

CHAPTER ONE

The Silk Road and Its Travelers

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, popular European fascination with the world beyond reached an all-time high. The British and French empires spanned the globe, and their colonial agents sent home exotic goods and stories. Poets and painters put their own visions of the seductive Orient onto paper and canvas.

The last remote corners of the world were completing the list of European discoveries; mountains were measured and the sources of great rivers determined and mapped. Tibet and other far-off lands were penetrated for the first time by Europeans, as British, Russian, and German agents ventured into the most inaccessible reaches of Central Asia, attempting to pave the way for colonial claims.

The Silk Road dates from this romantic period, in name if not in reality. In fact, the trans-Asian trade network linking the Mediterranean with East Asia had been past its prime for over four hundred years,¹ when a late-nineteenth-century player in that web of intrigue known as the Great Game,² Ferdinand von Richthofen, invented the term “Silk Road”

(*Seidenstraße*, in his native German), which came to epitomize a sense of exoticism and adventure.

[The “Silk Road” was not one road but many; it was actually a network of roads, generally going East and West, but with spurs into southern Iran, the northern Eurasian steppe, and south over the Hindu Kush to the Indian subcontinent.] In all of history Richthofen appears to have been the first to conceptualize the land routes across Asia in such a singular way—no one else, at least, had come up with such a catchy label.

Yet in the century since its invention as a concept, the Silk Road has captured and captivated the Western imagination. It has given us images of fabled cities, exotic peoples, awe-inspiring mountains and deserts, and the death-defying feats of hardy long-distance travelers. Explorers’ accounts from the turn of the century were best-sellers and continue to be reprinted today. Novels have been written, feature films and documentaries produced, travel packages sold, archeological expeditions funded, and international conferences held, all using the Silk Road as their theme. Like any catch-phrase of vaguely defined beauty, the Silk Road can be whatever we wish it to be; it can be the substance of all of our dreams.

[Modern-day Silk Road storytellers usually begin their tale with the mission of Chang-ch’ien, who was sent by the Han emperor of China, Wu-ti, to the “western lands” in 139 BCE to propose an alliance with a nomadic Indo-European people known to the Chinese as the Yüeh-chih against another steppe confederation which they called the Hsiung-nu (possibly predecessors to the Huns), who constantly harassed the Chinese with sporadic raids that even the Great Wall could not prevent. Chang did not succeed in his appointed task but learned quite a bit from his travels, which lasted thirteen years and may have taken him as far as northwestern India. During this time he was captured and imprisoned by the Hsiung-nu, escaped, and was imprisoned by them again on his way home before finally managing to return and offer his report to the emperor.]

One writer has suggested that Chang’s mission was less an official embassy than “an intelligence mission staffed with expendable personnel.”³ Whatever the case, the traveler’s tales of lands and peoples to the

west suggested to Wu-ti tempting opportunities for trade. Within a few years Chinese merchants were regularly braving the difficult journey west through the Gansu corridor, around the forbidding Takla Makan desert, and into Central Asia.

For the next twenty years or so this trade seems to have thrived. Wu-ti was particularly keen on obtaining horses from Ta-yüan, probably the Ferghana valley in modern Uzbekistan, which Chang had visited. The Chinese referred to these mounts as “heavenly horses” that “sweat blood” (an appearance caused by skin parasites). The people of Ta-yüan were reluctant to part with large numbers of them, however, and eventually in 104 BCE the Han emperor sent his general Li Kuang-li at the head of a large army with instructions to acquire these horses by force. Supplies were insufficient and much of the army starved en route. Massively reinforced by Wu-ti, they reached their destination only after two years and finally succeeded in gaining the inhabitants of Ta-yüan to capitulate. In the end the Chinese managed to bring home only thirty or so of the “heavenly horses,” but the trade route had been definitively opened and its eastern portion put under Han control.

[Despite the prominence of these events, which are detailed in the Chinese sources, trans-Asian overland trade probably linked the West with China much earlier than Han times. (Silk has been found in Egypt from around 1000 BCE and in Europe from around three hundred years later.⁴) Few if any individuals ever made the long and dangerous transcontinental journey as a single trip, however. Silk and other high-value goods were transported in contiguous stages, each part of more or less distinct economic systems and under the control of various political ones.]

The experience of Niccolo, Maffeo, and Marco Polo, who did cover the whole distance from Venice to China and back during the thirteenth century, was so unusual as to have sounded utterly unbelievable to their fellow Italians. The Polos owed their success to the *pax mongolica*, which brought most of Eurasia under one administration for the first time in history. During the subsequent century others, Asian as well as European, would make this great journey as well. One fourteenth-century Italian merchant even wrote a sort of Asian travel guide for businessmen.⁵

Overall, however, this kind of direct personal contact between East and West was rare.

The historical norm was that most participants in the moving of goods across Asia played relay roles. Central Asian middlemen might travel East or West into foreign lands and even set up trading offices there, but of individuals who personally conveyed silk or anything else from China to the Mediterranean in the pre-Mongol period, history has given us no confirmed examples.⁶ Still, the overall connections are apparent in hindsight. Therefore, having admitted that the Silk Road nomenclature is a recent invention, we will retain it as a general term to represent the complex network of land routes across Asia.

SCHOLARS OR SCOUNDRELS?

If it is to the explorer-agents of the turn of the century that we owe the Silk Road as a concept, then it is likewise to them that we owe much of our knowledge of its history. Many of these individuals—Aurel Stein, Albert von le Coq, Paul Pelliot, and Langdon Warner (the Harvard professor who was the model for Steven Spielberg's Indiana Jones)—were scholars and had a real interest in the histories and cultures of the regions they visited. Often armed not only with government funding and diplomatic support but connections with museums and universities as well, they were keen if not always careful archeologists. By diligence and by skill, by means and by ruse, they uncovered long-lost treasure troves of architecture, art, and literature, much of it religious in nature.⁷

One example of the lasting contribution of these men to the history of religions is that prior to their activities, next to nothing was known of the once-great tradition of Manichaeism. During its early life from the third through the ninth centuries, this gnostic religion enjoyed massive appeal throughout the Mediterranean and western Asia, to the extent that defenders of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam all saw it as the single greatest threat to the very survival of their own traditions. Manichaeism was rooted out and eradicated by force in the West, and all remnants of its existence destroyed by the end of the sixth century. By the tenth century few Manichaeans survived in the Muslim heart-

lands. Farther east along the Silk Road, however, the religion survived another seven hundred years.

For many centuries Manichaeism was known only through the polemics of its enemies (such as St. Augustine, himself a former Manichaean), and it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that actual Manichaean written works were found to have survived, locked up in forgotten vaults and buried beneath the deserts of East Turkestan, modern Xinjiang. (Later, further Manichaean texts would turn up in Egypt.) These writings, along with architectural ruins and fragments of wall paintings, were the relics of a Manichaean kingdom of the ninth and tenth centuries, after the religion had been made the official faith of the Uighur Turkish empire.

This is not to say that the intentions of the turn-of-the-century adventurer-scholars were always purely noble ones. Aurel Stein, finding that a large cache of ancient manuscripts had been inadvertently discovered by a Buddhist monk while restoring a grotto shrine, gained access to the site and later pilfered the manuscripts by persuading the monk that although European in outward appearance, he was really a spiritual disciple of the famous Buddhist traveler Hsüan-tsang. Stein insisted that just as that seventh-century pilgrim had "saved" so many Sanskrit works by bringing them from India, he now had a mission to save these works by carting them off to England. "I was performing a pious act," Stein rationalized, "in rescuing for Western scholarship those relics of ancient Buddhist literature and art which local ignorance would allow to lie here neglected or to be lost in the end."⁸

Von le Coq used similar reasoning but with more tragic results. He had his workers attempt to chip off entire walls of medieval Buddhist and Manichaean fresco work, but they did a somewhat careless job, and in the process of removal and transportation to Germany many of the paintings were severely damaged. The final blow came at the end of World War II, when most of them were destroyed in the Allied bombing of Berlin. Today the lost paintings survive only in the color reproductions which von le Coq published in 1913.⁹

The cavalier nature of Stein's claim notwithstanding, it is true that the bulk of subsequent research on Silk Road texts has been done by

Westerners, albeit with notable contributions from Japanese and Chinese scholars. The manuscripts were found to be written in seventeen different languages, many of which were unknown to anyone alive at the beginning of this century. The majority are Buddhist works, but a substantial number are Manichaeic and Nestorian Christian. A Jewish business document in Hebrew letters from the eighth century unearthed by Stein has provided the earliest known example of the "Islamic" New Persian language.¹⁰

European philologists have succeeded in deciphering most of these long-forgotten tongues, and begun the process of translating them into modern ones.¹¹ In addition, today there are numerous active archeological digs in western China, now under the sponsorship and surveillance of the Chinese government. Much of the material in this book owes itself to these twentieth-century finds preserved by the dry desert air of western China and to the efforts of contemporary scholarship to explain their content and meaning.

The religious texts and paintings found in East Turkestan (or Xinjiang, as it is now called in Chinese), together with archeological and written evidence from elsewhere in Central Asia, attest to a bizarre amalgamation of religious ideas drawn from Christianity and Judaism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Often this mixture is expressed in the deliberate, peculiar syncretism of Manichaeism.

It would seem, in fact, that eastern Central Asia in the premodern period became a melting pot of religious traditions because it served as a remote refuge for heterodox beliefs, and that well into the Mongol period it was one of the most religiously diverse places on the globe. How this very pluralistic religious environment came to be one of the world's most uniformly Muslim regions is one of the more intriguing questions of Silk Road history.

RELIGION AND TRADE

It is no coincidence that throughout history ideas and technologies have spread along trade routes, and that merchants have been among their prime transmitters. One only has to think about it to realize that traveling

businessmen do not simply convey, sell, and acquire goods, and move on. They socialize, interact, and observe while on the road, and they take their impressions home with them.

Nor are businessmen the only utilizers of trade routes; many other kinds of travelers benefit from the networks fostered by commercial activity. In the modern world business travelers are the driving force behind the airline industry, even if the average flier thinks little about that connection. Likewise, the interstate highway system in the United States was devised as a means to encourage trucking—a thought to temper one's curses when struggling to control the steering wheel in the wake of a passing eighteen-wheeler!

Increasing attention has been given in recent years to the role of long-distance trade in the cross-pollination of cultures and ideas.¹² Taking as its theme the specific example of the spread of religious ideas, this book tells the story of how religions accompanied merchants and their goods along the overland Asian trade routes of pre-modern times. It is a story of continuous movement, encounters, mutual reactions and responses, adaptation and change. This is part—though, the reader is cautioned, only a part—of a much broader historical dynamic of cultural interaction, exchange, and cultural conversion. While long-distance trade is not in and of itself an "explanation" of how religions spread across Asia or why Asians converted to them, a case will be made here that it is an important factor, important enough to serve as the theme of a book-length treatment.

Although some of the religious traditions in this story (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism) are familiar to us living today, it would be misleading to project too much of what we know of their modern manifestations into the Silk Road context. Religions are not monolithic, fixed institutions existing each in their own realm of dominance, although we often speak of "Christendom," "the Islamic World," and so on. In reality, religions are like organisms: They are born into this world at a point in time, they grow, develop, undergo diverse influences, and adapt to their environment. They quibble with their neighbors, experience periods of painful soul-searching, have good days and bad. At some point they may split like cells, each taking on a new life. Over time,

having proven themselves, they may settle into the self-confident stasis of maturity. Sometimes, eventually, they die. In China, especially, they are more often simply absorbed. Nothing could better illustrate the organic nature of religious traditions than the example of their experiences along the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was more than just a conduit along which religions hitched rides East; it constituted a formative and transformative rite of passage. No religion emerges unchanged at the end of that arduous journey. Key formative influences on the early development of the Mahayana and Pure Land movements, which became so much a part of East Asian civilization, are to be sought in Buddhism's earlier encounters along the Silk Road. Manichaeism, driven underground in the West, appears in the eighth century as a powerful political force in East Turkestan, then gradually blends into the amorphous mass of Chinese popular religion. Nestorian Christianity, expelled as a heresy from the Byzantine realm, moves eastward, touches hundreds of thousands among the Eurasian steppe peoples, and appears centuries later like a bad dream to the first Catholic missionaries in China, who find it comfortably entrenched there as the recognized resident Christianity of the East.

Islam, carried along by the momentum of the Arabs' military success, makes its appearance on the Silk Road in the eighth century but comes to a temporary halt halfway, following the Battle of Talas in 751. Directly and indirectly, Islam would be carried east through trade, just like its predecessors. Nor would the new tradition remain Arab property: It would belong instead to the Persians, the Turks, the Chinese—and it would feed from their cultures. Ideas, after all, like individuals, need to acquire new tastes and new sponsors if they are to thrive in foreign climes.

The existence of trade routes and constant commercial activity linking diverse cultures from ancient times meant that religious ideas (like technology and other aspects of culture) could spread easily along trade networks which spanned Eurasia. Indeed, like running water finding open channels, this spread was probably inevitable. But the religion-trade relationship was mutually reinforcing. For example, the expansion of Buddhism brought an increased demand for silk, which was

used in Buddhist ceremonies, thereby further stimulating the long-distance trading activity that had facilitated the spread of Buddhism in the first place.¹³

THE CARAVAN EXPERIENCE

If one needed or wanted to travel from one place to another in premodern Asia, the most prudent way (indeed, virtually the only way) of ensuring one would survive the trip was to join up with a caravan heading in the direction one wished to go. Travel was an exceedingly expensive and dangerous proposition, especially the farther one got from areas of dense population.

Inner Asia contains vast tracts of inhospitable land, often with little water and sparse human settlements frequently separated by great distances. The road from the Mediterranean to China is barred by some of the world's highest and most rugged mountain ranges, some of its driest, most expansive deserts, and an extreme continental climate which makes either winter or summer travel extremely difficult. The most physically challenging regions also tended to be those farthest from the reach of governmental administrations, making them prime grounds for banditry. And where there was local government, it might be hostile to outsiders.

Caravans coped with all of these problems in a variety of ways. There is safety in numbers, and caravans could be made up of anywhere from several dozen to several thousand travelers at a time. They followed established routes, so were unlikely to get lost, and traveled in set daily stages, stopping in places where the locals expected them and were prepared to meet their needs. Usually they were led by professional caravaneers who had made the trip before, and attempts were made to secure the approval and protection of all the authorities through whose lands the caravan was to pass. Occasionally caravans would receive military escorts through particularly dangerous or unruly areas.

The oases of the Silk Road—Marv, Balkh, Bukhara, Samarqand, Kashgar, Turfan, Khotan, and others—owed their prosperity and often their very existence to the regularity of passing caravans. They offered

way stations, or *caravansarays*, where large numbers of travelers could stop and rest for a night or more, stock up on food and supplies, buy local goods and sell the locals imported ones. Travelers would also often exchange their beasts of burden, either to obtain fresh, healthy, and rested animals or to trade in one type of animal for another more suitable for the next stage of the journey.

Caravan travelers transported their goods and personal belongings mainly on horses, mules, and donkeys. For desert regions camels were used: dromedaries in southwestern Asia and Bactrians in the colder, higher elevations of Inner Asia. In the most extreme conditions the choice was rather a yak or a *hainag*, which was a cross between a bull yak and a cow. Donkeys and mules carried packs, while horses, oxen, and camels often drew carts. The pace, set by the camels, was tediously slow: four miles an hour unloaded and two and a half to three miles an hour when loaded up. The average load was around three hundred pounds per camel. At this pace, a caravan might cover thirty miles a day.¹⁴

Even with the protection and regularity provided by a caravan, disasters were not uncommon. Dehydration, starvation, and exhaustion could befall even the best-planned expedition. Snowstorms or sandstorms could make a caravan lose its way, and even large caravans were not immune to attack from highwaymen. All in all, to travel was to assume an immense amount of risk, not to mention the expense. Exotic tales notwithstanding, a reasonable person would hope as much as possible to *avoid* romance and adventure, and pray just to arrive home again safely one day!

Clearly caravan traffic existed primarily by and for long-distance trade. For the most part no one but a merchant would have the means, the motivation, or the mettle to undertake travel when its conditions were so rigorous and its outcome so uncertain. This also explains why it was mainly goods of high value in proportion to their bulk that were carried along the Silk Road: one had to stand to make a considerable profit from his wares for such a daunting endeavor to seem at all worthwhile.

Even so, there were people who joined caravans for other than purely commercial reasons. Diplomatic missions attached themselves to cara-

vans. Sometimes people who had some special talent, or thought they had, would travel to distant courts in hopes of receiving patronage. A few hardy souls traveled merely to satisfy their own curiosity. Others had scholarly interests and traveled for purposes of research.

With the appearance of proselytizing religions came missionaries. First Buddhists, then Christians and Manichaeans, and finally Sufi Muslims latched on to caravans which would take them and their "spiritual goods" into new lands. As new religious traditions carried by the Silk Road disseminated eastward and took root along the way, travelers were increasingly able to find coreligionists in even the most far-flung and out-of-the-way places who could provide them with assistance and fellowship and to whom in return they could bring some contact from the outside world.

The spread of religious traditions across Asia also stimulated religious pilgrimage. For example, once Buddhism had established itself in China, Chinese Buddhists began to feel the need for direct contact with the sources of their tradition in India. Chinese monks, the most famous of whom are Fa-hsien in the fifth century and Hsüan-tsang in the seventh, traveled the Silk Road through Central Asia and down into the Indian subcontinent. Over time Korean and Japanese Buddhist pilgrims also appeared.¹⁵ And by the thirteenth century Christian Turks from Mongolia such as Rabban Sauma and his disciple Markos were undertaking the pilgrimage west to Palestine.

From the tenth century or even earlier, Sufi masters attached themselves to Silk Road caravans in order to spread their interpretations of Islam eastward into Inner Asia and China. They frequently won large local followings, converting people perhaps more by their own personal charisma than through the canonical teachings of the faith. Often such figures were attributed with miraculous powers, and when they died their disciples typically would erect a shrine in their honor which might later become a focus of pilgrimage.

It was not only, or even primarily, through missionary activity that religious ideas spread along the Silk Road, however. The earliest of the "mobile" religious systems to take this eastward path, the Iranian and the Hebrew, were not proselytizing faiths. Even the later so-called missionary

religions won converts at least as much through their prestige as foreign, cosmopolitan traditions as they did through active proselytization.

This is a phenomenon that historian Jerry Bentley has aptly characterized as “conversion by voluntary association.”¹⁶ According to this interpretation local communities, especially in remote areas, would tend to see foreign traders as being their link to the outside world, a world that wasn’t hard to imagine as being far more advanced and civilized than the isolated settlement one lived in. Likewise, any local who adopted the cultural trappings of the foreigners (religion being a particularly visible example) could feel and might be considered by others as being more connected to that greater outside world.

A significant aspect of this tendency for anyone involved in commerce was the practical consideration of maintaining the strongest and broadest connections possible with one’s business associates. Numerous cases in world history serve as illustration. For example, the spread of Islam through the Sahara and around the Indian Ocean Basin is generally attributed to the success of Muslims in dominating the trade networks of those regions, with the resulting dominance of shari’a law in the marketplace and favorable concessions and taxation terms being extended to Muslim traders in areas under Muslim control.¹⁷ The same pattern applies to Central Asia beginning in the eighth century, but even before Islam a similar process was at work there. It is surely no coincidence that the periods in which Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity experienced their most active spread through Inner Asia were connected with the adoption of those traditions by merchant communities.

THE SOGDIANS

The prime actors in this cross-cultural scenario are the people of Transoxiana, roughly modern Uzbekistan. This is a dry but fertile region of Central Asia lying between two great rivers: the Amu Darya (known to the Greeks as the Oxus and to the Muslims as the Jayhun) and the Syr Darya (the Jaxartes, or the Sayhun). Early inhabitants of this arid land were among the first peoples to develop irrigation. For over three

millennia agriculture thrived there, until the Russians imposed their rule late in the nineteenth century and turned the land over to a soil-destroying, water-depleting cotton monoculture, which the post-Soviet governments of Central Asia have so far chosen to maintain.

While irrigation ensured Transoxiana’s survival, however, its prosperity depended on trade. Situated halfway between the Mediterranean and East Asian centers of civilization, the peoples of this region were ideally situated to be middlemen, and throughout history they have answered this call. From the earliest times it is the natives of Transoxiana who appear as the central figures in trans-Asian trade, and with their role as traders comes their role as transmitters of culture and ideas.¹⁸

From ancient times the principal inhabitants of Transoxiana were an Iranian stock known as the Sogdians.¹⁹ A sedentary Indo-European people related to their nomadic neighbors the Sakas, or Scythians, they spoke an Iranian language, Sogdian, which survives today as Yaghnobi in remote areas of Tajikistan.

The Sogdian merchants were for centuries among the most successful in Asia, and their trading activities formed the major link connecting East and West. They were like cultural bees, cross-pollinating ideas and traditions from one civilization to another. In the centuries immediately before the common era Buddhism took hold among the Bactrians, another Iranian people living to the northwest of India in what is now Afghanistan. Sogdians living or trading in Bactria adopted Buddhism and spread its teachings throughout their trading colonies all along the Silk Road as far as China. Later Sogdians became enthusiastic converts to Manichaeism or Nestorian Christianity and became the representatives of these faiths through their string of merchant communities across the Asian interior.

With their international connections Sogdians knew foreign languages, and many were literate. They were often engaged as interpreters and translators. It was Sogdian scribes who translated most of the religious texts of Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity into the various languages of the Silk Road, from Indian Prakrits (vernacular dialects), Aramaic, or Parthian into Bactrian, Tokharian, Khotanese, Turkish, or Chinese, either via Sogdian or directly. For that matter, it

was Sogdians who brought the technology of paper production from China to the West, and well into the Islamic period the ancient Sogdian city of Samarqand was known throughout the world for the quality of its paper.

In 1907 the British agent-explorer Sir Aurel Stein found the earliest known example of rag paper, dating from the fourth century, in the Tarim Basin of modern China; it consisted of business letters written in the Sogdian language in Aramaic script.²⁰ In his account of his expeditions, Stein remarks in connection with his discovery of Sogdian Buddhist texts, "What a large share this Iranian element must have had in the propagation of Buddhism along the old 'Northern Route' to carry its particular language and writing to these marches of China proper!"²¹ The Sogdians' role in spreading other religious traditions was equally important.

During the eighth century Muslim armies based in Khurasan, composed of Arab settlers and native Iranian converts, gradually conquered and absorbed the Sogdian lands in Central Asia and brought them into the fold of the Muslim empire under the Caliph of Baghdad. First the ruling elite and aristocracy, then over time the general population, converted to Islam in increasing numbers, to such an extent that since the fifteenth century the native sedentary population of Central Asia has been almost completely Muslim.

It would seem that even before Muslim power was fully consolidated in Central Asia, Sogdian merchants were among the earliest and most enthusiastic converts to the new religion. The practical element lurking beneath this trend is not hard to see. Muslims had taken over control of the trade networks which connected Central Asia with the Mediterranean world; if Sogdian traders wished to maintain business in that direction, the advantages of being part of the dominant tradition were obvious. Once their own Central Asian homeland had come under Muslim rule (and their markets under shari'a law), merchants would have had particular incentives not to cling to the old ways.

As Sogdians in western and Central Asia turned to Islam, this led, following the established pattern, to the conversion of their fellow Sogdian trading partners farther East. This in turn facilitated the participation of non-Sogdian Muslims in the Sogdians' trading activities beyond the lands

under Muslim rule, so that when Islam came to China it was not only Sogdian but also Persian and Arab Muslims who were its bearers.

Thus from the eighth century Sogdians and others in Central Asia adopted Islam and became active participants in the formation of Muslim culture. But Islam came to Central Asia through the filter of Persian civilization, which it had already absorbed and which was its most prominent non-Arab influence. The Arab Muslims' most dramatic accomplishment was the defeat and absorption of the entire Persian Sasanian Empire during the 640s. In 750 the so-called "Abbasid revolution" displaced the center of Muslim power and administration eastward into the Persian world. The new Abbasid Empire then in many respects merely maintained the preexisting Persian cultural and political realities under a new Islamic identity. Islam became increasingly Persian in character: To a large extent, Islamic law, philosophy, literature, art, and mysticism all developed in the Persian cultural sphere.²²

It was therefore a very Persianized form of Islam that penetrated and transformed Central Asia over the next several centuries. Islamic religion and Muslim culture were communicated to Central Asians mainly in the Persian language. Just as in Egypt and in Syria, where the local Semitic languages gradually gave way to Arabic, in Central Asia Sogdian and other Iranian languages ceded to Persian. Although Central Asia had been incorporated at times into previous Iranian empires, from the Achaemenids to the Parthians to the Sasanians, it was under the Islamic Caliphate that local identity essentially disappeared and Central Asia became an integral part of the Persian world. Indeed by the tenth century a new Bukhara-based Persian dynasty, the Samanids, had made Central Asia the center of that world,²³ and it would remain so for several centuries to come.

LANGUAGE AND PROSELYTIZATION

Attitudes and choices about language are central to questions about the spread of religions. The Iranian and Hebraic traditions apparently did not proselytize along the Silk Road but remained the faiths of expatriate Iranian or Jewish communities. Coincidentally, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism

and Judaism remained bound to languages which were no longer spoken or understood by the majority of their adherents, whereas actively proselytizing movements such as Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity consciously attempted to reach potential converts through both preaching in and translating texts into vernacular languages.

Yet in the wake of the first translation of Hebrew texts into a popular language, the Greek Septuagint, throughout the Roman period the Hebraic tradition which would evolve into Judaism did win many converts; it would seem, in fact, that at no time in its history did the tradition experience such growth. By contrast, the story of Judaism along the Silk Road at a later stage in its life is one of far-flung and, over time, increasingly isolated communities struggling to maintain their religious identity. The tragedy of this trend underlies contemporary treatments by Jewish scholars of the demise of the ancient Chinese Jewish community in the middle of the twentieth century.²⁴

When and why conversion to Judaism began to decline is beyond the scope of the present work, but the issue may be pursued briefly. It may be that the Talmudic approach represents Judaism on the defensive, following the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. This case highlights the importance of noting, in any discussion pertaining to a religious tradition, where that tradition stands within its own historical lifecycle of development.

The spread of Islam across Central Asia presents a special case in regard to language, but one which perhaps ultimately fits the pattern. It has been argued that no religious tradition is more scripture-bound than Islam, and since Muslims do not believe a translation of the Qur'an remains the Qur'an, Islam has tended to be seen as strongly tied to the Arabic language.

While in theory such a tie certainly exists, in reality Arabic played less of a role in the transmission of Islam to the peoples of the Silk Road than Persian did. An early twelfth-century Bukharan translator into Persian of an Arabic work on local history explains in his preface that "Since most people do not show a desire to read an Arabic book, friends of mine requested me to translate the book into Persian."²⁵ Similarly, among the steppe nomads Islam was learned not so much from Arabic

texts as through the often highly personalized teachings of charismatic individuals who preached in local languages such as Turkish.

In general, there would appear to be a connection between the success of a religion in winning converts and the readiness with which the substance of that religion was translated into local vernaculars. It should be noted that successful translation is not merely linguistic; meaningful analogs must be found for symbols and concepts. In many cases such analogs between one cultural vocabulary and another simply do not exist and must be invented. It is thus easy to see how the substance of religious traditions often was transformed along the Silk Road, sometimes radically, as a result of the translation process.

MIXED MARRIAGES AND WOMEN'S ROLES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

For the most part long-distance travelers were men. In the case of traveling businessmen, liaisons or marriages with local women frequently ensued. Formally speaking, in most cultures the offspring of such mixed unions tended to be considered members of the father's community, but in reality it was often the mothers who exercised the greater influence on their children's religious education.

This informal level of passing on religious tradition is far less documented than that reflected in standard male history and often must be reconstructed from secondary evidence. It is therefore difficult to make assertions about women's roles and influence that can be clearly substantiated; nevertheless, a growing number of historians are attempting to round out the picture drawing on whatever sources they can.

The anthropological fieldwork of Sergei Poliakov conducted in Tajikistan during the last four decades of the Soviet period has shed much light on the roles of women in passing on religious tradition to their children.²⁶ At a time when even men were cut off from the influence of the mosque, Poliakov demonstrates how Islam—or, more accurately, a popular local expression of it—survived seventy years of enforced official atheism by being preserved through a culture of shrine visitation, a culture which was largely the province of women.

Although the shrine custodians who acted as teachers and transmitters were men, it was mainly the women who went to the shrines, often to pray for offspring. An American friend of mine recently visited such a shrine in Uzbekistan in the company of his wife; the attendant assumed they were there to pray for children and recited the *fatihā* (the opening chapter of the Qur'an) for them. My friends joked about it afterward—they had no plans for children. But four months later the wife was pregnant!

Normally wives visit such shrines alone, and in the course of such visits the custodian usually serves as a religious instructor. The knowledge passed on through this type of system belongs more to oral culture than it does to canonical texts, and it was this oral culture, transmitted principally by women to their children, that formed the backbone of Central Asian religious life throughout the Soviet period.

Historian Richard Eaton has described a similar system for the transmission and dissemination of Islamic vocabulary and symbolism in southern India dating back at least to the sixteenth century and probably earlier.²⁷ The folk literature of this region suggests that the spread of Islam—or, perhaps more accurately, of Islamic ideas and symbols—among the Indian masses was facilitated to a large extent by Sufi shrine attendants who composed “Islamic” songs in the local language and taught women to sing them while spinning, cooking, as lullabies, or at weddings. Since merely singing such songs did not require any kind of formal conversion or profession of faith, they spread widely and became a significant element of popular culture. As Islamic concepts and symbols worked their way into Indian society in this way, it would not always be easy to tell Muslims from Hindus on the basis of their religious vocabulary. At the village level such communal distinctions became most marked during the British period, as the colonial government sought to conduct censuses and place people into categories.

Still, even to this day in India one finds ostensible Hindus, Christians, Jains, and Sikhs visiting the shrines of Muslim saints, and vice versa. While men too participate in shrine culture, especially festivals, on a daily basis the normative influence of the mosque is more open to them, whereas women's access to “Islamic” teaching is more through the shrines.

While women's history is only recently beginning to emerge as a corrective to the established male-oriented view (“his-story”), it is likely that female-centered patterns of religious education within the family existed in many different historical contexts. That is a matter for future research, but women's roles may be borne in mind as one seeks to understand the various expressions of religious syncretism which continuously emerge from within the multicultural and cosmopolitan societies of the Silk Road.

OTHER HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

The largely unwritten history of women is not the only obstacle to a clear understanding of religious history. Another fundamental problem is that of defining the religious traditions themselves and of determining which religious ideas can be attributed specifically to each of them. Especially as we go farther back into prehistory and perceive borrowings between traditions, in many cases it is far from clear which culture borrowed from which. Such is the case with the many shared ideas found among the ancient Semitic Israelites and the Indo-European Iranians.

A related problem is determining the very nature of any given tradition. Religious belief and behavior varies inevitably even over brief stretches of space or time, often even within the boundaries of what we consider to be a single tradition; thus, any attempt to circumscribe belief and practice within a particular definition is bound to be to some degree arbitrary. We are stretching things, and possibly seriously anachronizing, if we refer to ancient Yahweh-worshippers as Jews or Ahura Mazda devotees as Zoroastrians. By the same token, the beliefs of second-century Parthian Buddhists or thirteenth-century Turkish Nestorians may be hard to reconcile with standard modern definitions of Buddhism or Christianity.

A third dimension to this problem of categorization is that in any given place and time, people more likely than not exhibit beliefs and practices that are to some degree heterogeneous. Where we perceive evidence of the presence of a recognizable tradition, we nevertheless often lack evidence that the people in question thought of themselves as

adherents to that tradition in any way that matches what we project back onto them.

When we find, for example, material from fifth-century Central Asia that we associate with Buddhism and other evidence we deem to be Zoroastrian, we may draw a variety of conclusions: (1) that both Buddhist and Zoroastrian native communities existed there; (2) that both communities existed but one was foreign and the other native; (3) that *local* religion was a mixture of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism; or (4) that the original local religion, although surviving, had incorporated Buddhist and Zoroastrian elements. In actual fact it is very difficult, if not impossible, to settle on any of these interpretations definitively.

This brings us to yet another unresolved question, which concerns the extent of conversion to a given tradition in any particular place and time or its proportional representation within the society. Even when we can obtain strong evidence for the presence of an identifiable tradition—say, a monastery containing canonical works in its library and bearing standard iconography on its walls—we often cannot extrapolate with any real accuracy how pervasive that tradition was.

We know that under the Uighur kings in the eighth and ninth centuries Manichaeism attained official status for the only time in its career. But despite its being the state religion, the mass of the population cannot have converted to it, for we see simultaneous evidence for the presence of Buddhists, of Christians, and for the persistence of the traditional Turkic shamanistic religion in Uighur society.

Likewise the decline of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity along the Silk Road, although a historical fact, is very difficult to trace with any sort of precision. Once the absence of evidence is complete, we can say with relative certainty that by that point a tradition has been extinguished. But if, for example, we find no Nestorian relics in Central Asia that date later than the mid-fourteenth century, neither does that tell us how numerous the Christians were who produced those last relics, nor does it tell us when the last practicing Nestorian died or converted to Islam.

Manichaeism in China ceases to be identifiable as a distinct tradition by the sixteenth century, yet in recent years a Manichaean temple has

been found in Fu-ch'ien Province.²⁸ Clearly, any observations regarding the existence and the survival of religious ideas, along the Silk Road or anywhere else in world history, ought to be advanced with humility.

CHAPTER TWO

Religion and Trade in Ancient Eurasia

Archeological evidence suggests that urban-based political structures in the Oxus region began to develop from the early part of the first millennium BCE. To the north, within the vast swath of steppelands reaching across the Asian continent from above the Black Sea all the way to the frontiers of China, the culture was mainly nomadic or semi-nomadic. As urbanization developed, the pastoral peoples of the Eurasian steppe entered into a long, rocky partnership with settled civilization which lasted for well over 2,500 years, until the twentieth century, when “modernizing” governments began forcibly resettling nomadic groups and bringing their age-old way of life to an end.

The great Russian Orientalist V. V. Bartold expressed this symbiotic relationship as “the steppe and the sown,” a conceptualization which remains popular among many who study the social history of Central Asia. According to this model, Central Asian history is defined largely by the dynamics of nomadic-sedentary relations, often hostile, even violent, but always mutually interdependent.

Specifically, the relationship meant that pastoral peoples would provide raw materials, such as wool and leather from their herds, to be processed by the oasis-dwellers, who would offer back manufactured goods in exchange. On a different level, the nomads would often attack and plunder the settled folk, like wolves raiding chicken coops.¹ Having taken their fill, they might then recede again to the steppes. Or, seduced by the fleshpots of civilization, they might stay on and assimilate, often taking their place as the new ruling class, thereby injecting new blood and new energy into a decadent society. Inevitably conquerors from the steppe who chose to settle in the cities would adopt the culture of those they had conquered and become in their turn the champions and defenders of that culture. This pattern repeats itself again and again over the course of three millennia.

In most cases the dominant peoples of the Eurasian steppe have belonged to either the Iranian or the Turkic language families. Although the Iranian tongues, being Indo-European, are distinct from the Altaic Turkic dialects, the speakers themselves often have been less easy to distinguish, since their shared history has provided them with many shared traits, ideas, and ways of life. This common legacy includes the Iranian and Turkic languages themselves, as can be seen in the bilingualism which remains in some parts of Central Asia to this day.

The same is true for religious beliefs, practices, and myths. Many of the religious concepts of the ancient Iranian peoples appear to fit neatly into the scheme of Indo-European religion and social structure, as reconstructed by the French Indo-Europeanist Georges Dumézil and others.² But in many cases the same phenomena are observable among the Ural-Altaic peoples as well. It has been suggested that such widespread phenomena as horse nomadism, fire worship, exposure of the dead, and the concept of universal dominion granted by a sky god were all borrowed from the Indo-European Aryans by other steppe peoples farther east—but this is largely a matter of speculation.³

In ancient Eurasian as in other primal societies, religion manifested itself mainly through rituals of daily life, such as in preparation for hunting, funeral rites, and so on. Archeological remains are the primary source for reconstructing these ancient religious rites and beliefs. The

tripartite structure of Indo-European society posited by Dumézil, consisting of priests, warriors, and pastoralists, seems to be reflected in the earliest building foundations uncovered at Dashly (in northern Afghanistan) and elsewhere. These appear to be in the form of sacred triads: three gates, nine towers.⁴ Burial sites also show evidence of animal sacrifice, especially horses, but also dogs and oxen. The graves often have wooden covers held up by posts, just as described in the *Rig Veda* scriptures of the ancient Indo-European migrants to India, peoples often referred to as the Indo-Aryans.⁵

In another parallel with the Indian culture depicted in the *Rig Veda*, Iranians of the steppes relied heavily on horse-drawn chariots, especially in warfare. This technology may have been vital in enabling the Indo-Aryans to subdue the northern Indian subcontinent. Indeed it is upon the steppes of western Central Asia that the horse was first domesticated and hitched up to a chariot—probably in the area of modern Ukraine—although riding horseback appears to have been a later innovation.⁶ Significantly, a horse-drawn chariot is the means by which the ancient Iranians believed the soul departs this world.

Other beliefs characteristic of the ancient Iranians are described in classical Greek accounts of various tribes known to them, especially the Sakas, or Scythians.⁷ The Sakas believed that the implements they considered most important—the yoke, the plow, the spear, and the chalice—were divine gifts. They had a cult of the horse, believing the horse to be an intermediary between this world and the next. The steppe Iranians' reverence for horses is seen in the frequency of horse motifs in Saka art, a theme found in the funerary art of the steppes at least as late as the sixth century CE. Horse sacrifice among the Sakas is mentioned by Herodotus, as is a water taboo and the making of drinking vessels from the skulls of slain enemies; all these customs are found later among various Turkic peoples.⁸

The Sakas also had a fire cult and a related cult of the Sun. Herodotus quotes Tomyris, queen of the Massagatae tribe, as swearing “by the Sun our master,” and says of them that “The only god they worship is the sun, to which they sacrifice horses: the idea behind this is to offer the swiftest animal to the swiftest of gods.”⁹

Herodotus elsewhere states that the supreme Saka goddess was named Tabiti, whom he equates with the Greek Hestia.¹⁰ The Greeks observed religious images, altars, and temples to be in use among the Sakas. They noted the existence of a figure known as an *enaree*, a sort of effeminate divination expert. Greek writers commented on the Sakas' elaborate funeral and burial rites and on their efforts to protect ancestral tombs.¹¹ Herodotus mentions one Saka tribe, the Argippaei, as having a special sacred status that protected them from attack by neighboring tribes and enabled them to serve as arbitrators in disputes.¹²

As in ancient Greece, local religious activity in the Iranian world often centered on worship of a mythical hero. In Bukhara the major cult focused on the heroic figure of Siyavash. He appears later as a character in the Persian national epic, the *Shah-nama*, or "Book of Kings," which the tenth century poet Abu'l Qasim Firdawsi, like his Greek counterpart Homer, redacted from a variety of ancient oral traditions.

Generally speaking, the Iranian tribes tended to dominate the western part of the Eurasian steppe and the Altaic peoples the east, although there were Altaic groups in the region of the Ural Mountains and elsewhere and Indo-Europeans at least as far east as the Tarim Basin of modern Xinjiang.¹³ Thus, we must turn to Chinese sources for references to the Altaic peoples. The earliest mentions of the Hsiung-nu (third century BCE to second century CE), state that, like the Chinese, they offered sacrifices to their ancestors and to the gods of heaven and earth, according to a seasonal ritual calendar. Furthermore, they consulted the stars and the moon before embarking on military maneuvers.¹⁴

A much-later Western source from a sixth-century Greek envoy to Central Asia describes a Turkish funeral ceremony where mourners lacerated their faces and, like the ancient Iranians, sacrificed horses and also servants.¹⁵ More elaborate information is given in the earliest-known inscriptions in a Turkic language, found on stone pillars by the banks of the Orkhon River in modern Mongolia, which date from the seventh century. These inscriptions specifically refer to a sky god, Tangri, and to a sacred mountain called Ötüken. Tangri comes to be identified as the supreme god of the Altaic peoples and survives as a synonym for Allah in modern Muslim Turkey.

ZOROASTER

At some point in pre-history—exactly when is not known—a prophet appeared among the Iranian pastoralists of Central Asia. Zarathrustra, or Zoroaster as he is more commonly known, is believed by some to have lived as early as the thirteenth century and by others as late as the sixth century BCE. His home has been placed as far west as Azerbaijan and as far east as Mongolia.¹⁶ Zoroastrianism, the religious tradition which traces its foundations back to his teachings, is represented today by small communities of believers in India (especially Bombay), Iran, and North America. Some compositions, actually hymns, attributed to Zoroaster himself are preserved in the sacred book of the Zoroastrians, the *Avesta*, where they are known as the *Gathas*. These hymns are in a very old Iranian dialect, close to Vedic Sanskrit, and were passed down orally for centuries before being included in the *Avesta* sometime in the early centuries of our era.

Zoroaster was a preacher, perhaps of priestly family background, who sought to reform the religious practices of his community. He opposed certain tendencies common to various Indo-European peoples, such as bull sacrifice and the ritual drinking of *haoma* (Skt. *soma*), an intoxicating beverage, which often led to drunken orgies.¹⁷ (In the *Rig Veda*, Soma is the second most important god after Indra.) The prophet also singled out one god, or *ahura* (Skt. *asura*), from among the Iranian pantheon for exclusive worship and referred to this god as Ahura Mazda, or "Lord Wisdom." The other Iranian gods, the *ahuras* and the *daevas* (Skt. *deva*), he demoted to demons: The English word "devil" is, like the concept itself, of Iranian origin.¹⁸

Thus, Zoroaster, like Moses, who may have been his contemporary, seems to have been among the earliest of the world's prophets to sow the seeds of monotheism. His vision differed from that of the ancient Israelites, however, in that it accounted for evil by positing an evil divinity, Angra Mainyu (Ahriman). For this reason Zoroastrianism is often characterized as a dualistic rather than a monotheistic religion.

It is often assumed that the various Iranian peoples of "greater Iran"—a cultural area that stretched from Mesopotamia and the Caucasus into Khwarazm, Transoxiana, Bactria, and the Pamirs and included

Persians, Medes, Parthians, and Sogdians, among others—were all “Zoroastrian” in pre-Islamic times. As one writer recently put it, “After the conversion of King Vishtasp [by Zoroaster], all of Iran is thought to have become Zoroastrian, and it continued to be so up to the end of the Sasanian empire.”¹⁹ Other scholars continue to characterize virtually the entire ancient Iranian world as Zoroastrian, a sweeping generalization supported by little or no evidence.²⁰

These blanket assertions must, therefore, be taken with caution. Like Judaism, the Zoroastrian religion has ancient roots, but is essentially a product of the Christian era. Zoroastrianism was first codified only from the third century CE as the official state religion of the Iranian Sasanian Empire, anywhere from a thousand to fifteen hundred years after the life of Zoroaster. We know relatively little about the religious beliefs and practices of the Central Asian Iranian peoples of early times, compared to the documentation available for Sasanian Zoroastrianism.

What is known of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, furthermore, does not necessarily apply to the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Iran. No known Achaemenid sources even mention the prophet Zoroaster. Clearly, we should be wary of projecting back onto Achaemenid- and Parthian-era Iranians the “Zoroastrian” tradition in its Sasanian form.²¹ The same is all the more true for Central Asia.

We can, however, speak of Iranian religion in a broad sense, by identifying certain elements which clearly belong to an Iranian religious “pool” of myths, deities, symbols, and rituals. Iranian religion can then be understood in its various local contexts to be made up largely of elements drawn from this pool. The mix varies depending on the time and locale, with different elements having greater or lesser relative weight, or none at all, and with diverse non-Iranian regional elements filtering in.

It appears that before as well as after Zoroaster many Iranian communities considered the sun to be the visible form of Ahura Mazda. Assyrian inscriptions give the form *Asara Mazas* (proto-Iranian **Asura mazdas*), and in the Saka language *urmaysde* is the word for sun.²² The sun, and its earthly analog, fire, both served to purify. It is worth noting that the Indo-Aryans worshipped Agni, the god of fire, and that the Indian practice of purifying the bodies of the dead on funeral pyres has at its root the same purpose as

the Iranian practice of exposing their remains to the sun. As one writer has remarked, “. . . fire and light are purifying agents, destroying dead matter and releasing the nonmaterial soul to paradise. Paradise itself is conceived of, in both cases, as a place of light.”²³

A moon cult also figured in the Iranian religious world. The moon was equated with the figure of a heavenly bull, which was widespread in ancient times, especially in Mesopotamia. In the Avestan language the moon is called *gao chithra*, “having bull semen.” According to Iranian myth all earthly animals were born of this semen, while plants were created from its dripping onto the ground. Evidence of bull worship from the early second millennium BCE has been found at Altin Tepe in present-day Turkmenistan. It has been suggested that the Makh temple at Bukhara mentioned in early Islamic sources was originally a temple of the moon (cf. Pers. *mab*, “moon”).²⁴

Perhaps the most visible element of Iranian religion is the festival of the new year, called *Naw ruz* (“new day”) held at the vernal equinox. This pan-Iranian festival seems to have originally been connected with Jamshid (Av. *Yima*), the “Primordial Man” figure in Iranian mythology.

By Achaemenid times quite a few of the Iranian deities which Zoroaster had attempted to demote to demons were creeping back into the Iranian religious pantheon, even in the central Persian lands. Still, the Achaemenid ruler Darius could say critically of the Sakas and Elamites, “they do not worship Ahura Mazda,”²⁵ indicating the official primacy the Achaemenids accorded to that god.

It seems that the Achaemenids attempted to impose their calendar on their Central Asian subjects, but it does not appear to have been a great success. The Sogdians substituted names of their own for most of the months and invented new names for the intercalary days (the *epagomenae*), which, in the words of one Iranologist, “shows little regard for the *Amesha Spenta* [‘Bounteous Immortals’, a class of divinities] and lack of familiarity with the *Gathas*.”²⁶

Among the divinities popular in Central Asia was Baga (cf. Skt. *Bagha*, Rus. *Bog*), a god associated with wine and marriage.²⁷ The Sogdian “Ancient Letters,” documents from near Lou-lan in Xinjiang which probably date to around 313 CE, before Buddhism, Christianity,

or Manichaeism took hold among the Sogdians, mention only “the lord of the temple” (*Vgnpt*) and not the chief of the Magi (*Mogrt*), leading us to understand that the former was more important in the Sogdian world even in the early Sasanian period.²⁸ The goddess Nanai (equated with Anahita, or Venus) is frequently mentioned. The figure of the devil carries a distinctly Sogdian name, Shimnu, which is derived independently of the Avestan Angra Mainyu.²⁹

THE ENCOUNTER OF IRANIAN AND JUDEAN RELIGION

The Israelite monarchy established in Palestine by King David in the tenth century BCE was obliterated by powers from the East in two major stages, beginning in the eighth century BCE and concluding in the sixth. The Assyrians crushed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 and forcibly relocated its inhabitants to other parts of their empire. The book of II Kings states that Ten Tribes of Israel were exiled to “Halah and Habor by the River Gozan and in the cities of the Medes” (18:11). Since the former locations have been situated in Khurasan, it has been suggested that Israelite presence in Central Asia should be considered as originating at that time.³⁰ Accordingly it has been proposed that these earliest exiles may have engaged in long-distance overland trade.³¹ Such hypotheses are not implausible, but solid evidence is lacking.

The southern kingdom of Judah managed to survive for another century and a half through diplomacy, but in 587 a new power, the Babylonians, put an end to Judean independence, destroying Jerusalem and its Temple, which had been the center of the priest-dominated sacrificial religion of the Israelites since the time of King Solomon (tenth c. BCE). Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians deported the Judean survivors to Mesopotamia to work as slaves.

Less than thirty years later, in 559 a Persian army under Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and freed the various enslaved peoples there, including the Judeans. Allowed to return home to Judah, most Judeans chose instead to stay in Babylon as free citizens of the new Persian Empire

or elected to try their luck elsewhere in the Persian-controlled lands. Many relocated eastward to Iran proper and laid the foundations for Jewish communities that have survived there to the present day, especially in the cities of Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana) and Esfahan.

As Cyrus had also made conquests to the east, as far as Bactria and Sogdiana, it is likely that some of the Babylonian Jews relocated to those provinces as well. The Book of Esther states in several places (3:6, 8; 8:5, 12; and 9:20) that the Jews lived “in all the provinces” of the Persian Empire. The modern-day Jewish communities of Bukhara and Samarqand, in particular, like to trace their history back to Assyrian times and consider themselves to be descended from the Ten Tribes.³² Although this origin is attested by Saadia Gaon of Fayyum in the tenth century,³³ there is no direct evidence for Jewish presence in Central Asia earlier than the Achaemenid period as described in the Book of Esther.

Recently an attempt has been made to argue that Samarqand was originally founded as a Jewish refugee colony, on the basis of some popular etymologies (Samar + qand = “Samaritan city”) and other evidence. While some of the examples given are intriguing, the clear fallaciousness of others undermines the argument’s credibility. For example, the author, being ignorant of Persian, suggests that the Persian new year, *Naw ruz* (“new day”), is derived from the Hebrew *navra* (“fire”).³⁴ In any event it is certain that Samarqand was already an important city by the time of Alexander’s conquest in 329–327 BCE; his chronicler Arrian mentions it as Maracanda. Therefore the Muslim legend, according to which the city was founded by two of Alexander’s slaves, Samar and Qamar, must be discounted as well as the recent Jewish explanation.

It does seem likely that many of the postexilic Judean settlers in Persian lands took up commerce. It would have been consistent with later patterns for them to set up trade networks with relatives or other Judeans in other parts of the Persian Empire or elsewhere. Roman sources show that by the Parthian period, both Palestinian and Babylonian Jews were involved in the silk trade from China. Hebrew names appearing on pottery fragments from Marv dating from the first to the third centuries CE attest to the presence of Jews living along the Silk Road at that time.³⁵ Because Jews were spread across a wide geographical area spanning both

the Parthian and the Roman lands, they were ideally situated to participate in trade between the two empires.³⁶

Iranian Influences on Judaism

Influences that Jewish communities picked up in one cultural environment could easily travel to connected communities in another. Beginning in the Persian period and continuing through Hellenistic and Parthian times, a number of Iranian beliefs and concepts began to work their way into the religious outlook of the Judeans, a tradition that would later evolve into Judaism.³⁷

Eschatological ideas such as warnings of the “last days” and belief in a messianic savior, a bodily resurrection, and a last judgment are just some of the notions that Judaism (and subsequently Christianity and Islam) seems to have borrowed from the Persians. The concepts of a heavenly paradise (Old Pers. *paira daeza*) and a hell of punishment for the wicked are also seen in ancient Iranian religion, but not in Israelite sources prior to the Babylonian period. The Iranian evil spirit Angra Mainyu, or Ahriman, evolves into the Christian and Muslim devil, who first appears in the book of Job as *ha-satan*, “the accuser.” The concept of angels and demons, likewise, seems to derive from Iranian beliefs. Ancient Iranian cosmology, with its numerology based on the number seven, may be the precedent for later evolutions in Greek philosophy and in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mysticism.³⁸

The biblical Book of Esther, composed apparently in Iran sometime in the fourth century BCE, provides one of the most explicit examples of interaction between the Iranian and Israelite religious traditions. It also provides the earliest record of numerous Iranian cultural traditions, such as court protocol, which continue to be attested through the Islamic period. The drinking custom mentioned in Esther 1:8 and echoed by the tenth-century Arab writer al-Jahiz is one example. Others are the function of the chamberlain in Esther 6:4-5, and the role of eunuchs in 1:10.³⁹

The Book of Esther has been shown to contain numerous elements derived from Iranian religion. The plotter Teresh and the disloyal

minister’s evil wife Zeresh appear to be reflections of the demons Taurvi and Zairik in the Avesta. Together they can be seen to represent the Iranian paradigm of “the lie” (*druj*) opposed to the king’s law (*data*), and by extension lewdness versus chastity and violence versus the pacifism of the righteous.⁴⁰

The Jewish festival of Purim, which comes out of the Esther story, was likely derived from the ancient Iranian springtime festival of Fravardigan, which, like Purim, began on the fourteenth day of the month of Azar and included an exchange of gifts.⁴¹

Like some other Indo-European peoples, Iranians believed time would end in a great apocalyptic event. This final catastrophe (which is known as Ragnarök in later Scandinavian mythology) was called Frashokereti or Fraoshkart by the ancient Iranians. It is surely no coincidence that the apocalyptic writings of Jewish tradition, such as those found in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, appear in the context of the Babylonian captivity and after.

Iranian origins have even been seen in aspects of the Christian apocalypse of St. John the Divine. The passage in Revelation 11:1-2 prophesying that Jerusalem, but not its Temple, would be destroyed, is derived from an earlier Jewish apocalyptic text written in Greek, the *Oracles of Hystaspes*. The latter work, composed most likely in Parthia, was in turn based on an old Iranian story about King Vishtasp, the royal convert won over by Zoroaster; the anonymous Jewish author presumably sought thereby to imbue his tale with the authority of an ancient Iranian prophecy.⁴² Eventually the “Great King” of the original Magian story evolved into the figure of Christ in the Revelation of John. Thus, over a period of centuries, what had originally been a uniquely Iranian eschatology was developed into a Hellenic and eventually Christian concept.⁴³

It has been observed that concepts apparently Iranian in origin become most evident in Jewish sources not from the Persian period (the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE) but later during the Hellenistic period, when they become evident in Greek-ruled Palestine.⁴⁴ This supports the theory that Iranian ideas found their way into Jewish culture through the agency of Jews who had settled in the Iranian world and were thus immersed in Iranian culture. Iranian Jews would then have transmitted

these ideas westward to the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean world with which they remained in contact. We have already suggested that the basis of this preserved contact was, to a significant extent at least, Jewish involvement in long-distance trade.

JUDAISM IN EAST ASIA

A single stone inscription from a synagogue in K'ai-feng along the lower reaches of the Yellow River offers a tantalizing suggestion regarding the earliest Jewish presence in East Asia. The inscription, which dates from 1663, reads: "The religion started in *T'ien-chu* [lit. 'India,' but probably just meaning the West], and was first transmitted to China during the Chou [the Chou dynasty, ca. 1100–221 BCE]. A *tz'u* (ancestral hall) was built in Ta-liang (K'ai-feng). Through the Han, T'ang, Sung, Ming, and up till now, it has undergone many vicissitudes."⁴⁵

If we are to believe this inscription, the Jewish community discovered at the turn of the twentieth century in eastern China would appear to have been founded by traders who came to East Asia, presumably via the Silk Road, prior to the end of the third century BCE. It has even been suggested that this process was already occurring in the time of King David! Supporters of the latter theory point to terms in the Hebrew Bible which they take to mean "silk," although detractors point out that these meanings are far from established.⁴⁶ For a long time enthusiasts identified "the land of Sinim" in Deutero-Isaiah with China, a connection since disproven.⁴⁷ In 1993 archeologists in Egypt found a sample of silk dating to the tenth century BCE,⁴⁸ and Israelite traders are certainly as likely as anyone to have played a role in bringing it there. It may be said that to argue Jews *may* have participated in trans-Asian trade from the earliest times is fine, but so far the more extreme dates are purely speculative.

Unfortunately, the K'ai-feng inscription is uncorroborated by any other piece of evidence and may just reflect the Chinese Jewish community's boldest claim to antiquity in its own origin myth. An earlier inscription from 1512 and a slightly later one from 1679 both date the Jews' first arrival in China to the Han period (202 BCE–221 CE). Consistent with this dating, some Chinese Jews told a Jesuit missionary

in the early eighteenth century that according to their own oral tradition, their ancestors had first come from Persia during the reign of Ming-ti (58–75 CE).⁴⁹ The founders of the K'ai-feng community, meanwhile, appear to have arrived by sea no earlier than the ninth century CE, separately and distinctly from the Jews who had come overland into Chinese territory much earlier.⁵⁰

IRANIAN AND JEWISH RELIGION ON THE ANCIENT SILK ROAD

Although firm evidence is lacking, it is not unlikely that both Iranian and Jewish merchants were active along the Silk Road from a very early time, perhaps 3,000 years ago or even more. Naturally their religious ideas would have accompanied them on their travels and therefore would have become familiar to peoples these merchants encountered along the way. There is evidence that Iranian soothsayers were employed by the Western Chou dynasty of China prior to the eighth century BCE.⁵¹

So we can say that in ancient times certain religious ideas may have spread geographically eastward, in the sense that the *possessors* of those ideas physically went there; this is not to say, however, that Iranian or Jewish religious systems "grew" or won converts. The great missionary religions had not yet entered the stage of world history.

In traditional societies religions, like people, are generally considered as being attached to a particular locality or region and, by extension, to their own local culture. From an Inner Asian or Chinese point of view, whatever religion a foreign merchant of Iranian or Israelite origin practiced was simply the home religion of the Iranians or of the Israelites; one would no more think of embracing such religion oneself than of pretending to be from Iran or Palestine.

Still, as Turks, Chinese, and other East Asian peoples came into contact with these merchants from the West and became familiar with their ways of thinking, subtle influences must have penetrated in both directions through everyday encounters and conversation. For example, it has been suggested that Taoists of the late Han period (i.e., sometime before 221 CE) borrowed their term for "the highest heaven," *ta-lo*, from

the Iranian *garo-dmana*, the “house of praise,” the highest of the four heavens, associated with Ahura Mazda who is referred to in parts of the Avesta as Dadhvah.⁵²

It has been argued by a Japanese scholar that the so-called “ghost festival,” an annual ritual for “feeding” untended souls, which became extremely popular during the T’ang period, actually had Iranian origins. The Chinese name for the festival, *yu-lan-p’en*, may be derived from the Sogdian *rw’n* (“soul”), and a popular tale associated with the festival, in which a monk, Mu-lien, descends into hell to retrieve his mother, seems to be based on the Greek myth of Dionysos and Semele.⁵³ There is evidence for other such influences from the early centuries of our era,⁵⁴ but similar exchanges of ideas may have been going on much earlier, and if Iranian soothsayers did serve the Chou, they probably were.

CHAPTER THREE

Buddhism and the Silk Road

At some time during the seventh to the fourth century BCE in northern India lived a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.”¹ A spiritual reformer who sought a “Middle Path” between worldliness and asceticism, the Buddha preached a message based on Four Noble Truths: that life is suffering; that there is a cause of that suffering, namely desire; that there is a way to end suffering; and that the way is by following an Eightfold Path of right opinion, right thought, right speech, right activity, right livelihood, right effort, right attention, and right concentration.

During his lifetime the Buddha founded a quadrupartite community of followers, called the *sangha*, divided between male and female monks and laity. Soon many of them began to travel throughout India and beyond in order to spread the Buddha’s message, which they believed to be universal. This was the first large-scale missionary effort in the history of the world’s religions.