



chapter four

The Paths of New Beliefs

The Spread of Religions

Buddhism

The Buddhist religion originated in India in the 6th Century BCE. However, it seems it was not until the 1st Century CE with the trade routes fully open, that the religion spread up through Kushan and Sogdian territory into the Tarim Basin, and later into China itself. Archaeologists have uncovered many Buddhist statues and religious tracts throughout these areas. Indeed, Buddhist monasteries with their characteristic stupas are found in most ancient Central Asian cities. This silk badge (below) showing the Buddha with an alms bowl dates from 7-8th Century CE. It was found at the Buddhist cave shrines at Dunhuang.



Zoroastrianism

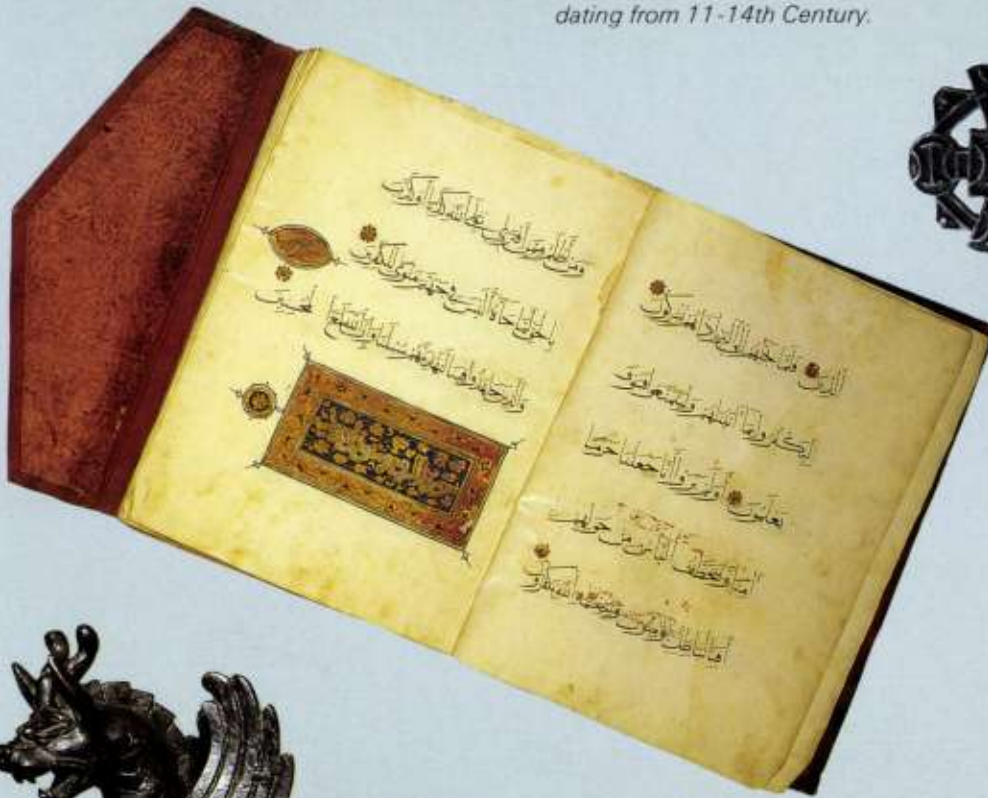
Zoroastrianism is named after the prophet Zoroaster. He probably lived during the 7th Century BCE, but the religion's origins may be earlier than this. During the 3rd to 6th Centuries CE, it flourished as the official religion of the Sasanian Empire. Zoroastrians worship fire as a symbol of their god and many ruined 'fire temples' are found in Iran. Similarly, Zoroastrian artefacts found in Central Asia, dating from this time, show that the religion had spread beyond Iran. Zoroastrianism is still practised today, particularly among the Parsi community in India who came there from Iran to trade around 900 CE.

The merchants who travelled the Silk Route did not just carry goods with them, they also brought ideas. In particular, the Silk Routes were a major channel for the spread of religions throughout Asia and Europe. The first thousand years of the Common Era were to see huge changes in religious thinking. Older religions, such as Buddhism, spread from India into Central Asia and China, while several new religions emerged, including Christianity and Islam. Each religion was to exercise a huge influence on its followers, not just in their everyday life but in their arts, their literature and their politics. These religious influences are reflected in the archaeological finds made along the Silk Route.

Byzantine Christian churches were often decorated with beautiful mosaics such as this one. It depicts a scene from the Bible but the characters are dressed in clothes from the Byzantine period.



A 15th Century copy of the Qur'an.



Three bronze Nestorian crosses, found in China and dating from 11-14th Century.



Islam

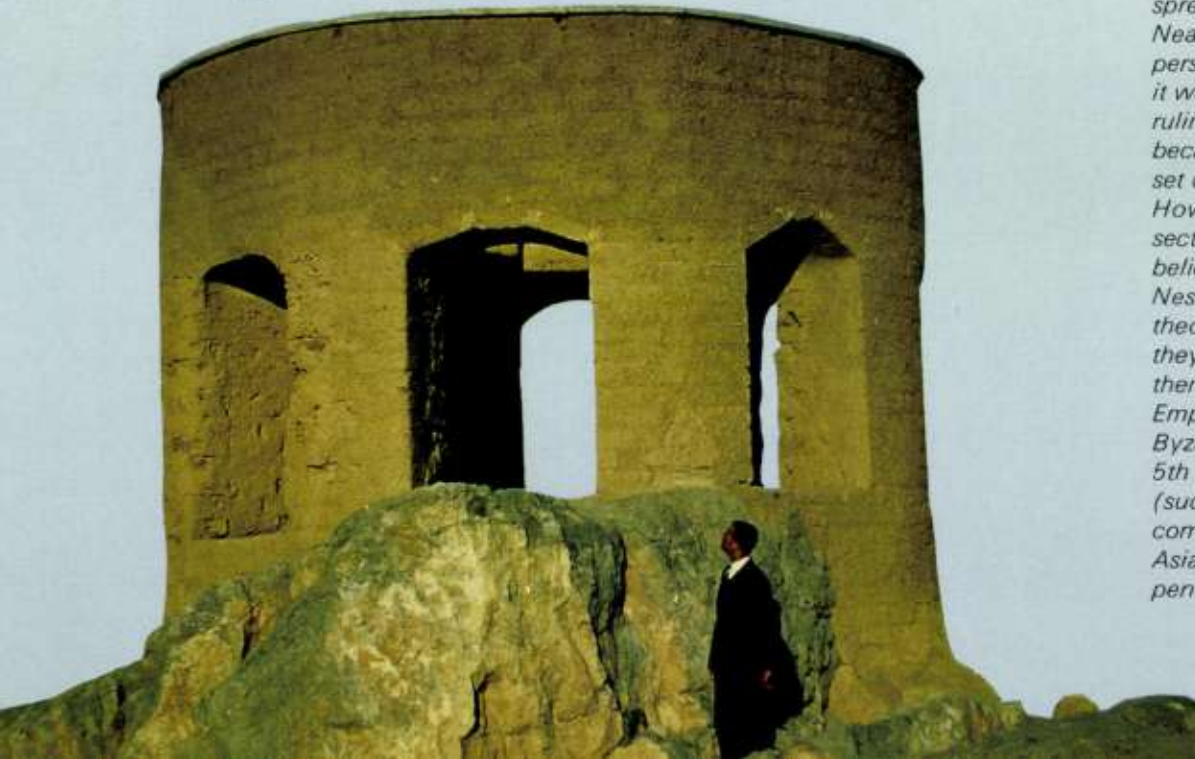
Islam was founded in Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 CE, following his flight from the city of Mecca to Medina. It was the last of the world religions to pass along the Silk Route and is still practised along many of its paths. The religion spread rapidly through the Middle East and North Africa to reach Spain, Central Asia and India by 750 CE.

The picture here is a copy of the Qur'an, the Muslim's sacred text. The Qur'an is always written in Arabic and often decorated with beautiful, intricate patterns. This style of decoration has developed because Muslim law traditionally forbids the portrayal of living figures.



A 5th Century Sasanian bronze figurine of Ahriman, the Zoroastrian God of Evil.

A modern Zoroastrian fire temple in Iran.



Christianity

From the death of Jesus around 30 CE, Christianity spread through parts of the Near East and Europe, despite persecution. In the 4th Century it was adopted by the Roman ruling classes and gradually became more organized with a set of recognized beliefs. However some groups, or sects, held to slightly different beliefs. One such sect was the Nestorians (named after a theologian called Nestorius): they were allowed to establish themselves in the Sasanian Empire after they fled Byzantine persecution in the 5th Century. Nestorian crosses (such as in the picture) are commonly found in Central Asia and China, in the form of pendants or on tombstones.



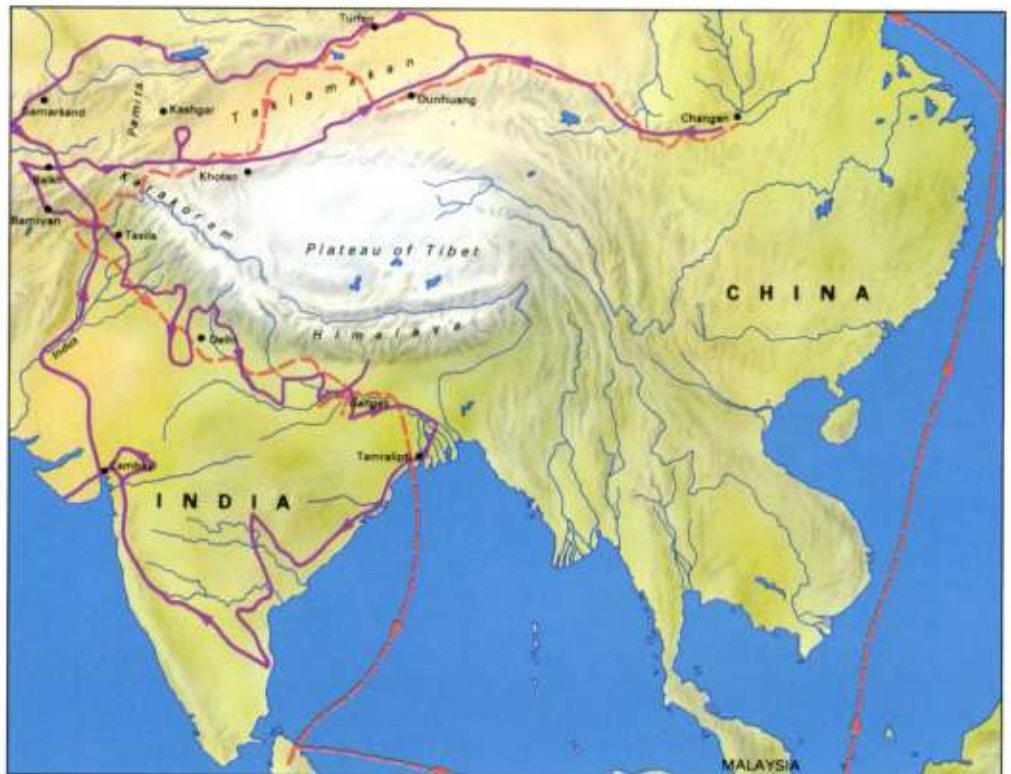
The Pilgrim Explorers

▼ This Buddhist cave complex at Bamiyan was visited by Xuan-Zang on his pilgrimage. The statue of the Buddha carved into the rock here is over 35 metres high.



Although Buddhist pilgrims probably began reaching China in the First or Second Century CE, this new Indian religion was not at first accepted by the Chinese. Not until the last troubled years of the Han Dynasty did the Chinese begin turning to Buddhism in large numbers.

During the unstable period which followed the Han Dynasty, China was largely cut off from India. The Chinese became worried that in isolation they might have strayed from the 'true path' of the Buddhists in India. In 399 CE they sent a pilgrim called Fa Xian to India to find out if this was the case. Fa Xian's record of his daring journey along the unprotected Silk Route to India is one of the few descriptions we have of the eastern end of the Silk Route during this period. According to Fa Xian, crossing the Taklamakan was sometimes so dangerous that 'it was impossible to know the way but for dead men's decaying bones, which showed the direction'. When Fa Xian eventually arrived in India, he was an object of great wonder. This was the first time the Indians had seen a man from 'the Land of Han' (as they called China). It was to be twelve years before Fa Xian finally made it back to China, by way of the Spice Route.



► A map showing the routes covered by Fa Xian and Xuan-Zang on their journeys from China to India and back. Fa Xian's route is shown by the broken line, Xuan-Zang's by the solid one.



◀ A modern Buddhist monk in Nepal carrying a prayer wheel. Behind him is a sacred stupa inset with prayer wheels.

Two centuries later, the Buddhists realized that many of their sacred books had been mistranslated from the original Indian texts. This led to serious errors in Buddhist practice. So another pilgrim, a learned man called Xuan-Zang, decided to set out along the Silk Route for India to seek out the original Indian Buddhist holy books. Xuan-Zang was to survive many adventures on his travels including a murder attempt! Travelling via Samarkand and Bactria, his record of the journey provides us with first-hand details of the peoples he met. For example, he describes how half the Sogdians lived by agriculture, the other half by trade.

But when Xuan-Zang finally arrived in India he found 'a thousand monasteries lay deserted in ruins, overgrown with weeds', many destroyed by the invasions of the Huns during the 5th Century CE. In northern and central India, people had forsaken Buddhism and returned to the Hindu religion.

Xuan-Zang wandered throughout India for nearly sixteen years. He visited Buddhist holy places and found the religion thrived in the east of the country. He collected Indian holy books to take back with him to China.

On Xuan-Zang's return to China, the new Emperor Taizong was so impressed with his exploits that he offered Xuan-Zang a post as his imperial adviser. But Xuan-Zang chose to retire to a monastery and complete his task, making a faithful translation of the sacred Buddhist books he had brought back from India.

▼ A 7th Century wall hanging from Dunhuang depicting a Chinese pilgrim laden with manuscripts and sutras. It may well be a representation of Xuan-Zang on his return to China.





The Tang Dynasty



▲ This glazed figurine of a wine merchant from Central Asia is one of the many found in the graves of Tang China. Tang pottery was often glazed in this three-coloured style.

► A portrait of the Tang Emperor Tsong, who ruled China from 712 to 756 CE.

The Emperor Taizong, who welcomed Xuan-Zang on his return from India, was the first emperor of the Tang Dynasty. United under this new royal family, China was once more entering a great age. Trade boomed and major innovations were made both in technology and the arts – all this taking place while much of Europe was plunged into the relative chaos that followed the decline of Roman power.

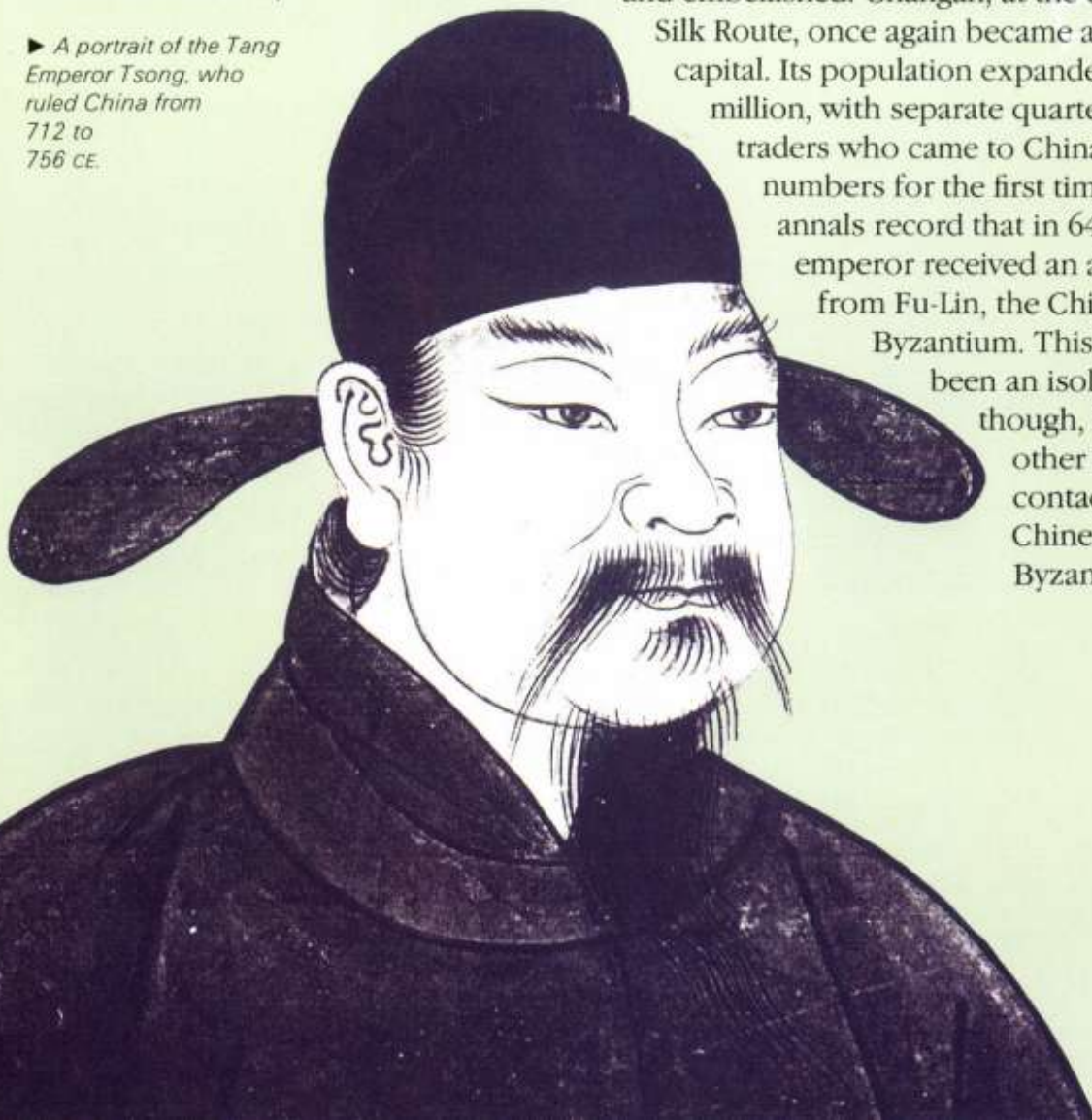
The Tang Emperors once again extended China's power into the Tarim Basin. Silk Route trade increased and the Chinese, perhaps more than ever before, welcomed the foreign influences that came with it. Nestorian Christians appeared at the imperial court. Sanskrit texts on medicine, mathematics and astrology were imported from India.

Motifs from Sasanian and Sogdian cloth and other wares were copied and embellished. Changan, at the eastern end of the

Silk Route, once again became a great imperial capital. Its population expanded to over two million, with separate quarters for foreign traders who came to China in large

numbers for the first time. The imperial annals record that in 643 CE, the emperor received an ambassador from Fu-Lin, the Chinese name for Byzantium. This appears to have

been an isolated incident though, for there is no other mention of direct contact between the Chinese and the Byzantine Empires.



The Silk Route itself expanded, with caravans continuing beyond Changan as far as Korea and to the coast for shipment to Japan. The Tang records provide some of the most detailed descriptions of Silk Route trade. There are descriptions of exotic birds and animals – such as peacocks, parrots and ostriches – as well as different medicines, aromatics, spices, fragrant woods and precious stones. Rich Tang Dynasty tombs often contained large numbers of decorated clay figures of men and animals, often associated with trade. There are striking representations of prancing horses – recalling the ‘heavenly horses’ of Ferghana – and camels heavily laden with sacks or rolls of cloth.

At this time, major changes were also taking place at the western end of the Silk Route. A series of devastating Byzantine-Sasanian wars raged from southern Arabia (modern Yemen) across to Egypt, Syria and the Black Sea, and shortly after this the two great empires crumbled in the mid-7th century CE. In their place rose new kingdoms sharing a new official religion – Islam.



▲ A 10th Century wooden block print of a sacred Buddhist text. Printing techniques were developed in Tang China during the 9th Century – 600 years before the printing press was invented in Europe.

▼ The ruins of an ancient oasis city near Turfan. During the Tang Dynasty a permanent garrison was stationed here to protect Silk Route travellers.





The Rise of Islam



▲ The extent of Muslim power (blue), the Byzantine Empire (red) and the Tang Empire (green) in 814.

► The interior of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. The intricate designs on the walls and window were developed by Muslim artists as they were forbidden to represent the human figure.

▼ The bottom dish is a typical example of Tang pottery. Their use of coloured glazes was later imitated in the Middle East and Europe, resulting in dishes such as the upper two shown here.



The Prophet Muhammad died in 632 CE, leaving behind him an organized community of the new religion, Islam, through central and southern Arabia. From here, inspired by their religious fervour, the Muslim Arab armies began to push outwards. They quickly overran much of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, which were weakened by decades of war, plague and economic neglect. By the year 670 CE – less than forty years after the death of Muhammad – the Arab armies had reached the river Oxus, although it took them several years to subdue this region. Control of the Silk Route from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs now passed into the hands of the Arabs and subsequent Islamic dynasties.

Soldiers, administrators, farmers and craftsmen, who had previously been Christians or Zoroastrians, began to convert to Islam. This was at first a gradual process – indeed, the Middle East is still full of diverse peoples and religious sects – but Islam was soon the dominant religion of Western Asia.

In 751 CE, the Islamic army defeated a Chinese force in the Battle of Talas, east of Samarkand. Large numbers of Chinese craftsmen were taken prisoner, amongst whom were former silk workers and papermakers. These papermakers began to practise their craft again in Samarkand and from here, knowledge of their techniques spread westwards, reaching Baghdad by 794 CE.

After its defeat at Talas, the Tang Empire began the troubled days of its long decline. Arab forces captured Kashgar and the Tarim Basin was overrun by the Tibetans from the south. The irrigation systems essential for settled life in the area fell into decay and once again trade along this section of the Silk Route began to dwindle.

Maritime trade increased in importance, however. The Arabs were excellent seafarers and, from the Eighth Century onwards, they were sailing all the way to East Africa and China. Distinctive types of Chinese and south-east Asian pottery began to appear in the Middle East from this period, which were often copied by local craftsmen.

The Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries marked a flowering of the Islamic civilization in the Middle East and Central Asia, as the East-West trade brought great wealth to the region. Magnificent mosques, tombs and palaces were built, sometimes covered in colourful glazed tiles and painted inside with beautiful patterns and designs.

▼ A 19th Century painting of an Arab market, a scene unchanged for centuries. Silk Route travellers in the Middle East would have encountered many such markets.

