



chapter two

The Culture of Trade

Traders by Land



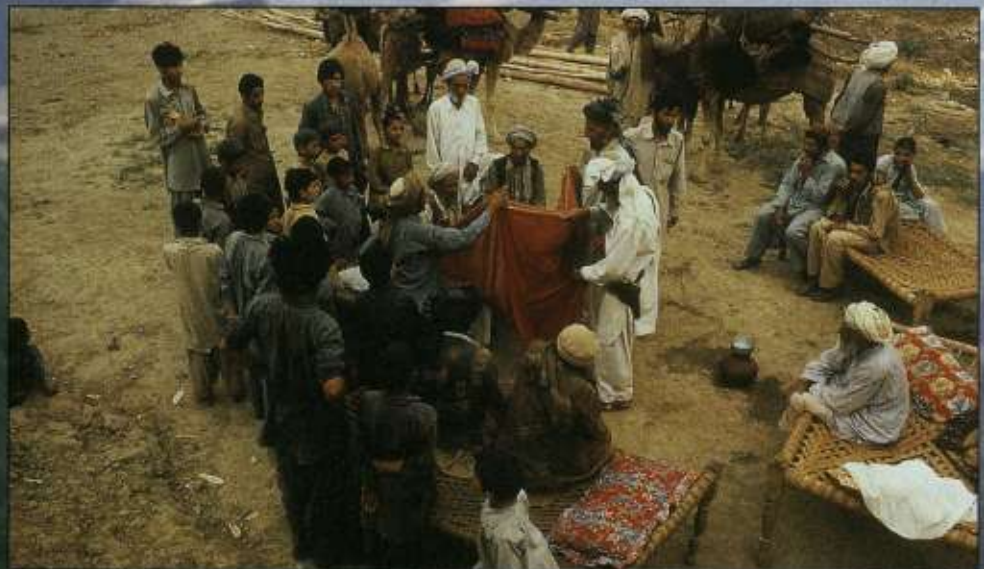
▲ Tang Chinese pottery model, 7-8th Century CE, of a bullock and cart. The nearside attendant is a foreign merchant, comically drawn.

Empire building inevitably affected the trade along the Silk and Spice Routes. Political upheaval could make some of their paths unsafe but a way was usually found to continue the exchange of goods between East and West. A declining empire did not mean a decline in demand for exotic goods and the profits to be made were too huge for the merchants to be deterred from trading for any length of time.

Overland trade along the Silk Route was most liable to be interrupted by war and strife. Even during times of peace, it was not an easy highway to riches. Blazing heat, blinding sandstorms and freezing cold were some of the hazards faced by the travellers and there was the constant threat of attack from bandits. Still many peoples' livelihood – and culture – evolved around the overland trade.

Goods were never transported by a single caravan or trader from one end of the Silk Route to the other. Different people conducted the trade along different sections of the route and often particular racial groups became associated with its practice. The Chinese considered

▼ Nomads gather in Afghanistan to buy and sell cloth. This kind of casual market has formed a focus for the nomadic communities of Asia for thousands of years.



trading a necessary but undignified pursuit and merchants had a low social status, so the eastern Silk Route trade was often handled by the empire's nomadic tribes. These tribesmen would then sell their goods on to the merchants of Central Asia, for example the Sogdians from the area around the modern city of Samarkand.

✓ The Sogdians played an important role on the Silk Route during the Second to Eighth Centuries CE. Although never empire builders themselves, they operated successfully under other powers, from the Kushans to the Turks, and the remains of their cities, houses and art suggest that their merchants enjoyed a high social status, virtually equal to the landowners who ruled them. The Sogdian language, both spoken and written, was used in the conduct of trade eastwards through to China and it was largely through this that new religions were introduced to China: Buddhism from India and Manichaeism from the Persian Gulf, for example. Religion played an important part in the traders' lives, whatever their nationality. Shrines were erected along the length of the Silk Route, where travellers could offer prayers for a successful journey and thanks upon a safe return.

The merchants of Central Asia would sell goods westwards to Iranian traders or, at times, direct to Europeans via the Eurasian Steppe Route. The Iranians in turn dealt with the Syrians, Jews and Greeks. Like the Sogdians, the Greeks were expert traders and had trading connections far beyond the area of their political influence. For many centuries, Greek and Farsi (Iranian) were the languages of trade on western paths of the Silk Route. Farsi is still very much in use today but the increasing influence of the Turkic peoples throughout Northern Asia, culminating in the conquest of the Greek Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman Turks in the Fifteenth Century, led to Turkic languages replacing Greek and Sogdian as the Silk Route's common tongue. Today, it is quite possible for a Turkic Kazakh from China to communicate effectively in his own language in Turkey, thousands of kilometres away.



▲ A charging horseman depicted in a fresco found in the Sogdian city of Penjikent.

▼ Panel from a portable Buddhist shrine of 5-6th Century CE found on the Silk Route west of Turfan.





▼ View of the minaret of the Huaishen Mosque in Guangzhou (Canton), China, built during the early Tang period by Arab merchants, who lived and traded there in large numbers.



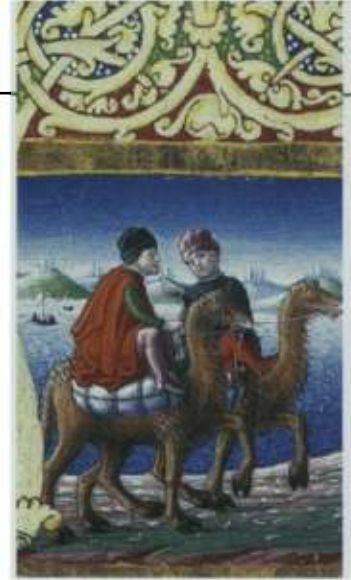
Traders by Sea

As on the overland routes, so on the seas the carriers of the trade goods changed at different stages along the way. The crews of the ships plying the Spice Routes were chosen because they were professional, skilled navigators who knew the routes and the dangers involved. The people of a particular country were not always the carriers of that country's goods. For example, during the time of the Roman Empire, the Greeks traded on behalf of the Romans. Ships owned by Roman businessmen would be rented out to Greek merchants, often from Alexandria in Egypt, with knowledge of the Indian Ocean and the conditions of eastern trade. The crews would be composed of Greeks and any other seamen frequenting the Egyptian Red Sea ports. These ships could sail on the monsoon winds as far as the west coast of India. From the Third Century CE, the Greeks' activities in the Red and Arabian seas were curtailed by the increasing power of the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum and Sasanian Iran.

Between the Persian Gulf and Oman and the ports of the west coast of India, Arabs, particularly Omanis, and Indians were the carriers, sailing in their own ships. The Arabs were perhaps to the Spice Routes

► A 6th Century BCE Greek vase with a sailor at its centre and ships around its rim. The civilization of the ancient Greeks was partly built on their success as sea traders.





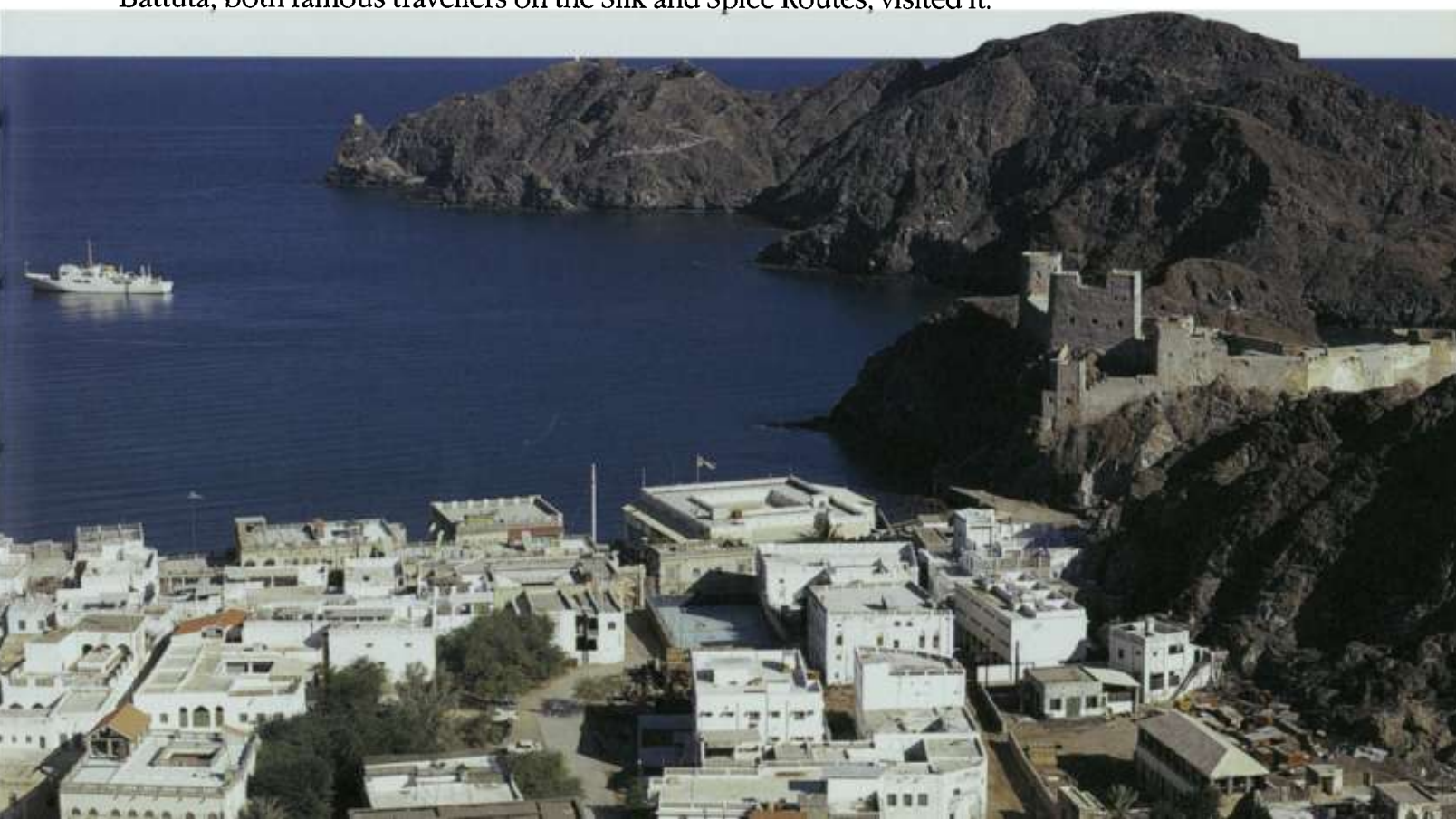
▲ An illustration from a 15th Century edition of *Natural History* by Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE). This work is an important source of information about the trade routes of this time (see page 36).

what the Sogdians were to the Silk Route – excellent long-distance traders who had the ability to adapt themselves to political change. They came into their own, however, with the establishment of an Arab empire and the rise of Islam. From the Seventh to Ninth Centuries, the Indian Ocean was a safe and rich ocean, thronged with ships of every nationality.

Ships that set sail from ports such as Hormuz and Aden could travel as far as China. They were manned mostly by Farsi-speaking crews, for the Sasanians had established Farsi as the commercial language of the western Spice Routes. The ships stopped at Muscat and other ports on the Omani coast, on their way out into the Indian Ocean. They traded their goods at ports of call all along the way, bartering with some people, using gold and silver coins with others. Slowly, they introduced their religion of Islam as well.

Until they had to compete with the Iranians and Arabs, Indians had acted as middlemen in the supply of western goods eastwards to China. Through them, both the Hindu and Buddhist religions had passed to the peoples of Southeast Asia. Indian trading colonies were established in the rich port of Oc-oc and around the Malay Peninsula. In the China Seas, Korean sailors operated, often on behalf of the Chinese. During the Tang period, they formed a sizeable foreign group on Chinese soil, living separately in large sections of certain towns. At the same time, the port of Canton (Guangzhou) housed tens of thousands of foreigners, many of them Arab merchants and sailors from the Middle East. Zaitun (modern Quanzhou) was similarly populated in the Thirteenth Century, when Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, both famous travellers on the Silk and Spice Routes, visited it.

▼ View of the harbour at Muscat in Oman, one of the ports to grow up as a result of the sea trade. The fort above it was built in 1587 by the Portuguese, relatively late arrivals on the Spice Routes





▲ *The great khan of Qansuh-al-Ghuri in Cairo, built 1504-5. It is five storeys high – the two lower floors for storage of goods and the upper floors for apartments, rented by merchants and travellers.*



Cities of Commerce

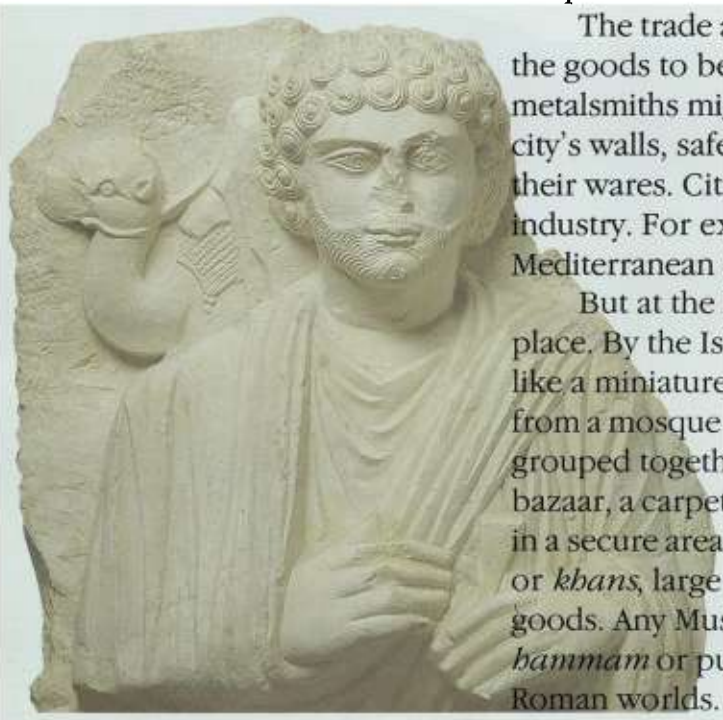
Trade along the Silk and Spice Routes encouraged the growth of many cities, towns and ports, for they were the centres where merchants met to buy and sell goods, or to replenish their supplies along the way. These cities would also be centres of commerce, providing bankers, credit and good supplies of money. If a local supply of metal was not available then it would need to be imported, encouraging further trade. During the Roman period, the Indian ports of Barygaza and Nelcynda imported copper, lead and tin from the West to aid the local coinage.

A city that had a good position on the Silk or Spice Routes benefited in many ways. Taxes and duties raised on the goods that passed through its gates enriched its rulers and administrators. Many of its inhabitants relied on the trade for their income, some as merchants, others as organizers of finance or transportation. During the first few centuries CE, the fortunes of the city of Palmyra in Syria were founded on its strategic position on the Silk Route between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. It was known as a city of traders, its people operating many of the caravans that passed through the region. Pack-camels and ships can be seen carved on the façades of its splendid buildings, erected with the aid of trade-generated wealth.

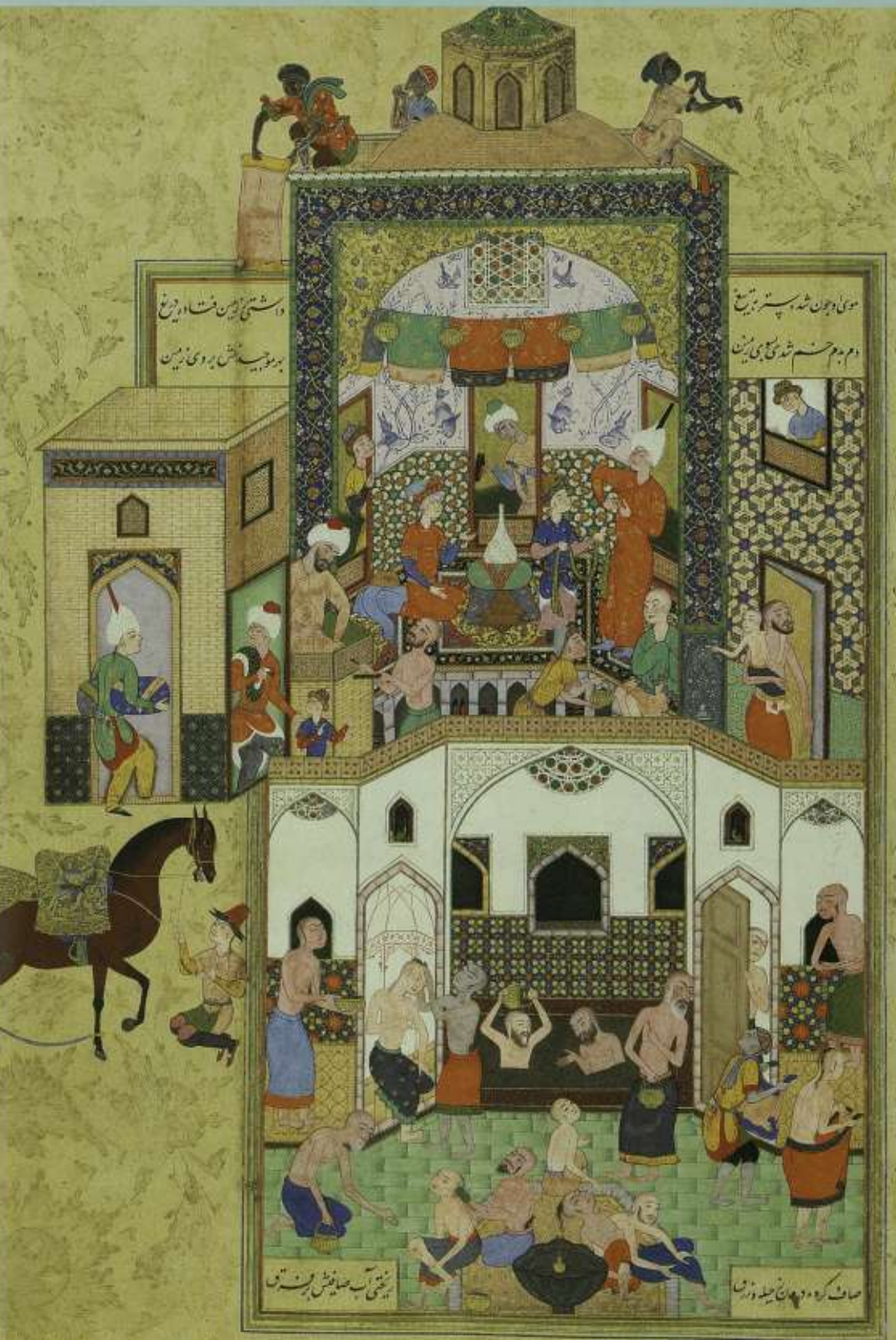
The trade also provided a means of support for the producers of the goods to be sold: potters, weavers, dyers, glassmakers and metalsmiths might all practise their craft within a Silk or Spice Route city's walls, safe in the knowledge that there was a market place for their wares. Cities would often become associated with a particular industry. For example, several of the cities on the eastern Mediterranean coast were famous for their dye works.

But at the heart of any Silk or Spice Route city was its market place. By the Islamic period, the bazaar of West and Central Asia was like a miniature city. A network of covered streets (*suqs*) fanned out from a mosque at its centre. Shops selling the same goods were always grouped together, so that there was a spice bazaar, a metalwork bazaar, a carpet bazaar and so on. The most valuable goods were sold in a secure area called the *qaysariyya*. Beyond this lay the warehouses or *kbans*, large square buildings with galleries and rooms for storing goods. Any Muslim settlement with a market also had at least one *hammam* or public bath, an institution inherited from the Greek and Roman worlds.

▼ *Sculpture of c.150 CE from Palmyra of the leader of a trading caravan. Behind him can be seen one of his camels. Many of the Palmyrenes were involved in trade.*



In the inhospitable countryside through which much of the Silk Route passed, travellers needed more frequent places of rest than the widely-spaced cities could provide. This led to the construction of caravanserais (palaces of the caravans), places where the travellers and their animals could be safe for the night and where they could be sure of food and water. Trading and changes of caravan teams could also take place here. Inevitably, some of these caravanserais developed into sizeable settlements in their own right.



▼ Map of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) dated 1422 (before its capture by the Ottoman Turks in 1453). Situated at the mouth of the Black Sea, where Asia meets Europe, Constantinople was one of the major centres of commerce at the western end of the Silk Route.



◀ A 16th Century Persian manuscript illustration of a hammam or public bath, found in most Muslim towns and cities. Here, men could relax away from the noise and activity of the bazaars in which they worked.