Introduction

During a period of roughly three and a half centuries, between the late second century before the Common Era (BCE) and the mid-third century of the Common Era (CE), many of the human communities dwelling within the vast Afro-Eurasian world zone became linked together into an interconnected system of exchanges via a network of routes known today as the Silk Roads. This "First Silk Roads Era" resulted in the most significant transregional commercial and cultural interactions experienced by humans to this point in history. Although silk was certainly one of the most important material commodities that was moved along this network of land and maritime routes, what made this first iteration of the Silk Roads so significant was the exchange of non-material "commodities" that occurred as a consequence of commerce. Because of the trade in silk and other luxury goods, different crop species and agricultural technologies, religions, philosophies and languages, ideas about art and music and devastating epidemic diseases also spread rapidly across Eurasia, with profound consequences for subsequent human and environmental history.

It is this extraordinary cultural and biological diffusion that marks the First Silk Roads Era as one of the most crucial periods in ancient world history. After tens of thousands of years of small-scale regional interactions, it was during the First Silk Roads Era that millions of humans dwelling in diverse communities across a vast expanse of geographical space were connected in an exchange network so dynamic and diverse that, in retrospect, it now seems to be the quintessential example of an ancient globalization (more on this later). It was because of the operation of this network of diplomatic and commercial routes that many of the core ideas of ancient Afro-Eurasian states and civilizations were able to diffuse widely for the first time. This was the moment, for example, when both Chinese and Greek philosophical and political ideas spread into Central Asia; when musical instruments and concepts of harmony that had been developed within Central Asian pastoral nomadic societies were diffused to the east, south and west; and when all regions of Eurasia began to share

their unique ideas about spirituality and meaning, which now flowed and often synthesized with each other via the trade routes. Arguably the most significant consequence of this sharing of spiritual concepts was the spread of the South Asian ideology of Buddhism into East and Southeast Asia, a diffusion of tremendous consequence to untold millions of humans ever since.

While this book attempts to dispel many of the myths that have grown up around the popular conception of the ancient Silk Roads, it is nonetheless reasonable to argue that this extraordinary cultural diffusion occurred, at least in part, because wealthy aristocrats in Rome (mostly women but also men) decided that to be truly fashionable they had to be seen in the streets of the city wearing the "latest thing" in fashion, a sensuous, translucent material that came from somewhere exotic far away across the deserts, a material called silk. The patricians of Rome, along with many other elites of Inner Eurasia, created a substantial demand for high-quality Chinese silk, which the Han Dynasty was able to meet by manufacturing the textile on an almost industrial scale. But it was the work of a diverse group of diplomats, merchants, sailors, pastoral nomads, and their horses, camels and ships, mostly operating within and around the fringes of two powerful Inner Eurasian imperial states, that made the exchanges possible. Each of these complex states, and the various groups that connected them, was crucial in facilitating the exchanges that occurred during the First Silk Roads Era, and their contributions are all explored in the pages that follow.

Although a myriad of individuals and smaller cultures contributed to the First Silk Roads Era, such as the Sogdians and smaller states and consortiums of South Asia, trade and cultural exchange on such an unprecedented scale was predicated on the political and economic stability created by the four large imperial states that controlled much of Eurasia during the First Silk Roads Era – those of the Han Dynasty in China, the Kushan and Parthian Empires of Inner Eurasia and the Roman Empire. This meant that at any time during the first two centuries of the Common Era just four men and their imperial courts, bureaucracies and armies controlled enormous regions of Afro-Eurasia. These powerful administrations established law and order over enormous areas; they created political and military stability (although there were also intermittent periods of instability, particularly between the Romans and Parthians); they minted and used coinage; and they constructed sophisticated roads and maritime infrastructure. It was because of the successful operation of these four great empires that commercial and cultural exchanges on such an unprecedented scale could occur. Because of this geopolitical reality, any attempt to analyze

the operation of the Silk Roads during this crucial period requires an understanding of the historical processes that led to the establishment and successful operation of these empires, and this also is one of the major aims of this book.

However, despite the crucial role played by these four "great powers" of their age, the Silk Roads were always something more than a trans-civilizational exchange network. As historian David Christian has pointed out, the Silk Roads were also trans-ecological in that they brought pastoral nomads, small-scale subsistence farmers and even hunter-gatherers into contact with each other and with the great imperial states.[1] To a certain extent the trans-ecological nature of the network was inevitable, given that the trade routes passed along the edges of mountainous and arid zones occupied by the pastoral nomads. This meant that even the most powerful of the agrarian civilizations active during the First Silk Roads Era never controlled the full extent of the network, and it was communities of pastoralists and other commercial intermediaries that played a critical role in facilitating both the material and nonmaterial exchanges. The histories and activities of these various intermediaries, including the great pastoral nomadic confederations that formed and thrived during the First Silk Roads Era, also play a crucial role in the pages that follow.

Naming the Silk Roads

The term *Silk Roads* is a relatively new one, not a label that was used by the ancient sedentary and nomadic peoples who interacted along these transregional routes 2,000 years ago. The name comes from the German term *die Seidenstrassen*, which was coined in the late nineteenth century by German geographer and explorer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. In the first of five volumes on the geography of China, von Richthofen used the term both in the singular, *die Seidenstrasse*, and also in the plural, *die Seidenstrassen*.[2] Von Richthofen used the singular form to label a specific stretch of the network of routes that linked China and the Mediterranean through Central Asia, a section that had been described by one Marinus of Tyre, an important ancient source noted by the Roman geographer Ptolemy. For von Richthofen this single route was thus "die

[1] D. Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History," *Journal of World History* 11, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1–26.

[2] See particularly F. von Richthofen, *China. Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien*. 5 vols. Berlin: Reimer, 1877–1912, vol. 1; and F. von Richthofen, "Über die zentralasiatischen Seiden- strassen bis zum 2. Jh. n. Chr." *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, 1877, pp. 96–122.

Seienstrasse des Marinus."[3] We have much more to say about the route described by Marinus of Tyre in Chapter 5.

Despite his use of the singular term when naming that part of the network described by Marinus, von Richthofen knew there was never a single road, but rather a complicated network of paths whose use was often influenced by environmental or political factors. He wrote that "it would be a mistake to consider that it [Marinus' route] was the only one at any given moment or even the most important one."[4] This meant that for von Richthofen the plural form of the term he had coined was much more accurate: *Die Seidenstrassen*, or "the Silk Roads." In a fascinating historiographic study of von Richthofen, Daniel Waugh reminds us that the influential German geographer also used other terms to describe these exchange routes, including *Verkehr Strassen* (Communication Roads), *Handelsstrassen* (Trade Roads) and *Hauptstrassen* (Main Roads), which he used in reference to the principal or most important of these trade and exchange routes. Von Richthofen limited his use of the term *Silk Roads* to the Han-Roman period, when he knew that silk was the most important commodity being transported along the routes. These careful uses of different terms to label the ancient trade network represent an early recognition by von Richthofen that, not only were the routes that connected Han China and the Roman Empire diverse and complicated, divided into "Main Roads" and a myriad of subsidiary branches, but they were equally important for both commercial and cultural exchanges.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other Europeans began to take an interest in Central Asia, such as Swedish adventurer Sven Hedin and Hungarian-British explorer Marc Aurel Stein. Initially Hedin, who had been a student of von Richthofen at the University of Berlin and who regarded him as something of a mentor, was reluctant to use the term *die Seidenstrassen*. As Waugh points out, it was another German scholar, Albert Herrmann, who in his 1910 book on connections between Han China and the Mediterranean actually used *Seidenstrasse* in the title.[5] Decades later, after leading several successful expeditions into Central Asia and publishing his exploits in best-selling books, Sven Hedin became very comfortable with using the term *Silk Roads*, although his

[3] D. Waugh, "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads': Towards the Archaeology of a Concept," *The Silk Road* 5, No. 1 (Summer 2007), p. 4, fig. 3.
[4] Quoted in Waugh 2007, p. 4.
[5] A. Herrmann, *Die alten Seidenstrassen zwischen China und Syrien. Beiträge zur alten Geographie Asiens. I. Abteilung. Einleitung. Die chinesischen Quellen. Zentralasien nach Ssema Ts'ien und den Annalen der Han-Dynastie*. Quellen und Forschungen zur alten Geschichte und Geographie. Heft 21. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1910.

1936 book *The Silk Road* actually had little to say about the historical trade routes and much to say about Hedin's own dramatic exploits.[6]

Since these early uses of the term coined by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, recognition of both the term and the "idea" of the Silk Roads has expanded dramatically in the public and academic consciousness. It now conjures up images of long caravans of Bactrian camels with bales of raw Chinese silk strapped to their flanks, transporting these precious cargoes all the way from the Han capitals of Chang'an or Luoyang deep into the deserts of Central Asia. Here the textiles were passed onto middlemen who transported them all the way to Rome, where they were turned by "wretched flocks of maidens" into magnificent gowns to be worn by the elite women of the Roman Empire. While this vision contains many historically realistic elements, this romantic idea of the Silk Roads has also become somewhat hackneyed, to the extent that some historians now question the veracity and usefulness of the term *Silk Roads*.

One of the first to do so was Warwick Ball, who argued in 1998 that the term was now meaningless and created a totally false impression of the realities of ancient trade through Central Asia.[7] In a thoughtful 2010 article partly titled "The Road that Never Was," Khodadad Rezakhani contended that "the concept of a continuous, purpose-driven road or even 'routes' is counterproductive in the study of world history," and that it has "no basis in historical reality or records."[8] With this in mind, Rezakhani concludes, doing away with "the whole concept of the 'Silk Road' might do us, at least as historians, a world of good and let us study what in reality was going on in the region."[9] Warwick Ball followed up his initial concerns about the usefulness of the term *Silk Roads* with the following observation in his 2007 book on the monuments of Afghanistan: "The 'Silk road' has now become both band wagon and gravy train, with an endless stream of books, journals, conferences and international exhibitions devoted to it, reaching virtual mania proportions that is almost unstoppable."[10]

[6] S. Hedin, *Sidenvägen. En bilfärd genom Centralasien*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1936 (English translation: *The Silk Road*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938; German translation: *Die Seidenstrasse*. 10. Aufl. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1942; Japanese translation: *Chûô Ajia: Tanken kikô zenshû*. Tokyo, 1966).
[7] W. Ball, "Following the Mythical Road," *Geographical Magazine* 70, No. 3 (1998), pp. 18–23.
[8] K. Rezakhani, "The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange," *Project Muse* 30, No. 3. (2010), pp. 420ff.
[9] Rezakhani 2010, p. 420.
[10] W. Ball, *The Monuments of Afghanistan: History, Archaeology, and Architecture*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, p. 80.

Empires of Ancient Eurasia and the First Silk Roads Era might thus be regarded as yet another contribution to this seemingly endless stream of books and other materials on the Silk Roads. But this volume tries to ground the study of the ancient Silk Roads firmly upon the historical, geographical and environmental reality of the region and period, rather than upon some clichéd falsehood. Through our careful treatment of primary sources, coins and other forms of evidence in the pages that follow, we attempt to counter the argument that the Silk Roads have "no basis in historical reality or records." We also believe that the English translation of Ferdinand von Richthofen's term *die Seidenstrassen* is now so deeply embedded in both the popular and historical consciousness that it remains an extraordinarily useful and relevant term for students of ancient Eurasian history. *Empires of Ancient Eurasia and the First Silk Roads Era* thus offers a summary of the histories of all the imperial states, commercial cultures, pastoral nomads and ancient mariners that facilitated Silk Roads exchanges, based on an analysis of all the available evidence for the practical mechanisms whereby these exchanges actually occurred, in order to ground this period and these processes firmly in historical reality.

Conceptualizing the First Silk Roads Era

Although historians, unlike their colleagues in the social sciences, often prefer to avoid theoretical constructs in their analyses of the past, it might be useful here to consider some different ways of conceptualizing the First Silk Roads Era, from the perspectives of big history, world systems theory and globalization theory. Each of these theoretical constructs has influenced the way we have approached our analysis of the First Silk Roads Era in this book.

The Silk Roads from the Perspective of Big History

One of the most important influences on Ferdinand von Richthofen's ideas about the geography of Asia were the accounts written by Prussian geographer, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt concerning his travels in Central Asia in 1929. An extraordinary traveler and visionary "big thinker," von Humboldt worked to bring various disciplinary branches of science and social science together into a unified conception of the forces that shaped the earth and indeed the cosmos.[11] Alexander

[11] On Alexander von Humboldt, see, for example, L. D. Walls, "Introducing Humboldt's Cosmos," *Minding Nature* (August 2009), pp. 3–15.

von Humboldt is also regarded as one of the founding influences on the modern field of big history, which similarly combines science, social science and history into a tool for analyzing processes on the macro scale.[12]

A big history analysis of human history demonstrates that, unlike the history of every other species on the planet, which are essentially captive to slow processes of biological evolutionary change, human history is characterized by a number of key moments of remarkable cultural and technological change. Big historians identify a handful of these "cultural revolutions," each of which, like changing gears in a car, has profoundly affected the pace of subsequent change in the human condition. One such major cultural revolution in the history of our species was the appearance of agriculture, a process that began around 10,000 years ago, driven partly by the waning of the last ice age, and partly by demographic pressure caused by the adoption of affluent foraging lifeways. As a result, some human communities became sedentary and dependent upon a small number of domesticated animals and plants for survival, a fundamental alteration of our previous nomadic, foraging lifeways. The transition to agriculture led eventually to a third cultural revolution, the appearance in some regions of the first cities and states around 5,000 years ago. Where the appropriate "goldilocks conditions" (i.e., conditions that were "just right") were in place, such as in the valleys of the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile, Indus, Huang He and Yellow Rivers, large numbers of humans who had been living in small villages now settled in huge, densely populated cities.

It is this handful of profound cultural and technological revolutions that fundamentally separates human history from the history of all other life on earth. Big historians attempt to identify the major causal factors, or "prime movers," that triggered these revolutions, including particularly the role of climate change and of demographic pressure. But all the evidence also indicates that, for the most part, those regions in which these changes first occurred were also characterized by high levels of cultural exchange. This means that contacts between different groups have also been an important prime mover in instigating change on this sort of scale, and the more diverse the participants in these exchanges, the more profound the change has been. The late pioneering world historian William McNeill had no doubt that intercultural contacts had indeed been "the main drive wheel of history."[13] The most significant

[12] For an introduction to the approach of big history, see D. Christian, C. Brown and C. Benjamin, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2014.
[13] W. McNeill, *The Rise of the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. xv.

transregional exchange network of the premodern world was undoubtedly that created by the Silk Roads, a network that resulted in unparalleled levels of diverse intercultural communication and exchange. For big historians, this is precisely why the First Silk Roads Era was so important. Silk Roads exchanges created a revolutionary "goldilocks" moment that helped shape the future course of global history. As we unfold the story of the Silk Roads, then, we also explore one of the great revolutionary episodes in the history of humanity, an episode that helped facilitate a gear shift that led eventually toward modernity.

The First Silk Roads Era also powerfully magnified the unique human capacity of collective learning, a term that describes the ability of our species to store, exchange and share information collectively. From the very beginning of human history some 200,000 years ago, and certainly throughout the long Era of Agrarian Civilizations (roughly 3200 BCE to 1750 CE), few human communities ever existed in complete isolation. As various groups of pastoralists, complex states and often enormous agrarian civilizations expanded their boundaries, they tended to bump together and become smaller parts of much larger systems. Sometimes they connected with each other because their borders met and merged along contested military frontiers, such as that between the Romans and Parthians, or that between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu nomadic confederation. But more often they came together in a looser sense as people from one region traded with or traveled into other regions beyond the boundaries of their own civilization. Both of these mechanisms of expansion and contact were greatly in evidence during the First Silk Roads Era.

This regular comingling of states and cultures means that any attempt to consider agrarian civilizations as discrete entities contained between the sort of modern borders we see on maps just doesn't work. The borders between these various communities were really just vague regions where the control of imperial leaders was regularly contested by the claims of local rulers. These processes were complex and the borders between civilizations were always fluid. But the gradual linking up of different civilizations into much larger organisms was immensely important because it led to a huge increase in the size, diversity and intensity of opportunities for collective learning, this capacity to exchange and store information that appears to be unique to human beings.

Ever since the Paleolithic Era of human history (which began around 200,000 years ago), the exchange of ideas between diverse peoples and cultures has been a prime mover in promoting historical change through enhanced collective learning. But during the Paleolithic and subsequent Early Agrarian Eras (which began around 10,000 years ago), exchanges

were limited by the small size of the groups involved. Only when exchanges began to dramatically expand in scope during the Era of Agrarian Civilizations do we start to see a significant impact on collective learning. The expansion of exchange networks magnified the power of collective learning, intensifying our capacity for finding new ways of relating to the natural world and to each other. During the First Silk Roads Era, millions of humans living within the vast Afro-Eurasian world zone were connected through vibrant trade and cultural exchange. This was true only within individual world zones, however.[14] Significant exchange networks were also constructed during the era in the Americas, Australasia, and the Pacific. But the four world zones were so isolated from each other that humans living in each remained largely ignorant of events in the others until the late fifteenth century.

Within the Afro-Eurasian world zone, the expansion in size and reach of imperial states and the appearance of the lifeway of pastoral nomadism led to a significant increase in opportunities for exchanges of goods and ideas between different regions. Eventually, these imperial states, along with a myriad of groups following different lifeways outside of the empires, found themselves linked into a vast interconnected network. Not only were trade goods exchanged in these networks, but also social, religious and philosophical ideas, languages, new technologies and diseases. While significant smaller exchange networks developed much earlier between many of the foundational civilizations of Afro-Eurasia, a big history perspective demonstrates that the most important exchange network that existed anywhere during the Era of Agrarian Civilizations was that which operated during the First Silk Roads Era.

The Silk Roads as a World System or Human Web

Because of these early connections that developed between ancient civilizations, many historians now argue that from the moment they appeared these civilizations were always embedded in much larger geopolitical structures again, something like a "world system." This way of thinking about the historical past is a fairly recent development; before world systems theory appeared in the 1970s, most historians still thought of "the civilization" as the basic unit for analyzing history on the macro scale. Civilizationists were heavily influenced by the work of early twentieth-century European historians Oswald Spengler and Arnold

[14] The term *world zones* refers to four unconnected geographic zones that emerged as sea levels rose at the end of the last ice age. The zones were Afro-Eurasia, the Americas, Australasia and the Pacific. See Christian et al., 2014, p. 313.

Toynbee, who in seminal publications offered superb analyses of dozens of civilizations. Their intention was comparative, and thus they needed to study civilizations as distinct and separate entities, but this meant they had little to say on the *relationship* between these apparently discrete worlds. Even today, many world history books are still written from this "civilizationist" perspective, with blocks of information on the various civilizations of the Afro-Eurasian and American world zones, but little on how they *interacted* with each other within those zones. However, with the emergence of world systems theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein that emphasis was reversed, and the focus was shifted to the interactions and connections *between* civilizations.

A world system is essentially a self-contained relationship (usually unequal) between two or more societies. The term *world system* can sound misleading, because it was only in the twentieth century that the entire world did actually become connected in a vast globalized system. But the term has also been applied to other periods in history when societies over large areas engaged in some sort of relationship, be it through trade, war or cultural exchange. In this sense, to paraphrase Immanuel Wallerstein, a world system is not of the world or in the world; rather it is a system that *is* a world unto itself.[15] Wallerstein identified three different types of world systems. The first of these was a "world economy," essentially a world system composed of two or more states that trade with and often fight with each other periodically. In the context of the First Silk Roads Era, the commercial and military relationship between the Roman and Parthian Empires might be considered a kind of world economy. The second type is a "world empire," which occurs if one of the states in a world economy comes to dominate the others under its hegemony. This seems less relevant to Afro-Eurasia during the First Silk Roads Era, because none of the four major imperial states ever came to dominate the others. The third type Wallerstein identified is a minisystem, a group of interacting societies that are not actually states. The relationship between various pastoral nomadic confederations during the First Silk Roads Era might be considered a minisystem.[16]

It is arguable whether the Silk Roads ever constituted a world system the way Wallerstein conceived of it. But there is no doubt that the central

[15] I. Wallerstein, "The Timespace of World-Systems Analysis: A Philosophical Essay," *Historical Geography* 23, No. 172 (1993), pp. 5–22.

[16] I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New Edition. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001. Previously published in 1974 by Academic Press, Inc.

argument of world systems theorists – that the relationship between civilizations and other groups within the system are so pervasive that something like "a world system" should replace the civilization as the basic unit for historical analysis on the macro scale – is highly relevant to the study of the Silk Roads. In that sense, even as we offer in the pages that follow individual chapters on the history of four "great powers" of ancient Eurasia, the focus is equally on the connections that developed between them. Wallerstein's theory shared some similarities with the ideas advanced by another significant and quite revolutionary school of historians that emerged in France in the 1960s and 1970s. This so-called *Annales* group included Marc Bloch, Immanuel le Roy Ladurie and Fernand Braudel. The *Annales* historians took the idea of breaking down barriers between discrete entities further by arguing that it was time to dismantle not only the idea that civilizations could be studied as discrete entities, but also the artificial barriers that existed between the various social science and humanities disciplines. By seeking explanations for historical events and processes through a variety of disciplinary lenses, both world systems theorists and members of the *Annales* group were highly influential in the emergence of the transdisciplinary field of big history.

Although Wallerstein originally maintained that the first world system did not appear until the fifteenth century CE, others have argued that, virtually from the moment agrarian civilizations appeared on the planet, they established relationships that led quickly to the emergence of small but genuine world systems. In her 1989 work *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350*, Janet Abu-Lughod argued that the roots of the modern world system need to be sought somewhere between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. This was followed by the 1993 publication of *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* by Andre Gunder Frank and Barry Gills, in which they claimed that the vast Afro-Eurasian world zone had actually constituted a genuine world system from the emergence of the first agrarian civilization in Mesopotamia in c. 3200 BCE, a system that became increasingly interconnected through exchange networks like the Silk Roads.[17]

Building on some of the ideas proposed by world systems theorists, in 2003 John McNeill and his father, William McNeill, both extremely influential proponents of the field of world history, published a book in which they argued for the reconceptualizing of networks of human interconnections into an entity that they call the "human web." The McNeills

[17] A. G. Frank and D. K. Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* New York: Routledge, 1992.

pointed out that from the very beginning of human history, individuals and communities have been forming connecting webs, large and small, rigid and flexible. By studying these webs historians can reveal patterns of interaction and exchange, and of cooperation or competition, that have driven history relentlessly into the modern age. By analyzing everything from the "thin localized" webs of the Early Agrarian Era, through the "denser, more interactive, metropolitan webs" of the great agrarian civilizations such as the Silk Roads and eventually the "electrified global web" of today, the McNeills have also created a mechanism for deeper world historical understanding by focusing on these larger structures of connectivity.[18] From our perspective this is undoubtedly correct. The analysis of the Silk Roads contained within this volume borrows much from world systems theory, and also from the idea of an eternal web of connections that has bound societies together from the very beginning of human history, but that intensified during certain periods such as the First Silk Roads Era.

The Silk Roads as an Ancient Globalization

Another way of conceptualizing the First Silk Roads Era might be to consider it as an example of an ancient globalization. Most theorists think of globalization as very much a modern process whose origins can be traced to the construction of European colonial empires around the globe beginning in the sixteenth century. Recently, however, other scholars have been arguing that globalizations (with an emphasis on the plural) actually occurred multiple times in the ancient world.[19] This conclusion is based on an influential definition of globalization offered by John Tomlinson in 1999. At the heart of globalization, Tomlinson argued, is the establishment of a "complex connectivity," essentially a dense web of interactions between different communities created by trade and cultural exchange.[20] For a network to achieve the level of complex connectivity, it needs to intensify until it triggers a wide range of social changes that, to a certain extent, brings all its participants into an amalgamation that is somewhat homogenous, but also fractured and hybrid.[21]

[18] J. McNeill and W. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003.
[19] See, for example, J. Jennings, *Globalizations and the Ancient World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
[20] J. Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 2.
[21] Jennings 2011, pp. 2–3.

Historian Justin Jennings has argued that many periods and places in the ancient world meet Tomlinson's definition of a globalization. He articulates eight key trends that are the hallmark of globalization, and we would argue that some of these were clearly visible in Eurasia during the First Silk Roads Era.[22] For example, the trend of "time-space" compression, where long-distance exchanges and the social processes that follow make the world feel like a smaller and more connected place, must undoubtedly have been experienced by merchants and diplomats of Afro-Eurasia during the first two centuries CE. Another trend is "standardization." When diverse groups come together to participate in a common purpose, such as transregional commerce, they can only do so successfully if they achieve some common mechanisms such as shared languages and an agreed upon understanding of how the economics of this commerce should operate. Although we lack many of the details of these mechanisms in the ancient world, it is clear that commerce on the scale of the Silk Roads must have been predicated on common languages (or at least the use of skilled interpreters), as well as common understandings of tariffs and taxes and the value of various luxury commodities as measured in currencies, particularly Roman gold and silver coinage.

Another defining trend of ancient globalization is "homogenization," the process whereby "foreign" ideas are adopted by other groups. The Silk Roads clearly facilitated processes of homogenization as religions, ideologies and technologies that evolved in one region were adopted by communities living in far distant regions. A final trend is "vulnerability." Communities engaged in processes of globalization can become so interdependent that if something goes badly wrong in one place, everyone is adversely affected. Vulnerability is the very essence of what occurred in the third century CE, as the near simultaneous collapse of the Han, Kushan and Parthian Empires, political and military crisis in the Roman Empire and outbreaks of disease epidemics essentially led to the disintegration of the Silk Roads globalized network and to hardship for millions of its participants. Most globalization theorists would agree that all eight of Jennings's trends have occurred in the past couple of centuries, but there is less agreement that these trends also appeared in the ancient world at different periods. However, from our point of view there can be no doubt that the First Silk Roads Era is as clear an example of ancient globalization as one can find anywhere in the long annals of history. As Jennings concludes, if we find "(a) a surge in long-distance connections during an earlier period that (b) caused an array of cultural

[22] Jennings 2011, pp. 30–32.

changes that are associated with the creation of a global culture," we have "strong evidence for an earlier globalization era."[23]

Conclusion

The story that unfolds in the pages that follow owes much to the perspectives provided by big history, world systems theory, the human web and ancient globalizations theory. Whichever approach we use to conceptualize the First Silk Roads Era, there is no doubt that during a period of some 350 years between the late second century BCE and the mid-third century CE, material and intellectual exchanges facilitated by commercial hubs within Inner Eurasia and the Indian Ocean Basin brought the Afro-Eurasian world zone together into a thriving, vibrant, connected web of exchanges that had profound political, economic, social and cultural consequences for all those involved. The demise of the Parthian, Kushan and Han Chinese Empires, along with a troubled half century in the Roman Empire, brought an end to the First Silk Roads Era and a significant decline in levels of transregional trade and cultural exchange. A Second Silk Roads Era subsequently thrived between roughly 600 and 1000 CE, connecting China, India, Southeast Asia, the Dar al-Islam and the Byzantine Empire into another vast web based on overland and maritime trade, but that period belongs to another study.

There is no doubt that the primary function of the Silk Roads during both periods was to facilitate trade, but the transmission of intellectual and artistic ideas and of diseases had an even more significant impact on subsequent human history. Perhaps the most important cultural consequence of commercial exchange was the spread of religions across Afro-Eurasia, particularly Buddhism, which moved from India through Central Asia and on to China and East Asia. Associated with the diffusion of Buddhism was the eastward spread of artistic ideas and techniques, such as the syncretic sculptural styles that developed in the second century CE in the Kushan-controlled workshops of Gandhara (in Pakistan) and Mathura (in India), where the first ever representation of the Buddha was conceived. An important biological consequence of Silk Roads trade was the spread of disease and plague, which occurred late in the era. The passing of disease bacteria along the Silk Roads by traders played a significant role in the depopulation and subsequent decline of both the Han and Roman Empires. These are just a handful of examples, each of which is explored in greater detail in the chapters that follow, that support

[23] Jennings 2011, pp. 31–32.

the claim that the First Silk Roads Era profoundly affected the subsequent shape and direction of all human history.

Empires of Eurasia and the First Silk Roads Era explores the environmental, ecological, political, economic and cultural conditions that made these and so many other exchanges possible. It considers the establishment, early history and expansion of four great imperial states and the role pastoral nomads played in connecting them. It explores the challenging geography of the routes, including the major land connections between East, Central, South and West Asia, and the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean Basin. It considers the many diverse individuals, cultures, ecologies and biological organisms that were brought together by these various routes, and analyzes the costs and profits generated by this explosion of commerce. Finally, it unfolds a cavalcade of events and conditions that brought a rapid end to this extraordinary moment in ancient history, and the demise of three of the four major imperial states that had been responsible for its success. As Warwick Ball pointed out, many books are now available in "the endless stream" on the history of the Silk Roads, but this book focuses exclusively on the *First* Silk Roads Era, arguably one of the most important and influential periods in the history of humanity.

Selected Further Reading

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Waugh, D., "Richthofen's 'Silk Roads': Towards the Archaeology of a Concept." *The Silk Road* 5, No. 1 (Summer 2007), pp. 1ff.