Heyday of the Silk Road

Richard von Glahn
UCLA
Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen coined phrase “Silk Road” to describe the trans-Eurasian route to China imagined by Greek geographers (who dubbed China “Seres,” or “Land of Silk”)
Nomad Confederations, 800 BCE-100 CE

Herodotus’s description of the Scythians of Southern Russia is remarkably similar to Sima Qian’s account of the Xiongnu on the northern frontier of Han China.
Belt Buckle with Wrestlers

- Subject matter and style are typical of Scythian art of West Asia; also found in Siberia and Korea
- From northern frontier of China, 2nd century BCE
Invasion by Xiongnu confederation first mentioned in Chinese records in 201 BCE.

Early Han rulers favored policy of appeasement (peace through marriage)　和親

In 133 BCE, Emperor Wu turned instead to a policy of aggression and conquest.

A branch of the Xiongnu later crossed the steppe and invaded Europe (= “Huns”)

Xiongnu 匈奴
Xiongnu Acknowledgement of Han Sovereignty

- Top: Bronze seal issued to Xiongnu chief as mark of identification when the Xiongnu came to trade
- The legend reads, “The Xiongnu of Han have ‘returned to righteousness’ (i.e., recognize Han sovereignty) and will long remain kinfolk of the Han”
- Bottom: Inscribed roof tiles from Xiongnu palace proclaiming long life for the Chinese “Son of Heaven”
Han Silk Armband

- Polychrome silk armband with animal and cloud motifs, recovered from a Central Asian tomb (1st-3rd century CE)
- Chinese legend reads: “The five planets all appear in the east; auspicious for China”
Map of Han and Kushan Empires, c. 150 CE (showing international trade routes)

Kushan Empire flourished in 1\textsuperscript{st}-3\textsuperscript{rd} centuries CE
Kushan Bronze and Gold Coins

Coins struck by the Kushan kings imitated Greek and Persian models.

Bronze coins first issued in early 1st century CE.

Gold coin issued by Kanishka I (c. 127-150 CE) shows image of king and Bactrian inscription “king of kings” on face, and the Iranian sun-god Mithra on the reverse.
Begram Treasure

Among the goods excavated at Begram in Afghanistan (believed to be a Kushan royal treasury) were:

(1) Indian ivories (left)
(2) painted glass goblets depicting youths gathering dates, from Egypt (top right)
(3) a bronze paperweight in the shape of the Greek goddess Athena (bottom right)

and also Chinese lacquerware (not shown)
Fragment of Cotton Cloth from Niya

Printed cotton fabric combines motifs of the Greek goddess Tyche holding cornucopia, a Chinese dragon, and paws and tail (upper right)—probably Hercules’s lion.

Niya briefly had a Chinese garrison in Han times.
The Spread of Buddhism from India to East and Southeast Asia
Scene is flanked by Kushan (left) and Indo-Iranian warriors. Women in balconies listening to sermon perhaps are donors. Stone pedestal, Afghanistan, 2nd-3rd century.
Hariti & Pancika

- Hariti figures in Buddhist mythology as a mother who ate her children until converted by the Buddha
- Figures and dress almost wholly Greek in style
- Hariti (at right) holds cornucopia (attribute of Tyche, Greek goddess of fortune)
- Gandhara (Afghanistan), 3rd-4th century
Monumental Buddha, Bamiyan (Gandhara)

- This monumental sculpture (4th-5th century) stood 175 feet high
- After the decline of Kushan in the 3rd century, this region became more directly influenced by India, though Greek artistic elements survived
- Destroyed by Taliban regime in spring 2001
Yungang 雲岡 Rock Temples

Building of Buddhist temples at original Northern Wei capital begun in 460 as an act of penance for having persecuted Buddhists
Sogdian & Tang Silverware

§ Left: silver bowl made in Iran or Sogdia in 5th-6th c, excavated at Silk Road oasis town of Yanqi (Sogdian inscription identifies female owner)

§ Right: silver bowl with gilt decoration of two lions (8th century), excavated near Tang capital of Chang’an
The Main Routes Across Eurasia

- Silk Road
- Ancient site
Sogdian Silk Brocade

Woven in the Sogdian town of Zandan, these “Zandaniji” silks have been found throughout Eurasia, in European churches (as in this example) and the Dunhuang caves.

Iranian lion motif, but silk yarn and dye pigments probably from China.
Sarcophagus of Yu Hong (d. 592)

- Yu, a Turk, served as governor of Taiyuan under the Northern Qi
- Sogdian-style sarcophagus features scenes of an Indian hunter riding an elephant (left); a Turkic hunter astride a camel (center); and an Iranian-style king feted with food offerings and music (right)
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Silk as Currency

Now snapped in two, this bolt of silk (measuring 50 cm wide) was used to pay Chinese soldiers at the remote Loulan outpost.

Silk used in payment was made in plain weave with no design.
Sasanid Silver Coin
Excavated from Turfan

Silver *drachm* issued by Sasanid ruler Khosro II (r. 591-628) shows king with winged crown on face and Zoroastrian fire altar flanked by attendants on reverse.
Turfan Contract for Loan of Silver Coins

Moneylender Zuo drew up this contract in 668 for a loan of 20 silver coins to a local farmer to cover the costs of spring planting.

Interest rate was set at 2 coins (10%) per month.

Farmer pledged personal possessions and vegetable garden as security.
Tang Kaiyuan Coin

First issued in 621, the *Kaiyuan tongbào* 開元通寶 coin was the first imperial coin in China not named after its weight. This coin was found at Kucha, a region rich in copper mines, where the Tang government had established a mint. Reddish tinge is typical of high copper content of Kucha coins.
An Lushan Rebellion (755-763)

- Reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756): unprecedented prosperity & cultural efflorescence
- An Lushan 安祿山, Tang general of Sogdian descent, rebelled against Tang in 755
- An Lushan was assassinated in 757; but the rebellion severely crippled the Tang dynasty
Uighur Imitations of Tang Coinage

Top: Coin issued by Uighur khan Boquq (r. 795-808) with Uighur inscriptions; reverse states “by order of he who rules the empire”

Bottom: Uighur coin excavated from Gansu with blank reverse; inscription reads “permitted to circulate by divine decree”