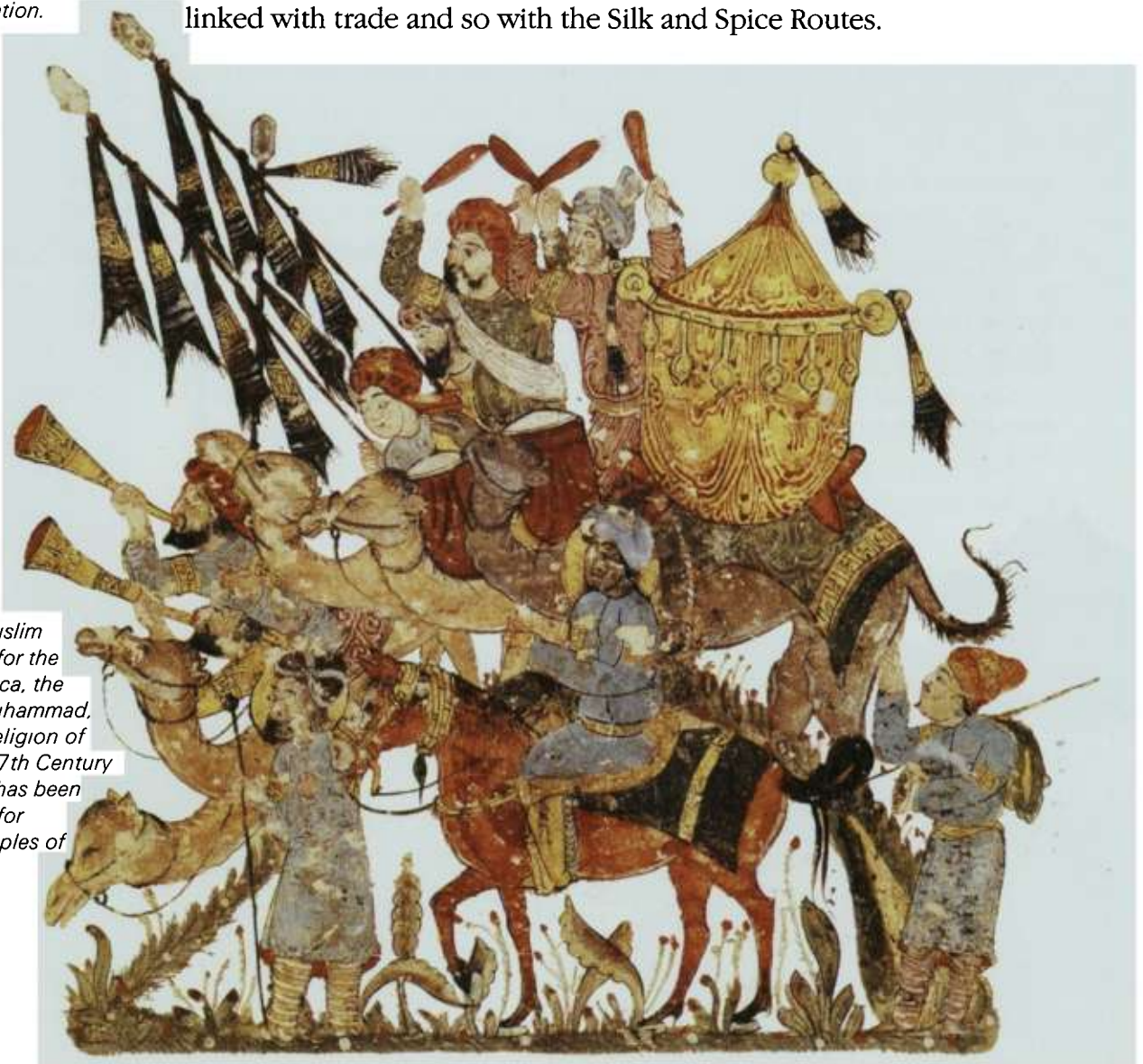


Civilizations and Empires



▲ *The empires of the Silk Route around 100 CE: the Roman (red), the Parthian (blue), the Kushan (orange) and the Chinese under the Han Dynasty (green). The stability these empires achieved enabled trade to prosper and encouraged the growth of civilization.*

Civilization means literally 'living in a city', although it has many other connotations. People first lived in cities partly for collective security, but partly because of the development of centres of trade. Large communities needed administration to regulate life, from water supplies to trading practices. These administrations financed themselves by taxes, which again depended on the city's success as a trading centre. The growth of civilization is therefore inextricably linked with trade and so with the Silk and Spice Routes.



► *A party of Muslim pilgrims set out for the holy city of Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad, founder of the religion of Islam. From the 7th Century onwards, Islam has been a cultural focus for many of the peoples of Western Asia.*

But civilization also suggests cultural sophistication – a written language, advanced technology and science, magnificent buildings and a flowering of the arts. These elements tend to be found during a period of peace and stability, a situation often brought about by a strong empire. In this sense, civilization is associated with the great empires of the past. The backdrop of expanding and declining empires against which the Silk and Spice Route trade took place contributed massively to the process of cultural exchange.

In the Far East, the Chinese civilization with its successive dynasties exercised the greatest influence on its neighbours. Despite many upheavals, this huge country was bound together by a shared language which resulted in the development of a remarkably unified culture. Two Chinese 'golden ages' took place under the Han (202 BCE-220 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) dynasties – both notably associated with thriving international trade along the Silk and Spice Routes!

To the west of Asia, with Europe on its borders, there was a greater mix of cultures. From 500 to 330 BCE, the Achaemenid Empire of Persia (Iran) stretched from India to Egypt. It collapsed with the invasion from Greece of Alexander the Great, sending Greek culture deep into Asia. Later, power in Iran passed to the Parthians (170 BCE-224CE) and then the Sasanians (224-651), whilst the Romans superseded the Greeks as the dominant power around the Mediterranean. Frequent wars between the neighbouring empires did not halt trade. Eastern goods were in huge demand in Rome and, later, Constantinople, which was the capital of the Roman Empire from 330 and also of the succeeding Byzantine Empire (610-1453).

The picture changed again with the sensational rise of the Arab Empire in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries. Limiting Byzantine power in the Middle East, they drove right into Central Asia. The Arabs brought with them a new religion, Islam, and this provided a focus of cultural development in the countries of West and Central Asia for centuries to come.

In Central Asia, home-grown empires, such as that of the Kushans (c. 70-224 CE), had to contend with the expansion and decline of these successive empires. Despite this the peoples of Central Asia – the Kushans, Sogdians and the Turks, for example – developed their own unique civilizations, greatly influenced by their central position on the Silk Route.

Throughout much of Asia, but particularly in the Steppe region to the north, there were many nomadic tribes. They were frequent traders and from time to time came together to form great military powers. One such power, the Mongols, succeeded in controlling almost the whole length of the Silk Route, a feat not equalled before or since. From 1260 to 1368, *Pax Mongolica* (Mongol Peace) saw a final flowering of overland trade between East and West. Ironically, a people that were not literally civilized contributed greatly to the civilizations to come – from China, to India and Europe.



▲ Roman aqueduct at Aspendos, western Turkey, part of the Roman and later Byzantine Empires. The aqueduct brought water from the surrounding mountains to the city on the hill. The Romans were skilled engineers and built on a monumental scale.



▲ A page from a Tang Chinese text of 777 CE, when Chinese characters were often written in this elegant style. The Chinese had a written language from as early as 2000 BCE and its use played a major role in the development of their remarkable culture.