

I. The Rise and Fall of the Silk Road

In Central Asia's back of beyond, where China tests her nuclear weapons and keeps a wary eye on her Russian neighbours, lies a vast ocean of sand in which entire caravans have been known to vanish without trace. For well over a thousand years the Taklamakan desert has, with good reason, enjoyed an evil reputation among travellers. Apart from the handful of men who have crossed its treacherous dunes, some of which reach a height of three hundred feet, caravans throughout history have always skirted it, following the line of isolated oases along its perimeter. Even so, the ill-marked tracks frequently became obliterated by wind-blown sand, and over the centuries a sad procession of merchants, pilgrims, soldiers and others have left their bones in the desert after losing their way between oases.

Surrounding the Taklamakan on three sides are some of the highest mountain ranges in the world, with the Gobi desert blocking the fourth. Thus even the approaches to it are dangerous. Many travellers have perished on the icy passes which lead down to it from Tibet, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Russia, either by freezing to death or by missing their foothold and hurtling into a ravine below. In one disaster, in the winter of 1839, an entire caravan of forty men was wiped out by an avalanche, and even now men and beasts are lost each year.

No traveller has a good word to say for the Taklamakan. Sven Hedin, one of the few Europeans to have crossed it, called it 'the worst and most dangerous desert in the world'. Stein, who came to know it even better, considered the deserts

of Arabia 'tame' by comparison. Sir Percy Sykes, the geographer, and one-time British Consul-General at Kashgar, called it 'a Land of Death', while his sister Ella, herself a veteran desert traveller, described it as 'a very abomination of desolation'.

Apart from the more obvious perils, such as losing one's way and dying of thirst, the Taklamakan has special horrors to inflict on those who trespass there. In his book *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, von Le Coq describes the nightmare of being caught in that terror of all caravans, the *kara-buran*, or black hurricane.

Quite suddenly the sky grows dark . . . a moment later the storm bursts with appalling violence upon the caravan. Enormous masses of sand, mixed with pebbles, are forcibly lifted up, whirled round, and dashed down on man and beast; the darkness increases and strange clashing noises mingle with the roar and howl of the storm . . . The whole happening is like hell let loose. . . . Any traveller overwhelmed by such a storm must, in spite of the heat, entirely envelop himself in felts to escape injury from the stones dashing around with such mad force. Men and horses must lie down and endure the rage of the hurricane, which often lasts for hours together.

Several other European travellers, including Hedin, who lived through such storms left similar descriptions. The vital thing was to keep your head. A caravan of sixty horsemen escorting a consignment of silver ingots to the oasis of Turfan in 1905 perished when they were struck by a *buran* so powerful that it overturned the heavily laden carts. 'The sixty Chinese horsemen', von Le Coq relates, 'galloped into the desert where some of the mummified bodies of men and beasts were found later on, while the others had utterly and entirely disappeared, for the sandstorm likes to bury its victims.' Clearly it was a case of panic, by the horses if not also by the riders. But in Chinese minds such happenings were caused by the

demons which they believed inhabited the desert and lured men to thirsty deaths.

Hsuan-tsang, the great Chinese traveller, who passed through the Taklamakan on his way to India in the seventh century, describes these demons. 'When these winds rise,' he wrote, 'both man and beast become confused and forgetful, and there they remain perfectly disabled. At times, sad and plaintive notes are heard and piteous cries, so that between the sights and sounds of the desert, men get confused and know not whither they go. Hence there are so many who perish on the journey. But it is all the work of demons and evil spirits.'

Sir Clarmont Skrine, who served as British Consul-General at Kashgar in the 1920s, has left a vivid description of the desert's appearance in his book *Chinese Central Asia*. 'To the north in the clear dawn the view is inexpressively awe-inspiring and sinister. The yellow dunes of the Taklamakan, like the giant waves of a petrified ocean, extend in countless myriads to a far horizon with here and there an extra large sand-hill, a king dune as it were, towering above his fellows. They seem to clamour silently, those dunes, for travellers to engulf, for whole caravans to swallow up as they have swallowed up so many in the past.'

Skrine, who for two and a half years manned this sensitive listening post where three empires met – those of China, Russia and Britain – recalled speaking with an old Chinese traveller who arrived in Kashgar from 'China proper' via the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts. On one lonely stretch of this journey he had marched for fifty days, he told Skrine, without seeing a soul.

Another traveller who, nearly forty years earlier, covered the three thousand five hundred miles from Peking to Kashgar was Colonel Mark Bell, V.C., Director of Military Intelligence of the Indian Army. His secret purpose in making the journey was to assess whether the Chinese would be able to resist an encroachment by the Russians through Central Asia

towards India. He and a young companion, Lieutenant (later Sir Francis) Younghusband, raced one another from Peking to India by different routes, Bell winning by five weeks.

Afterwards Bell wrote somewhat dismissively of the Gobi. 'Water can be readily obtained and is often close to the surface,' he reported. 'Travellers like to make much of crossing the desert, but it has few hardships; and before we left Kashgaria we had reason to think the Gobi days pleasant in comparison with the Kashgarian desert hills and flats. . . .' By the latter, of course, he meant the fringes of the Taklamakan which he, like most other travellers, carefully skirted.

Over the years this little-known region of China has, on the maps of the day and in the memoirs of travellers, borne numerous different names. In vogue at various times were Chinese Tartary, High Tartary, Chinese Turkestan (sometimes spelt Turkistan), Eastern Turkestan, Chinese Central Asia, Kashgaria, Serindia and Sinkiang. The earlier their use, the vaguer were their boundaries, although all included the Taklamakan. Some Victorian travellers called it High Asia, though this appears to have included Tibet - 'the most stupendous upheaval to be found on the face of our planet', as Sven Hedin once described it.

Ancient Han records show that two thousand years ago the Chinese knew the Taklamakan as the *Liu Sha*, or 'Moving Sands', for its yellow dunes are ever in motion, driven by the relentless winds that scour the desert. Present-day hydrographers and climatologists refer to it more tamely as the Tarim basin after the glacier-fed river which flows eastwards across it to shallow Lop-nor lake, the mystery of whose apparent 'wandering' would finally be solved by Sven Hedin. On the map of modern China the Taklamakan (meaning, in Turki, 'go in and you won't come out') is shown by a large egg-shaped blank in the heart of what is now officially termed the Sinkiang-Uighur Autonomous Region.

The Taklamakan and its oases are protected on all four sides from any but the most determined of intruders. To the north

rise the majestic T'ien Shan. To the west lie the Pamir – 'The Roof of the World'. To the south stretch the Karakoram and Kun Lun ranges. Only the east is free of mountains. But there nature has placed two further obstacles, the Lop and Gobi deserts. Most British travellers (Bell and Younghusband excepted) have approached Chinese Central Asia from India via the Karakoram passes which in places reach nineteen thousand feet. Hedin describes this bleak route as a 'via dolorosa' because of the many lives it has claimed, both human and animal. As recently as 1950 a traveller wrote: 'Never once until we reached the plains were we out of sight of skeletons. The continuous line of bones and bodies acted as a gruesome guide whenever we were uncertain of the route.' In *The Lion River*, a history of the exploration of the Indus river, Jean Fairley writes: 'Nothing grows along the Karakoram route and the traveller must carry all the food he needs for himself and his beasts. Pack animals, overloaded with trading goods at the expense of fodder, have died in this pass in their millions.' Sir Aurel Stein, on the other hand, dismisses the Karakoram route somewhat mischievously as 'a tour for the ladies'.

During the nineteenth century, however, there was one hazard which could not be shrugged off so lightly – the risk of being murdered. Any trespasser in this mountainous badland was regarded as fair game by local tribesmen (even in 1906 Stein took a small armoury with him). This lawlessness was to cost several European travellers, including Dalgleish, Hayward and Moorcroft, their lives. Not that this deterred anyone. Such perils were part of the challenge of Central Asia. Today, with the building of a new two-way highway across the Karakoram, the era of hiring mules and ponies, cooks and coolies, of clinging dizzily to mountain ledges, dodging rock-falls and bullets – the very stuff of Central Asian travel – is finally at an end.

But the men whose exploits concern us here belonged to the earlier age (although Sven Hedin, the first of them, died

only in 1952). To achieve their purpose they were willing to endure great hardship, frequent danger and, if necessary, death in this grim Asiatic backwater. What was it that drew them so powerfully to the Taklamakan with its cruel winters and sweltering summers? To understand this it is necessary to turn back the pages of China's history some two thousand years.

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A century before the birth of Christ an adventurous young Chinese traveller called Chang Ch'ien set out across China on a secret mission to the then remote and mysterious regions of the west. Although its immediate purpose ended in failure, it proved to be one of the most important journeys in history, for it was to lead to China discovering Europe and the birth of the Silk Road. Chang, who was renowned for his strength and daring, was sent on his trail-blazing journey by Wu-ti, the Han Emperor, who found himself facing increasing harassment from China's ancient foes, the Hsiung-nu. These warlike people, Huns of Turkic stock, were eventually destined to appear in Europe as the ravaging Huns of our own history books. Their raids on China had begun during the period of the Warring States (476-206 BC) and in 221 BC the Emperor Shi Huang-ti had built the Great Wall in an effort to keep them out.

Emperor Wu-ti, or the Son of Heaven as he was officially known, had learned from Hun captives that some years earlier they had defeated another Central Asiatic people, the Yueh-chih, made a drinking vessel from the skull of their vanquished leader and forced them to flee far to the west, beyond the Taklamakan desert. There, he was informed, they were waiting to avenge their defeat, but first sought an ally. Wu-ti immediately decided to make contact with the Yueh-chih with the aim of joining forces with them and making a simultaneous attack on the Hsiung-nu from both front and rear.

He therefore sought a suitable volunteer for this dangerous

mission – dangerous because an emissary from China to the Yueh-chih would first have to travel through Hun-held territory. Chang Ch'ien, an official of the imperial household, volunteered and was accepted by the Emperor. In the year 138 BC he set out with a caravan of one hundred men determined to run the Hun gauntlet. But in what is now Kansu they were attacked by the Hsiung-nu and the survivors taken prisoner, remaining captive for ten years. Chang was well treated, however, and even provided with a wife. With the aim of eventually making his escape and continuing his journey westwards, he managed to retain Wu-ti's ambassadorial token – a yak's tail – throughout his captivity. One day, after their captors had allowed them more and more liberty, Chang and the remnants of his party managed to slip away and set out once again on their mission.

They finally reached the territory of the Yueh-chih (who later became the Indo-Scythian rulers of north-west India), only to discover that in the years that had passed since their defeat by the Huns they had become prosperous and settled and had lost all interest in avenging themselves on their former foes. Chang remained with them for a year, gathering as much information as possible about them and other tribes and countries of Central Asia. While journeying home through Hun territory he was again captured. As luck would have it, civil war broke out among his captors, and in the confusion he managed to escape once again. Finally, after thirteen years away, and long assumed to be dead, he reached Ch'ang-an, the Han capital, to report to the Emperor. Of his original party of one hundred men only one, besides himself, reached home alive.

The intelligence that Chang Ch'ien brought back – military, political, economic and geographical – caused a sensation at the Han court. From his emissary the Emperor learned of the rich and previously unknown kingdoms of Ferghana, Samarkand, Bokhara (all now in Soviet Central Asia) and Balkh (now in Afghanistan). Also for the first time the Chinese

learned of the existence of Persia and of another distant land called Li-jien. This, present-day scholars believe, was almost certainly Rome. But of more immediate importance was the discovery in Ferghana of an amazing new type of warhorse which, Chang reported, was bred from 'heavenly' stock. Fast, large and powerful, these were a revelation to the Chinese whose only horses at that time were the small, slow, local breed today known as Prejevalsky's Horse, and now only to be found in zoos.

Wu-ti, realising that the Ferghana horses would be ideal for cavalry warfare against the troublesome Huns, was determined to re-equip his army with them. He sent a mission to Ferghana to try to acquire some, but it was wiped out on the way there, as were successive missions. Finally a much larger force, accompanied by vets, was sent to lay siege to Ferghana. However, the inhabitants rounded up their horses and drove them into the walled city, threatening to kill themselves and the horses if the Chinese came any closer. At last an honourable surrender was arranged and the Chinese left for home with their chargers. Although now long extinct, these 'heavenly horses' have been immortalised by Han and T'ang sculptors and artists. The most splendid example is the world-famous bronze 'Flying Horse' excavated by Chinese archaeologists on the Silk Road in 1969 near Sian, Wu-ti's one-time capital, and cast by an unknown sculptor some two thousand years ago.

Greatly pleased with his emissary who had shown such determination on this epoch-making journey, Emperor Wu-ti bestowed upon him the title 'Great Traveller'. Many further expeditions followed, for Wu-ti was now determined to expand his empire westwards. One of these was again led by Chang, this time in 115 BC to the Wu-sun, a nomadic people who lived along the western frontier of the Hsiung-nu, whom Wu-ti hoped to gain as allies against the Huns. Again Chang failed to enlist their aid, for they were too afraid of their powerful neighbours and China seemed far off. Not long after

his return from this mission, the Great Traveller died, greatly honoured by his emperor, and still revered in China today. It was he who had blazed the trail westwards towards Europe which was ultimately to link the two superpowers of the day – Imperial China and Imperial Rome. He could fairly be described as the father of the Silk Road.

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Although one of the oldest of the world's great highways, the Silk Road acquired this evocative name comparatively recently, the phrase being coined by a German scholar, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, in the last century. As a description, moreover, it is somewhat misleading. For not only did this great caravan route across China, Central Asia and the Middle East consist of a number of roads, but it also carried a good deal more than just silk. Advancing year by year as the Han emperors pushed China's frontiers further westwards, it was ever at the mercy of marauding Huns, Tibetans and others. In order to maintain the free flow of goods along the newly opened highway, the Chinese were obliged to police it with garrisons and watchtowers. As part of this forward policy they built a westward extension to the Great Wall, rather like the Roman *limes*.

The Silk Road (sometimes known as the Silk Route) started from Ch'ang-an, present-day Sian, and struck north-westwards, passing through the Kansu corridor to the oasis of Tun-huang in the Gobi desert, a frontier town destined to play a dramatic role in this story. Leaving Tun-huang, and passing through the famous Jade Gate, or Yu-men-kuan, it then divided, giving caravans a choice of two routes around the perimeter of the Taklamakan desert.

The northern of these two trails struck out across the desert towards Hami, nearly three weeks distant. Then hugging the foothills of the T'ien Shan, or 'celestial mountains', it followed the line of oases dotted along the northern rim of the Taklamakan, passing through Turfan, Karashahr, Kucha,

Aksu, Tumchuq and Kashgar. The southern route threaded its way between the northern ramparts of Tibet and the desert edge, again following the oases, including Miran, Endere, Niya, Keriya, Khotan and Yarkand. From there it turned northwards around the far end of the Taklamakan to rejoin the northern route at Kashgar. From Kashgar the Silk Road continued westwards, starting with a long and perilous ascent of the High Pamir, the 'Roof of the World'. Here it passed out of Chinese territory into what is now Soviet Central Asia, continuing via Khokand, Samarkand, Bokhara, Merv, through Persia and Iraq, to the Mediterranean coast. From there ships carried the merchandise to Rome and Alexandria.

Another branch left the southern route at the far end of the Taklamakan and took in Balkh, today in northern Afghanistan, rejoining the west-bound Silk Road at Merv. An important feeder road, this time to India, also left the southern route at Yarkand, climbed the hazardous Karakoram passes, the 'Gates of India', to the towns of Leh and Srinagar, before beginning the easy ride down to the markets of the Bombay coast. There was yet another branch at the eastern end of the trail known to the Chinese as 'the road of the centre'. After leaving the Jade Gate, this skirted the northern shore of Hedin's 'wandering lake' at Lop-nor and passed through the important oasis town of Lou-lan before rejoining the main northern route.

The Silk Road was entirely dependent for both its existence and survival upon the line of strategically situated oases, each no more than a few days' march from the next, which hugged the perimeter of the Taklamakan. In turn, these depended for their survival upon the glacier-fed rivers flowing down from the vast mountain ranges which form a horse-shoe around three sides of the great desert. As the Silk Road traffic increased, these oases began to rank as important trading centres in their own right and no longer merely as staging and refuelling posts for the caravans passing through them. Over the centuries the larger and more prosperous oases gained

sway over the surrounding regions and developed into independent feudal principalities or petty kingdoms.

This made them an increasingly attractive target for Huns and others greedy for a share of the Silk Road profits. Because this trade was beginning to bring considerable wealth to Han China, a ceaseless struggle now ensued between the Chinese and those who threatened this economic artery. Periodically the Chinese would lose control of the Silk Road and it would temporarily fall into the hands of the barbarian tribes or to some independent feudal ruler. The new overlord would then demand tribute for allowing the safe-passage of goods in transit, or simply pillage the caravans, until the Chinese managed to regain control of the route by force of arms, treaty or savage reprisals. Even when the Silk Road was firmly under Chinese control, caravans rarely travelled unarmed or unescorted for there was also always the risk of being attacked by brigands (particularly Tibetans skulking in the Kun Lun) on one of the more lonely stretches of the trail. All this made the journey a costly one, ultimately encouraging the development of sea routes, but in the meantime adding greatly to the price of the goods. Nonetheless, despite these hazards and interruptions, the Silk Road continued to flourish.

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The Romans firmly believed that silk grew on trees. As Pliny wrote: 'The Seres are famous for the wool of their forests. They remove the down from leaves with the help of water. . . .' Virgil too described how the 'Chinese comb off leaves their delicate down'. The Chinese, moreover, had no intention of dispelling such myths. Although willing enough to sell their silk, whose secret they themselves had discovered a thousand years before, they were determined to maintain their monopoly of the trade. This they managed to do for a further six centuries, until the first silkworm eggs were smuggled out of China to Byzantium, supposedly by Nestorian monks who, it is said, concealed them in a hollowed-out wooden staff.

The first Romans to encounter this revolutionary new material were the seven legions of Marcus Licinius Crassus. It happened when they were pursuing the Parthians eastwards across the Euphrates in 53 BC. Suddenly, at Carrhae, the fleeing Parthians wheeled their horses, discharging backwards a deadly hail of arrows – the original Parthian shot. It broke the Roman formation, transfixing men two at a time and nailing the hands of others to their shields. Even so the steadfast legionaries might still have held their ground had it not been for what followed. Screeching their barbaric war-cries the Parthians suddenly unfurled great banners of silk in the blazing sunlight in the faces of their already demoralised foes. The Romans, who had never seen anything like it before, turned and fled, leaving some twenty thousand dead behind.

The Parthians, the Romans knew, were a warlike and unsophisticated people, quite incapable of inventing or manufacturing this astonishing material which was ‘as light as a cloud’ and ‘translucent as ice’. But where had they got it from? Roman Intelligence soon found out. It had come from the ‘silk people’, a mysterious tribe living on the far side of Central Asia. For one of the Emperor Wu-ti’s early trade missions, following in the footsteps of Chang Ch’ien, had penetrated as far as Parthia where it had bartered a quantity of silk for an ostrich egg and some conjurers, both of which, according to Chinese annals, had delighted the Son of Heaven.

In no time the Romans had managed to obtain samples of the new material, so alluring to the eye and delicate to the touch, and were eager for more. At the same time it dawned on the Parthians that there were fortunes to be made as middlemen in this new traffic. Before very long the wearing of silken garments by both sexes had become the rage in Rome – to such an extent that in AD 14, fearing that it was becoming an instrument of decadence, Tiberius banned men from wearing it. Pliny wrote disapprovingly of the new see-through garments which ‘render women naked’ and blamed Roman

women for the drain on the nation's economy that their thirst for silk imposed.

But despite official disapproval the trade flourished, and by the year 380 a Roman historian reported that use of silk 'once confined to the nobility, has now spread to all classes without distinction, even to the lowest'. It had become so expensive, however, that it is said to have changed hands for its exact weight in gold, although some scholars have questioned this. Anyway Rome had to pay for it in gold, and as the demand continued to grow this began to have increasingly serious consequences for the economy. Much of the profit was going into the pockets of the middle-men of the now flourishing Silk Road rather than to its weavers, the 'Seres', in far-off China. As early as the first century AD, some enterprising Roman merchants had tried to by-pass the avaricious Parthians by sending agents to explore new routes, and by the second century bales of silk were already beginning to reach Rome via the sea route from India, thus making considerable savings. To try to preserve their valuable monopoly, the Parthian merchants spread abroad terrifying tales of the dangers of the sea journey, and we know that at least one Chinese mission to the West was successfully deterred by these.

But the Silk Road carried much else besides silk. The China-bound caravans were laden with gold and other valuable metals, woollen and linen textiles, ivory, coral, amber, precious stones, asbestos and glass which was not manufactured in China until the fifth century. Caravans leaving China bore furs, ceramics, iron, lacquer, cinnamon bark and rhubarb, and bronze objects such as belt buckles, weapons and mirrors. Not all these goods travelled the whole length of the Silk Road, many of the items being bartered or sold at the oases or towns on the way, where they were replaced with other goods, such as jade, on which a profit could be made further on. Indeed, few if any of the caravans ever travelled the whole way, some nine thousand miles there and back. Chinese merchants were never seen in Rome, nor

Roman traders in Ch'ang-an. For a start, it would not have been in the Parthians' interest to allow this. They had every reason for preventing the recipients of a commodity which passed through their territory from discovering its original cost. Moreover, it is unlikely that any pack animal – and these included camels, horses, mules, donkeys, bullocks and (in the Pamir and Karakoram passes) yaks – could have lasted this distance. The system was for caravans to take on fresh animals at regular staging posts. Even so, thousands of beasts were lost every year on this gruelling trail.

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This great trans-Asian highway carried yet another commodity which was to prove far more significant than silk. It was to revolutionise art and thought not only in China but throughout the entire Far East. This was the gentle creed of Buddhism, which preached compassion to all living creatures, an idea born in north-east India in the sixth century BC. King Ashoka's conversion in the third century BC had led to its adoption as the official religion of his empire which then comprised almost all of India. Buddhism first reached China, according to legend, as a result of a dream by the Han Emperor Ming-ti in the first century AD. In this he saw a golden figure floating across the room in a halo of light. Next morning he summoned his wise men and demanded an interpretation. After deliberating among themselves they decided that he must have seen the Buddha (for the new faith had already been heard of in China). An envoy was immediately dispatched to India to find out more about Buddhism and its teaching. After a long absence he returned to the Han court not only bearing sacred Buddhist texts and pictures, but also bringing with him Indian priests who had agreed to explain their religion to the Chinese emperor. Legend or not, it is certain that from about this time onwards missionaries and pilgrims began to travel between China, Central Asia and India. In addition to sacred books and texts they brought with them

examples of the art of the new religion, never before seen in China, which was to astonish and delight the aesthetically conscious Chinese.

The penetration of China by Buddhism not only gave the Chinese a new religion but, of central importance to this narrative, it gave to the world an entirely new style of art which has come to be known as Serindian. This term is coined from the two words *Seres* (China) and *India*. Logically it should have been simply a fusion of Indian Buddhist art and the art of contemporary Han China. It almost certainly would have been had it not been for the great Himalayan massif which so effectively isolated China from all direct contact with India. But faced by this impenetrable barrier, the gospel of Buddhism together with its art came to China by a round-about route, gradually absorbing other influences on its way. Its real point of departure was not India proper but the Buddhist kingdom of Gandhara, situated in the Peshawar valley region of what is now north-western Pakistan. Here another artistic marriage had already taken place. This was between Indian Buddhist art, imported by the ruling Kushans (descendants of the Yueh-chih) in the first century AD, and Greek art, introduced to the region four hundred years earlier by Alexander the Great.

The most revolutionary product of this Graeco-Buddhist, or Gandharan, school was the depiction of Buddha in human form, for it was the first time that artists anywhere had allowed themselves to show him thus. As a being who had ceased to exist, theologically speaking, by achieving Nirvana and thus escaping the endless cycle of rebirth, he had always been portrayed before by means of a mystical symbol such as a single footprint, a wheel, a tree, a stupa or Sanskrit characters. But the Gandharan Buddha is shown by sculptors with straight, sharply chiselled nose and brow, classical lips and wavy hair – all Hellenistic influences. Another obvious Mediterranean introduction is the diaphanous, toga-like robe he wears in place of the expected loin cloth. But his eyes are heavy-lidded

and protruding, the lobes of the ears elongated, and the oval-shaped face fleshy – all characteristics of Indian iconography. The stretched ear lobes symbolise Buddha's casting away of the heavy, jewelled and worldly earrings that he had worn as a wealthy prince before his conversion to a life of self-denial and teaching.

The first western travellers to reach the Gandhara region from India during the nineteenth century were astonished at the sight of this art, so different from 'the squat, contorted and grimacing forms' of the Indian religious art they were used to. In the rush to obtain examples of it for museums and collections dreadful and irreparable damage was inflicted on temples and sites there. The climate, moreover, had expunged the wall-paintings. For this reason the genius of these Graeco-Buddhist artists is known to us almost entirely through their sculpture, cut from the grey schist of the region.

It was this Gandharan art therefore which, instead of the original Buddhist art of India, travelled over the northern passes with the revolutionary message of Buddhism into Chinese Central Asia. From there it moved slowly eastwards along the newly founded Silk Road, following in the footsteps of missionaries, merchants and returning pilgrims, and gradually absorbing new influences, including those of China. The progress of the new religion through the oases around the Taklamakan desert resulted in a proliferation of monasteries, grottoes and stupas. These received rich patronage from the local ruling families and also from wealthy merchants anxious to invoke protection for their caravans or to give thanks for their safe return. Such gifts and donations were considered to be an act of merit which might enable the donor to escape further rebirth into this world. In many of the wall-paintings discovered in chapels and shrines along the Silk Road their donors or benefactors, both male and female, are depicted (as in Christian Renaissance works) in pious attitudes, and even by name.

As the new faith gathered converts, pilgrims in search of

its original sources, scriptures and holy sites set out westwards along the Silk Road. They crossed over the Karakoram and Pamir passes to Gandhara, by now a second Holy Land to the Buddhist faithful, and thence to India itself. Several of them left detailed descriptions of life in the by now flourishing oasis towns of the Taklamakan desert. One of the earliest of these travellers was Fa-hsien, who journeyed most of the way on foot. He left a vivid account of the Kingdom of Khotan, on the southern arm of the Silk Road, as he saw it in AD 399.

Fa-hsien's highly important travelogue, first translated into English in 1869, records: 'This country is prosperous and happy; its people are well-to-do; they have all received the faith and find their amusement in religious music. The priests number several tens of thousand.' He describes a monastery which deeply impressed him with its splendour, called the King's New Monastery, which had taken eighty years and three reigns to build. 'It is about two hundred and fifty feet in height, ornamentally carved and overlaid with gold and silver, suitably finished with all the seven preciousities. Behind the pagoda there is a Hall of Buddha which is most splendidly decorated. Its beams, pillars, folding doors and windows are all gilt. Besides this, there are apartments for priests, also fitly decorated beyond expression in words.' The seven preciousities he refers to were gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, ruby, emerald and coral.

Fa-hsien, who stayed at Khotan for three months, records that there were fourteen large monasteries in the kingdom 'without counting the smaller ones'. Before the door of every house stood a pagoda, 'the smallest of which would be about twenty feet in height'. The inhabitants, he found, were generous and hospitable. 'They prepare rooms for travelling priests, and place them at the disposal of priests who are their guests, together with anything else they may want.'

He describes a Buddhist festival in which the royal court took part. 'Beginning on the first day of the fourth moon, the main streets inside the city are swept and watered, and the

side streets decorated. Over the city gate they stretch a large awning with all kinds of ornamentation, under which the king and queen and court ladies take their places.' A procession followed, led by the priests of the monastery where the king had lodged Fa-hsien. A mile or so outside the city a float had been prepared 'over thirty feet in height, looking like a movable Hall of Buddha, and adorned with the seven precious things, with streaming pennants and embroidered canopies'. A figure of Buddha was placed on this 'four-wheeled image car', with two attendant Bodhisattvas and devas following behind. 'These are all beautifully carved in gold and silver and are suspended in the air,' Fa-hsien notes. The ceremony proceeded, and when the images had approached to within one hundred paces of the city gate the king removed his cap of state and donned new clothes. 'Walking barefoot and holding flowers and incense in his hands, with attendants on either side, he proceeds out of the gate,' Fa-hsien records. 'On meeting the images, he bows his head down to the ground, scatters the flowers and burns the incense.' The whole ceremony was spread over fourteen days, as each of the major monasteries had its own day for the procession as well as its own Buddha-bearing float. At the end of it the king and queen returned to their palace, and Fa-hsien continued on his pilgrimage via the Kingdom of Kashgar, where the northern and southern branches of the Silk Road reunited.

The Buddhist faith gave birth to a number of different sects or 'schools' in Central Asia. Two of these – the 'Pure Land' and Ch'an (or Zen) sects – eventually reached Japan where they still flourish today. It was ostensibly to search for the long-lost holy sites and relics of the 'Pure Land' sect that the Japanese Count Otani mounted his three expeditions to Chinese Central Asia. These were also to serve, some would maintain, as a cover for something altogether more secular.

But Buddhism was not the only foreign-born religion to reach China via the Silk Road. Two others, together with their art and literature, also established themselves around the Tak-

lamakan. These were Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism. The Nestorians, who denied that Christ could be simultaneously human and divine, were in the year 432 outlawed in the West at the Council of Ephesus. Many adherents of this sect fled eastwards to the Sassanian empire in what is present-day Iran. From there its merchant-missionaries carried its beliefs, and also its art, into China where the first Nestorian church was consecrated at Ch'ang-an in 638. It reached there via the northern branch of the Silk Road and Nestorian communities grew up in many of the oases. Numerous Nestorian manuscripts were discovered in the early years of this century both at Turfan and also in the walled-up library at Tun-huang. Because so many Nestorians were both merchants as well as missionaries, the creed eventually took root along all the caravan trails of Chinese Central Asia, also reaching southwards into Tibet. Neither the banning of all foreign religions from China in the year 845 under the T'ang Dynasty nor the bloody conquest of Chinese Central Asia by the followers of Mohammed in the eleventh century managed to extinguish it completely. Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller, found many Nestorians at Kashgar and Khotan when he passed by there at the end of the thirteenth century.

Manichaeism, born in Persia in the third century, was based on the opposing 'Two Principles' – Light (the spirit) and Darkness (the flesh). The disciples of Manes were ruthlessly persecuted by the Christians in the West at the end of the fifth century. Fleeing eastwards they eventually reached Chinese Central Asia and China proper where they became firmly established under the Sui (589–618) and T'ang (618–907) dynasties. Until the Germans began to unearth whole Manichaean libraries in the Turfan region, this creed appeared to have no literature, and was known chiefly by the violently hostile writings of its opponents, notably St Augustine.

The Uighur Turks encountered Manichaeism around the

year 762 when they pillaged Ch'ang-an, the T'ang capital, and became converts to it soon after. This outlandish creed, which borrowed from the conflicting beliefs of Christianity and Zoroastrianism, enjoyed its heyday in the tenth century. Thereafter it suffered a decline, eventually disappearing from China. In the western oases of the Silk Road it was violently extinguished and supplanted by the tidal wave of Islam, while further east it was replaced by Buddhism. Proof of the latter can be seen at Karakhoja, at the north-eastern end of the Taklamakan, where beautiful Manichaean wall-paintings were discovered by von Le Coq concealed behind later Buddhist ones. However, it was the art of Buddhism which left the most powerful and enduring monuments along the Silk Road, although both Nestorian and Manichaean artists and scribes also left behind them ample evidence of their own remarkable achievements.

The art and civilisation of the Silk Road, in common with that of the rest of China, achieved its greatest glory during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), which is generally regarded as China's 'golden age'. During the long periods of peace and stability which characterise this brilliant era, prosperity reigned throughout the empire. Its capital Ch'ang-an, the Rome of Asia and point of departure for travellers using the Silk Road, was one of the most splendid and cosmopolitan cities on earth. In the year 742 its population was close on two million (according to the census of 754, China had a total population of fifty-two million, and contained some twenty-five cities with over half a million inhabitants). Ch'ang-an, which had served as the capital of the Chou, Ch'in and Han dynasties, had grown into a metropolis measuring six miles by five, surrounded by a defensive wall. The gates were closed every night at sunset. Foreigners were welcome, and some five thousand of them lived there. Nestorians, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, Hindus and Jews were freely permitted to build and worship in their own churches, temples and synagogues. An endless procession of travellers passed through the city's

gates, including Turks, Iranians, Arabs, Sogdians, Mongolians, Armenians, Indians, Koreans, Malays and Japanese. Every known occupation was represented: merchants, missionaries, pilgrims, envoys, dancers, musicians, scribes, gem dealers, wine sellers, courtiers and courtesans. Dwarfs, gathered from all over Asia, were particularly popular among the Chinese as jugglers, dancers, actors and entertainers. Entire orchestras were brought from distant towns along the Silk Road and from elsewhere in Asia to entertain the imperial court.

A remarkably accurate record of the origins and occupations of these foreigners is found in the terracotta tomb figures discovered around Ch'ang-an (today called Sian) in graves dating from that era. Many of these *ming-chi*, or tomb furnishings, clearly depict foreigners whose race or country of origin scholars have been able to determine from their physiognomy or dress. In addition to the continuous procession of travelers, a cornucopia of luxuries and everyday goods emptied itself daily into the capital's many bazaars. Among the more exotic commodities, many of which arrived via the Silk Road, were cosmetics, rare plants (including the saffron crocus), medicines, aromatics, wines, spices, fragrant woods, books and finely woven rugs. In addition to the 'heavenly horses' from Ferghana, some of which were trained to dance to music, there were peacocks, parrots, falcons, gazelles, hunting dogs, the occasional lion or leopard, and that two-legged marvel (to the Chinese) the ostrich. These latter creatures, two of which reached China in the seventh century, were first known to the Chinese as 'great sparrows' and later as 'camel birds', a description borrowed from the Persians. One of these was reputed to be able to run three hundred Chinese miles in a day, and to digest copper and iron.

Despite their insatiable appetite for these exotic imports, the Chinese nevertheless regarded the foreigners who brought them as *Hu*, or barbarians. Indeed, such was their deeply rooted sense of superiority that they regarded all foreigners

with contempt. Gifts from foreign rulers were accepted by the imperial court as tribute and visiting princes and envoys received as vassals.

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Under the T'ang Dynasty the Silk Road may have enjoyed a golden age, but the fortunes of both the dynasty and its principal trade route were firmly bound together. When the dynasty began to decline, so too did the civilisation of the Silk Road. It was a process which was to end in the ultimate disappearance, together with their monasteries, temples and works of art, of many flourishing towns. Indeed, so completely did all traces of this once-glorious era vanish that it was not until the nineteenth century that it was rediscovered. The reasons for its disappearance are complex, and the process was spread over several centuries. But there were two principal causes. One was the gradual drying up of the glacier-fed streams which supplied the oasis towns. The other was the sudden arrival, sword in hand, of the proselytising warriors of Islam from far-off Arabia.

Ever since man first moved into the oases of the Taklamakan, back in the mists of Central Asian pre-history, it had been a struggle for survival. Not only against marauding Huns, Tibetans and others, but against death by thirst or starvation. Indeed, survival would have been impossible in this barren landscape but for the streams cascading down from the mountains and spilling into the desert. By skilful use of this water through elaborate irrigation systems the people of the oases had made themselves agriculturally self-sufficient. If, for whatever reason, this irrigation was neglected or interrupted for any length of time then the desert, ever waiting its chance, would take over. The oasis would be abandoned and before long all signs of human habitation would vanish beneath the sands. The town of Niya 'died' in this way at the end of the third century AD, when the Chinese temporarily lost control of the Silk Road. It was soon swallowed up by the Taklamakan.

But however wisely the inhabitants conserved and controlled their water supplies, the processes of geography were working remorselessly against them. High above them in the mountains, the glaciers which fed the streams bringing them life were shrinking. This process, which had begun at the end of the Ice Age, resulted in a steadily diminishing flow of water throughout the Tarim basin. Lou-lan, near Lop-nor, was once the terminal oasis of the Konche river, which was still flowing at the beginning of the fourth century. By the end of the third century, however, the oasis ceased to be occupied as the river gradually receded. Rivers also sometimes changed course or silted up, and sites had to be abandoned. One such oasis was Yotkan, the original site of ancient Khotan, which today lies buried under alluvium.

But the ultimate reasons for the disappearance of the Buddhist civilisation from the Silk Road were the decline and eventual collapse of the T'ang Dynasty, the victories of the Arabs to the west and the final conversion of the whole Taklamakan region to Islam. The advance of this new religion along the Silk Road spelled the death of figurative art – the portrayal of the human form – for this was anathema to Moslems. Many statues and wall-paintings were damaged or destroyed by these iconoclasts, while temples and stupas were left to crumble and vanish beneath the sand. By the fifteenth century, Islam had become the religion of the entire Taklamakan region. Under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) the Silk Road was finally abandoned when China shut herself off from all contact with the West, and this led to the further isolation and decline of the area.

In face of all this, only the strongest and best-watered of the oases survived, and they with a new religion possessing its own art and architecture. The others, with their rich and forgotten secrets, lay buried beneath the sands of the Taklamakan, where they were to remain undisturbed for so many centuries.