

The Great Silk Road is a system of caravan routes crossing in ancient and middle age time Eurasian continent from Mediterranean Sea to China and influencing the emergence and development of trade and cultural ties between people and statehoods located along the way. The legacy of first transnational contact between people of West and East prove importance of implementing this project aimed at launching open source online web portal dedicated to studies on Silk Road and studies about it. Moreover, local surveys and research are aimed to support scientific and cultural cooperation between the scholars and experts representing different regions and countries once surpassed by the Silk Road.

Connecting eastern and western margins of Eurasian continent, extended routes of the Silk Road crossed China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. On the east the road led to Korea and Japan; on the west to Russia, Eastern and Western Europe; on the south to India and Middle East on south-west. This was a transit road with two-way movement of goods, scientific ideas and achievements, as well as cultural and religious values. At certain period of time Silk Road used to be important and quick means of disseminating information through merchants, travelers and diplomats.

Many people assume that Silk Road first served as a route for exporting Chinese silk to Western countries, however many findings show that different goods produced in Rome, Byzantium, India, Iran, Arab Caliphate, later Russia and European countries were imported to China. Long list of exotic goods comprised: frankincense and myrrh, jasmine and amber, cardamom and nutmeg, ginseng and bile of a python, carpets and fabrics, dyes and minerals, diamonds, jade, amber, corals, ivory and “fish tusks”, gold and silver bullions, fur and coins, bows, arrows, swords and spears. Highly pedigreed species of Fergana horses, Arab and Nissyan horses, camels and elephants, rhinoceros and lions, cheetahs and gazelles, hawks and falcons, peacocks, parrots and ostriches passed the routes of Silk Road to be sold for higher prices. Cultivated crops, such as grapes, peaches, melons, vegetables as well as spices and sugar enhanced their geographic distribution with the help of merchants. Aside from movement of goods and animal trade, Silk Road served as a channel for dissemination of fashion and artistic styles that became widespread once grounded in a new ethno-cultural environment.

There is a theory that Silk Road contributed to the popularization of Timurid style in ceramics that is distinctive for blue palette of painting on white background. First emerging in emperors’ workshops of China during Yuan dynasty (1279-1369) it received its wide distribution in Iran, Turkey and Central Asia. Nowadays superb examples of ceramic bowls and vases painted with cobalt are exposed in many museums of the world.

Baghdad painting was regarded as a model. We believe, that public fascination with the style may explain why the walls of VIII-IX sanctuary located on the settlements of Kostobe and Talass valley, identified with Jammukat/Hammukat¹ were decorated with thick layer carving of plaster. Wide

¹ Jammukat/Hammukat – ancient city civilization located in the valley of Syrdarya river and Talas valley, modern Kostobe, Zhambyl region of Kazakhstan

variety of grape withers, bundles of rape berries, tulips, rosettes, palmettes, rhombus shaped belts, meander borders, bouquet of plants were painted on panels. The palace walls of Afrasiyab and Varakshi, Samarra and Fustat encounter close analogies in carving motives, ornament details and general style. This meant that vision of Baghdad masters, fashion and lifestyle of the caliphate's capital spread along the Silk Road, surpassing the borders of Muslim civilization.

Authors of different countries, contemporaries of those distant events praised not only prosperity of a certain state, but integration of other cultures' values. The idea of cultural interaction naturally bears in itself main component of one of the real forms of developing world culture. Great Silk Road was not merely a route for transmitting goods, outstanding cultural pieces and standards of applied arts, architecture, wall paintings, but music art, dance and theatric performances of middle age. Performances of musicians and dancers, tamers of wild animals, acrobats and mimes, magicians and illusionists – all these forms possessed such qualities as entertainment and mobility. No language barriers existed for wandering troupes. Similar performances were showcased to Greek Basileus, Kiev Knyaz, Turkic Kagan and Chinese Emperor. Foreign orchestras traditionally were part of court staff. They were displayed both on official palace ceremonies and in unofficial celebrations and social gatherings. There are records left on reception of ambassadors by Turkic Kagan in his headquarters near Suyab city. It is widely known that most popular music in Tang China was music of the West – coming from cities of Eastern Turkestan and Central Asia. Music traditions of Kuchi and Kashghar, Bukhara and Samarkand merged with Chinese music tradition. Iranian, Sogdian and Turkic actors made significant contribution in choreographic culture of China. In China most popular artists were young dancing men and women from Central Asia. “Western prancing dance” was often performed by young boys from Tashkent, dressed in Iranian style blouses and tall pointed hats trimmed with beads. They were belted with long sashes, ends of which were waving during dance movements. “Chacha” dance was performed by two young girls in transparent robes decorated with multi-color embroidery and silver belts. The dressing of the dancers was complimented with narrow sleeves, peaked head wearings with golden bells and red brocade shoes. Another frequently performed dance was so-called “Girls from the West spinning in a whirlwind”, during which Sogdian girls dressed in scarlet dresses with green oriental style trousers and red suede boots, galloping, hopping and spinning on decorative balls. Of great popularity among all nations were various theatre performances with masks. In later time this traditional was guarded in Muslim countries. It is well known that during celebrations of Nowruz in Baghdad mask performances were displayed to the Caliph himself.

Monuments of spiritual culture found during excavations in different places located on traces of the Silk Road, speak about high level of cultural enrichment. For instance, terracotta collection of Tan period depicts dancers and actors in masks, musical ensembles sitting on camels. Facial features of these artists are identified with Central Asian people. Musicians and actors wearing masks are depicted on wall paintings preserved in the staterooms of Penjikent, Afrasiyab,

Toprak-kala and cities of East Turkestan. Exquisite wooden sculpture of a dancer was found in Penjikent, modern Tajikistan. Clay mask belonging to an artist of X-XI centuries was found during the excavations of Keder city located in Syr-Darya region.

In addition, Great Silk Road played tremendous role in dissemination of religious ideas. On the routes of Silk Road different missionaries “carried” their faith to foreign lands. Buddhism came from India via Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan; Christianity and later Islam were transmitted from Syria, Iran and Arabia.

As archeological findings show, trade routes coming from Europe to Asia and vice-or-versa crossed Middle age Central Asia and Kazakhstan in different places: they went through steppes, overcoming mountains, and going down to fertile valleys. Silk Road, remaining as a main trade artery for many countries and people was at the same time the road of cooperation, mutual interpenetration and enrichment of different cultures. It is logical to conclude that Great Silk Road is a phenomenon of human civilization.

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