



## chapter six

### *The End of the Silk Route*

# The Decline of Overland Trade

#### Did you know?

The Great Wall of China stretches nearly 2400 kilometres from Gansu to the Yellow Sea. It was built to protect China from raids by the nomadic tribes to the north of the Empire. Originally constructed between 3rd and 1st Centuries BCE from a series of smaller fortifications, the present wall was re-built and strengthened during the Ming Dynasty, which lasted from 14-17th Century CE. This not only served to protect China, but also stood as a symbol of the Ming policy of isolation from the outside world during this period.

During the Thirteenth and early Fourteenth Centuries, the Silk Route became increasingly popular with European traders. Marco Polo records that Italian merchants had brought ships overland along the Silk Route to the Caspian Sea, and were using them to trade along its shores. In 1340, another enterprising trader, Francesco Pegolotti, wrote *La Praticba della Mercatura* (The Practice of Trade) giving useful information for merchants setting out for the East and recommending the Eurasian Steppe Route. Pegolotti may never have travelled East himself so his guide was probably compiled from the accounts of the many traders who had.

Then, in 1368, the Mongols were finally expelled from China. Their empire, already divided, began to decline. It briefly revived under Timur the Lame, bringing great wealth to his capital, Samarkand, but disappeared completely after his death in 1404. Trade along the Silk Route passed once more into the hands of local traders.

This breakdown in international trade was also caused by the tension between the Christian Europeans and the Muslim people of the Middle East. This was mainly due to the Crusades which the Europeans had launched from the Eleventh to Thirteenth Century to capture Christian sites in the Holy Land (now occupied by modern



Israel). The Christians had started taking over territory on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, and the Muslim inhabitants counter-attacked, eventually driving them out.

In 1453, a Turkish Muslim army finally captured the last Christian stronghold in the Near East, Constantinople, and the Byzantine Empire came to an end. After this, Europeans were no longer able to travel freely along the western part of the Silk Route. The remaining trade was carried on by Muslim merchants, and goods travelled between East and West by land in decreasing quantities.

By the Fifteenth Century classical knowledge, hitherto preserved in Byzantine, Sasanian and Arab libraries, was making an enormous impact on Europeans. This marks the period of cultural re-awakening which we know as the Renaissance (which means 're-birth'). New discoveries were being made in science and the arts and with them came the great age of European exploration. The Europeans had realized that the world was round and dreamed of discovering a new trade route to the East, by travelling west around the globe. In 1492 Christopher Columbus set off across the Atlantic Ocean to try and reach China by this western route – so the 'New World', America, was found.

Meanwhile, Portuguese explorers such as Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama had found a sailing route around Africa and the Indian Ocean to India. This route now linked up with the Spice Route from the Far East. The Europeans had at last found a way of trading directly with China and south-east Asia which avoided paying money to the middlemen conducting the caravans along the Silk Route.



▲ This Genoese map of the world dates from 1457. It shows the Europeans' limited knowledge about the geography of countries outside Europe. Within a few decades, this would change dramatically as the Portuguese rounded Africa and explored the Indian Ocean, and Columbus reached America.





▲ Aurel Stein (1862-1943), the Hungarian-born British archaeologist.

▼ The superb ruins of the Triumphal Arch at Palmyra, dating from 2nd Century CE.

# Rediscovery of the Silk Route

Over coming centuries, Europe slowly extended its influence and came to dominate world trade. The Silk Route through the Middle East and Central Asia was all but forgotten.

In the middle of the Eighteenth Century two British travellers, Robert Wood and James Dawkins, visited the site of the ancient city of Palmyra. Here amidst the wastes of the Syrian desert they discovered the magnificent columns and ruined temples of a once great city. It was known that this city had formerly been an important staging post on the ancient overland trading route to the East and historical interest in the Silk Route began.

Just over a century later, the Tarim Basin began to attract interest. This unmapped region had become strategically important as it now lay at the edge of three expanding empires. The Russian Empire was expanding east of the Caspian, the British Empire was expanding north from India, and the Chinese Empire was once again expanding westwards into Xinjiang (the Chinese name for the Tarim region





which dates back to the Han Dynasty). Explorers, some independent, some working for their country, penetrated the region and returned with stories of buried cities and treasure hidden beneath the sands of the Taklamakan.

On the evidence of these explorers' reports, Britain, France, Germany, America and Russia now all launched archaeological expeditions to explore the Tarim Basin. They realized that here possibly might lie vital evidence on how East and West had been linked by the Silk Route. The Japanese too sent explorers, who hoped to discover how Buddhism had reached their country.

What the archaeologists found was to exceed their wildest expectations. Digging through the sand, they uncovered the relics and treasures from the oasis cities which had once formed the essential links along the Silk Route between north-west China and the Pamir Mountains. A Buddhist culture, which few people knew had existed, was revealed. For instance, at Dunhuang the Hungarian-British explorer Sir Aurel Stein discovered a priceless collection of Buddhist manuscripts and paintings of the Tang Dynasty which had been bricked up in a cave since 1000 CE.

The archaeology of the Silk Route has continued ever since. A particularly exciting new development has been the recent use of satellites in mapping the exact course of the Silk Route, which is often visible as a worn sunken track or 'hollow way'. Excavations have also been carried out at important centres such as Palmyra, Ctesiphon, Merv and Samarkand, with many of the major monuments being restored to their former glory.

▲ *The Diamond Sutra, a Tang Dynasty sacred Buddhist tract, is the oldest printed text in the world. It was found by Stein in the cave at Dunhuang.*

▼ *A figurine of a 6th Century warrior found in the sands of the Taklamakan. His armour reflects the Sasanian and Sogdian influence on this part of the Silk Route.*





▼ Today's Silk Route travellers often pass through Urumqi in China. The pagoda above the city dates from the Tang dynasty.

# The Silk Route Today

The routes that follow the old Silk Route still exist to this day. At the moment it is possible to travel from Xi'an (once the ancient Chinese imperial capital Changan) all the way to Istanbul (once Constantinople) although it is by no means an easy journey. The vast majority of goods traded between East and West today are transported by sea.

A paved road exists from Xi'an at the eastern end of the Silk Route as far west as Kashgar. This remains central China's principal overland supply route to the remote western areas of Xinjiang. From here a lorry route winds south through the Karakoram Mountains to connect China with Pakistan. This link between modern China and the Indian sub-continent has once again become an important international trading route.

The path of the ancient Silk Route west from Kashgar into western Turkestan now connects China and the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union. This is a rarely used and difficult route which, until recently, was closed because of bad relations between the Russians and the Chinese. Over the next few years, the newly independent republics in this area, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, will need to open up trade links to survive on their own and this could lead to a new Silk Route developing. As always, travel and trade along the Silk Route depends upon the tide of history.

This is particularly the case along the southern roads of the Silk Route which continue through the Middle East. The present political situation in some countries in the area has meant that parts of the ancient Silk Route remain closed for international travellers. At present, tours can follow the Eurasian Steppe Route through the old





Soviet Republics of Central Asia, skirting north of the Caspian and crossing the Black Sea into Turkey, although it is impossible to say as yet how the breakdown of the Soviet Union will affect this area.

If international relations improve, it is possible that the entire Silk Route may one day open up again as an international overland trading link between East and West. If the road all the way from Xi'an to Istanbul became a paved modern highway, a journey which once may have taken three years could be travelled in less than two weeks. In a future era of world peace, we may yet see lorries or trains carrying international trade along the routes once travelled by Zhang Qian and Marco Polo.

▲ The map shows the countries and their borders through which the Silk Route's paths pass today.

