

Silk Roads – what Silk Roads? Two Exhibitions, London and Venice

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I

Silk Roads are the topic of the moment in medieval history, and the history of other periods as well. Peter Frankopan's *Silk Roads* was a phenomenal publishing success, though it is fair to say that it is less a history of silk roads than a history of the world that places the Eurasian landmass at its centre.¹ Frankopan has also been the presiding deity of the Cambridge Silk Roads seminars, which for several years have brought speakers from as far away as China and the central Asian republics, as well as much nearer home, to highly appreciative audiences in King's College, Cambridge in person and via Zoom. Very many of the seminars have concerned the early history of the peoples, towns and trade routes of a vast swathe of territory from Ukraine to Japan. There are Research Fellows in Silk Roads Studies at King's, and University College London has an Emeritus Professor of Silk Roads Archaeology. As for books about the Silk Roads aimed at general audiences, there is an abundance of choice among competing titles by such authors as Valerie Hansen, from Yale and Frances Wood from the British Museum.² This is not to mention a stream of excellent scholarly studies, such as the outstanding mapping through documents from the Dunhuang caves and elsewhere of what Xin Wen of Princeton University has called *The King's Road*.³

¹ P. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: a New History of the World* (London, 2015).

² Among general histories of the Silk Roads published in this century: F. Wood, *The Silk Road* (London, 2002); J. Tucker, *The Silk Road: China and the Karakorum Highway* (London, 2010); Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (New York and Oxford 2010); Xinru Liu, *The Silk Roads: a Brief History with Documents* (Boston 2012); V. Hansen, *The Silk Road: a New History* (New York and Oxford 2012); J. Millward, *The Silk Road: a Very Brief Introduction* (Oxford 2013); G. Torr, *The Silk Roads: a History of the Great Trading Routes between East and West* (London, 2021).

³ Among monographs and edited collections published this century: V. Elisseeff, ed., *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce* (London 2000); P. Kalra, *The Silk Road and the Political Economy of the Mongol Empire* (London and New York, 2018); R. Spengler III, *Fruit from the Sands; the Silk Road Origins of the Foods we Eat* (Berkeley, 2019); M. Biran, J. Brack, F. Fiaschetti, eds., *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, and Intellectuals* (Berkeley, 2020); H.K. Chang, *Civilizations of the Silk Road* (London and New York, 2023); Xin Wen, *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Making of the Silk Road* (Princeton, 2023).

All this reflects the increasing attention of medieval historians to global themes. Traditional emphasis on Britain and western Europe among medieval historians in the Anglophone world has increasingly been challenged by those who take an interest in long-⁴distance connections, by land and sea; that means trade, migration, sometimes (as in the Mongol period) empire-building, though other historians prefer a comparative approach where one sets side by side the ‘feudalism’ of, say, Japan and that of medieval France. But connections are what stir the imagination, with mental images of intrepid traders (thinking in the first place of Marco Polo) crossing the Gobi Desert, or risking the open sea to reach India from Egypt. These connections still tend to be compressed into a single concept, that of the *Seidenstraße* or Silk Road, identified by Baron von Richthofen and other nineteenth and early twentieth-century explorers who traversed the vast spaces of Eurasia in search of the ancient traces of Buddhist monks and Sogdian traders.

The Silk Road has also been revived in the minds of modern politicians. The ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ of the People’s Republic of China very consciously echoes the familiar story of routes encompassing Eurasia in the early Middle Ages, and again in the era of the so-called *pax mongolica* attributed to Chinghiz (Genghis) Khan and his thirteenth century successors. In April 2024 UNESCO hosted a meeting on ‘Intercultural dialogue and mutual learning: shared horizons’ which included a panel devoted to ‘Silk Roads: A Movement of Cultural Dialogue and Exchanges’, linked to a very beautiful series of volumes devoted to the ‘Thematic Collection of the Cultural Exchanges along the Silk Roads’; these are published jointly by UNESCO and the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou.⁵ Not surprisingly the meeting in Paris was addressed by a Chinese government minister. Naturally the famous Ming voyages

⁴ P. Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: the Search for the Lost Treasures of Central Asia* (London, 1980).

⁵ F. Zhao and M.-L. Nosch, eds., *Textiles and Clothing along the Silk Roads* (Paris and Hangzhou, 2022); E. Paskaleva and M. Turner, eds., *Cultural Networks and Sea Ports on the Maritime Silk Routes* (Paris, 2025).

led by Admiral Zheng He at the start of the fifteenth century featured in the discussion, along with consideration of places along land routes through the heart of Asia.

2024 happens to mark the 800th anniversary of the death of Marco Polo, so it hardly comes as a surprise that the Italians, passionate lovers of historical commemorations, organised a prestigious display of more than 300 objects mainly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries devoted to *I Mondi di Marco Polo* in the Doge's Palace, which coincidentally overlapped by a few days with an even more ambitious exhibition at the British Museum containing a similar number of objects simply entitled *Silk Roads*. This, however, concentrates on the years from around AD 500 to 1000, which is often seen as the period when east-west travel along a 'Silk Road' was rendered easiest. (A third, much smaller, exhibition in the British Library will be discussed later). Both major exhibitions raise a fundamental question. When, as in the case of the British Museum exhibition, we are told of links stretching all the way from Japan to Ireland (with side-tracks all the way to Madagascar and Mali), what sort of cultural and economic links are we examining? Sometimes commercial and cultural links have done much to mould a civilization – the impact of the Greeks on the Etruscans is a good example. But the impact of distant cultures takes many forms. Truly massive amounts of blue-and-white porcelain produced in Jingdezhen reached early modern Europe from China, and a passion for *Chinoiserie* eventually took off, but in many ways this was an artificial conceit and, apart from introducing tea-drinking to Europe, these imports did little to mould European society. This question about what sort of relationship one is trying to identify is never answered by either Silk Road exhibition and leaves the visitor with a somewhat bitty impression. Both exhibitions offer fascinating and sometimes magnificent objects, but do they tell a coherent story?

II

The London exhibition is aimed at the widest possible audience: it features on massive London Underground posters which convey a somewhat ambiguous message. They portray a

camel caravan plodding across a black desert landscape illuminated by a golden sky, with the legend ‘Journey beyond sand and spices’. In many ways, this image displays what the exhibition is trying not to be – not a retelling of romantic tales of intrepid travellers enduring heat and snow to carry silk and spices across the vast space between China and western Asia. The word ‘beyond’ in the advertisement is perhaps intended to convey the sense that the image of a desert caravan is indeed inadequate, just as the use of the plural *Roads* in the title of the exhibition emphasizes that the history of these trans-Eurasian connections cannot be reduced to a single route, a sort of precursor of the Trans-Siberian Railway, fixed in space and spanning not just thousands of miles but thousands of years. The ‘Silk Roads’ are a much more complex phenomenon, a jumble of trade routes by land and sea that have come and gone, and what was in place around AD 500 is different from what was in place five hundred years later, as kingdoms came and went, as religious movements expanded and contracted, as disease (such as the Justinianic plague) exploded and evaporated. Nor is it all about silk, though one of the most eloquent objects in the exhibition is a single bolt of plain silk, which could be used as currency in wide areas of China and Inner Asia; equally eloquent is a caption offering a Tang dynasty list of prices for horses, expressed in bolts of silk (22 for a superior Turkic gelding). Bolts of silk were also used by the Jewish merchants of medieval Egypt as currency reserves, and their remarkable documents, mostly preserved in Cambridge, also appear in the London exhibition.

The deficiencies in boiling everything down to a static ‘Silk Road’ are explained very well in the rich and handsome catalogue; but on the floor of the British Museum it is passed over very rapidly with some big, bold statements at the start of the exhibition, without any proper explanation of how and why the term ‘Silk Road’ came into use – though it is made abundantly plain that the story is by no means all about silk, despite the presence of remarkable

silk objects in the display.⁶ (Moreover, it is not really a catalogue but a series of very worthwhile essays illustrated by the objects that are on show – a consolidated list would have been helpful). But the exhibition does start with a well-posed question. The small figure of the Buddha that originated in the Swat Valley, Pakistan, somewhere around AD 600, but was found on an island site in Sweden, speaks for routes that brought it across the Asian landmass, through mountains and along rivers, though knowing when it arrived in Scandinavia is different to knowing roughly when it was made. An intelligent guess is that it was already a fairly old object when a Swedish Viking obtained it, perhaps after a trip down the river system of western Russia and across the Caspian to the silver-rich lands of Persia. Saying that is to sound a warning: objects, such as Roman coins found in Thailand, could take centuries to move, being passed from hand to hand, lost, found, stolen, forgotten, traded. The question is whether we are looking at the drip of a stalactite or the flow of a stream. Addressing this question, the editors of the catalogue express themselves carefully if somewhat vaguely: ‘those operating along the networks may not have travelled very far themselves, but what they handled could cross the known world.’ And, it needs to be added, how exotic objects were seen is not easy to decipher: much of the time they conveyed no intelligible information about distant, unknown worlds, but were simply bizarre curios.

The idea of opening out the long and vast shed-shaped Sainsbury exhibition centre, without the usual internal walls and twists and turns from one section to another, is intended to make a point: the exhibition deals with one connected space, and something that originated in Iran or Afghanistan could end up in the astonishing collection of the Shōsō-in Imperial Treasury in the ancient Japanese capital at Nara, containing 9,000 objects that date back as far as the eighth century, though, in accordance with the practice of the Imperial Household, a replica of a Sasanian glass bowl is on display rather than the original object. Helpful in understanding

⁶ S. Brunning, Luk Yu-ping, E. O’Connell, T. Williams, eds., *Silk Roads* (London, 2024).

how objects moved are the images of foreigners, including Chinese figurines (one of which appears to portray a black slave) and a bowl from the extraordinary Belitung wreck, of the ninth century, showing a curly-headed individual. If anything, though, the exhibition underplays the role of foreign merchants, who in that period were reaching China by land and sea, including many Persian and Arab merchants, and some Jewish ones arriving from as far west as Aden. Helpful too is the attention to the fluctuating religious identities of early medieval Eurasia: Daoism in China, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism in the Sogdian world, Buddhism among the Uyghurs. Extraordinary survivals from the Dunhuang caves, where 70,000 mainly Buddhist manuscripts were discovered, illuminate the story of the eastward spread of Buddhism; painted silk hangings brought from Dunhuang by the intrepid Aurel Stein are one of the high points of the exhibition, even if they are already part of the British Museum collections. Particularly poignant is a battered image of the Buddha from a cave at Bamiyan, the site where in 2001 the Taliban demolished two gigantic statues carved into the rock. As the captions point out, the survival of Buddhist monuments in what became primarily Muslim territory had until then been tolerated by Muslims for many centuries.

This is a good point at which to say something about the third exhibition, limited to just fifty items, held simultaneously in London in the British Library, though it seems to have been conceived independently, and neither exhibition directs visitors to the other show. *A Silk Road Oasis: Life in Ancient Dunhuang* is concerned with just one place along routes leading towards China in the east, the empire of Khotan in the west and India and Tibet to the south, in roughly the same period as the British Museum exhibition. Remarkably, nearly all the objects on display are handwritten or printed texts from Dunhuang, including the oldest complete printed book to survive anywhere, a scroll in Chinese dating to AD 868.⁷ Although the vast majority of documents are Buddhist texts, such as the will of a dying nun, Manichaean Sogdians, Daoist

⁷ The catalogue is by M. Doumy, *A Silk Road Oasis: Life in Ancient Dunhuang* (London, 2024).

Chinese and others also appear in the exhibition. Dunhuang was not just an oasis, as the title of the exhibition suggests, but a cross-roads. Evidence for trade links in all directions and for the rich mixture of cultures, religions and languages in and around Dunhuang is presented using just a tiny selection from the tens of thousands of documents on paper and other materials brought back to London from Dunhuang by the irrepressible explorer Aurel Stein, most notably those found in one of the caves outside the town (many of which were elaborately decorated), known as Mogao Cave 17.⁸ Excerpts in a variety of languages including Tibetan and Old Turkic are not merely on display but can be listened to in the original. More information about the town itself would have been welcome, but one of the great virtues of *A Silk Road Oasis* is that it does not overwhelm. As other museums such as the National Gallery have also discovered, a small exhibition built around a single carefully defined topic is often more effective in conveying a coherent message than a head-spinning blockbuster.

Dunhuang flourished when the land routes were accessible. Arguably, despite the pieces from the Belitung wreck, the exhibition in the British Museum underplays the importance of the ‘Silk Route of the Sea’, though the organisers have taken care to include material from Burma and India and to mention the trade in East Indies spices such as cloves.⁹ The great strength of *Silk Roads* is the display of objects from the Far East and central Asia (for which the Uzbek government deserves thanks – the massive fresco from the Hall of the Ambassadors at Samarkand is part of a series commemorating links to Tang China and is truly impressive). The important role of Sogdian merchants in early medieval long-distance trade is all-too-little known, despite the impressive scholarship of Nicholas Sims-Williams, Britain’s resident Sogdianist: Samarkand is not just a memorial to the reign of Timur Leng (Tamerlane) at the

⁸ Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils*, pp. 156-76; Xin Wen, *King’s Road*, pp. 19-38.

⁹ See e.g. R. Ptak, *Die Maritime Seidenstraße: Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vorkolonialer Zeit* (Munich, 2007); for a later period, J. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300-1800* (Singapore, 2013); and more generally my own *The Boundless Sea; a Human History of the Oceans* (London and New York, 2019), pp. 124-296

end of the Middle Ages but to much earlier pioneer traders present in China, Persia and across great stretches of central Asia.

As the exhibition turns to the Islamic world its coverage becomes skimpier, even more so once it reaches western and northern Europe, where the choice of objects sometimes says little about long-distance connections. There is some interesting material drawn from the Cairo Genizah documents, mainly preserved in Cambridge, about the Jewish merchants of Fustat (Old Cairo), where, as it happens, enormous quantities of Tang pottery have been found, illustrating commercial links all the way from China to Egypt. The Fustat Jews traded deep into the Indian Ocean, but nothing much is said about their trade towards Tunisia and Sicily, even as far as Spain, which is odd, since something is made of the rich cultural life and relatively easy religious co-existence that characterised al-Andalus (probably a corruption of the word Atlas, whom the Greeks placed on the Rock of Gibraltar). And they were particularly active in the trade in silk, though most of it was apparently produced in Mediterranean lands such as Sicily. Just as the many thousands of Dunhuang manuscripts open up the life of Buddhist and other communities in central Asia, the enormous collection of Cairo Genizah documents, generally later in date, open up the life not just of Egyptian Jews but of a much larger world. Both astonishingly rich collections were found at around the same time, and it can be argued that their dispersal was also their salvation, as they could easily have fallen victim to war, fire or wanton destruction.

Apart from one or two brief mentions in the catalogue, the Khazars, a Turkic people whose empire dominated the lands north of the Black Sea and the Caspian around AD 900, are strangely absent from the exhibition – an odd geographical, ethnic and religious gap. The Khazar rulers appear to have coped with their Christian, Muslim and pagan neighbours by adopting the remaining Abrahamic religion, Judaism, though the catalogue is somewhat dismissive of reports that they did so, which come from Arab as well as Jewish sources as well

as numismatic evidence. They are an important part of the story of Eurasia. Viking, or as the Byzantines called them, Varangian, traders and warriors knew them well, as the Khazars sat astride some of the key river routes that led down to the Black Sea and the Caspian, which offers a good opportunity to shift attention to the exhibition in Venice and the routes across Eurasia through what had once been Khazar territory.

III

This is an area of the world that is mentioned at the start of the Venetian exhibition on *The Worlds of Marco Polo*, since it was from Soldaia (Sudak) in Crimea, in 1260 or 1261, that Marco's father and uncle set out on their initial journey that took them to the Mongol court. According to Marco Polo's account, they had moved deep into the Black Sea from Constantinople in the hope of increasing their profits, at a time when the Venetians were beginning to penetrate the waters of the Black Sea, which, somewhat oddly, they called 'the Greater Sea', *il Mare Maggiore*. The Venetians were slow to act despite having free access ever since when Constantinople fell to the armies of the Fourth Crusade, along with their own navy, in 1204. There is a long-standing assumption that Chinghiz Khan's conquests opened up the trade routes across Asia, re-establishing the 'Silk Road' all the way to the court of Kubilai Khan in what is now Beijing; and Crimea is often cited as the new and glittering hub of Italian trading networks that linked Genoa and Venice to Quanzhou and Hangzhou, importing silk and spices all the way from the Far East via the Black Sea. But the picture is much more complex. After carrying precious stones to their trading destination at Sarai, the capital of the Mongol Golden Horde that lay on the lower Volga, the Polos had hoped to return to Venice; but the hostility of the restored Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos to the Venetians during the early 1260's meant that they, unlike Michael's Genoese allies, could not cross the Black Sea safely. Instead, they found themselves propelled eastwards, and decided to join a group of emissaries who were heading from the Mongol court in Persia to Kubilai Khan's court at Karakorum in

Mongolia. This was a lucky chance, as their journey was already hampered by the break-up of the Mongol Empire and conflict between rivals for its leadership: the Mongol rulers of Persia, the Golden Horde, China and factional groups all contended for domination of the now fractured Chinghizid empire. If Chinghiz Khan and his immediate successors has created a *pax mongolica* across Eurasia, it was of short duration and, one might suggest, it was in many areas (such as Baghdad) the *pax* that follows devastation rather than beneficent rule: ‘they make a desert and call it peace’, in the famous words of Tacitus.

When the Polos set out on their second expedition, accompanied by young Marco, they took a route through Armenia and Persia that avoided the Black Sea, which was fast becoming a Genoese lake; Marco reached the court of Kubilai Khan in 1274. After his long stay in China he returned to Venice by following the sea-route from China to the Middle East.¹⁰ Kubilai had plenty of enemies in central Asia who resented his growing success in drawing China under his rule, and from 1269 he faced serious opposition in central Asia from none other than his own cousin Khaidu. As Morris Rossabi has written, ‘raids and actual battles between two of the four main Mongol-controlled territories characterized the last quarter of the thirteenth century’.¹¹ The land routes across Eurasia remained insecure as one civil war after another made them impassable.¹² Why then did the Florentine merchant Pegolotti, in his *Libro della Mercatura* of the 1340’s, talk so enthusiastically about the ease of travel across Asia all the way to China? The answer must be the same as the answer to the question why he wrote about the taxation arrangements in the crusader city of Acre, destroyed by the Mamluks half a century earlier: he was uncritically recycling older material. But his short description of the route towards China

¹⁰ Among many accounts, V. Bianchi, *Marco Polo: Storia del Mercante che Capì la Cina* (Bari, 2007); J. Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven, 1999); also the controversial F. Wood, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* (London, 1995), but see now S. Lieu, ‘Marco Spurio? Marco Polo on the Church of the East in China’, in E. Hunter, ed., *Šālmūtā Šāpīrtā: Festschrift for Rifaat Y. Ebied in honour of his Contribution to Semitic Studies presented for his 85th Birthday, 29th June 2023* (Piscataway, 2023), pp. 329-60.

¹¹ M. Rossabi, ‘The Yuan dynasty and the sea’, in A. Dunlop, ed., *The Mongol Empire in Global History and Art history* (I Tatti Research Series, vol, 5, Florence and Rome, 2023), p. 158.

¹² Jong Kuk Nam, ‘Rethinking trade between Europe and the Mongol realm during the *pax mongolica*’, *ibid.*, pp. 167, 172.

has ever since deluded historians who imagine that he painted a picture of the world as it was in his own day.

Once again, therefore, it is a mistake to exaggerate the solidity and permanence of the land routes across Eurasia. The organisers of the Venetian exhibition have understood that point, but the display still leaves an impression of a greater flow of people and goods from east to west than is warranted by the evidence. It is true that in the early fourteenth century members of the Vilioni family were living in Yangzhou, where a surviving gravestone records that Caterina, daughter of Domenico, Vilioni died in 1342; the family was probably Venetian.¹³ Around the same time a member of the eminent Loredan family of Venice set out on a trading expedition to China; and, in a different direction, a Venetian trading expedition was launched towards Delhi.¹⁴ No one can doubt that a few brave souls made extraordinarily challenging journeys in the hope of breaking into the rich markets of the Far East.

If, on the other hand, we look at the goods that were reaching the Genoese and (later) Venetian trading stations in the Black Sea, notably at Caffa in Crimea and Tana on the Sea of Azov, what is most striking is how humdrum they were: plenty of grain arrived in Caffa, to be sent on to Constantinople or Trebizond and, at times of shortage, all the way to Italy; wax also arrived, always in strong demand in western European churches; so did a great many Circassian slaves, many of whom were sent to Egypt, where the fittest were recruited into the sultan's guard as Mamluk soldiers, while a large number of Tatar women arrived in Italy as domestic slaves. As for luxury goods, we see very much less; even the large quantity of sturgeon flesh and caviar that was traded in and beyond the Black Sea, especially in Lent, was much less of a luxury than nowadays. Those luxury items that have been found in Crimea – fragments of fine ceramics, for instance – almost certainly arrived via Egypt and Syria in part-payment for slaves.

¹³ K. Ilko, 'Yangzhou, 1342: Caterina Vilioni's passport to the Afterlife', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2024), pp. 1-36.

¹⁴ Wood, *Silk Road*, pp. 125-6; R. Lopez, 'Venezia e le grandi linee dell'espansione commerciale nel secolo XIII', in Fondazione Giorgio Cini, *La Civiltà Veneziana del Secolo di Marco Polo* (Florence, 1955), pp. 50-62, 64-82.

Any spices that reached the warehouses of Genoese and Venetian merchants arrived by a similar route. However, the miniature, independent, Greek empire of Trebizond, in the south-east corner of the Black Sea, did act as a backdoor to Persia, and there were Italian merchants and even friars living in Tabriz.

It was from the Italian trading bases in Tabriz that the finest silk reached European markets. Persian, not Chinese, silk was the best that was available, because the Chinese simply did not send their best silk westwards. It is thus difficult to accept the interpretation one historian has offered of an apparently curious phenomenon: ‘Chinese silk textiles were available at the fairs of Champagne in 1257 for less than the price of silks manufactured in Persia.’¹⁵ Far from demonstrating a massive flow of Chinese silks along open roads, this fact indicates that the Chinese did not export their best silks to the west. As for the failure of the Italians to maintain such limited contact as they possessed with China after the first half of the fourteenth century, this reflected the awareness that it was quite simply more practical to obtain rare eastern luxuries through Muslim intermediaries with well-established links to the Far East, by way of the maritime routes. These, stage by stage, brought goods from the Far East and the Spice Islands past India, up the Red Sea and into accessible markets in the Middle East, notably Alexandria; and, as will be seen, Christian Laiazzo, on the south-east coast of modern Turkey, was another backdoor that for a time provided reasonably easy access to Persian and other Asian goods.¹⁶

The best way to view the 309 objects in the Venetian exhibition is by way of its excellent catalogue, because the actual *mostra* provides textbook examples of how not to display objects.¹⁷ Since the catalogue provides a permanent record of the exhibition accompanied by

¹⁵ Millward, *Silk Road*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Cf. the brilliant but over-stated arguments of B.Z. Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis: Genoese and Venetian Men of Affairs and the Fourteenth-Century Depression* (New Haven, 1977), pp. 118-32.

¹⁷ G. Curatola and C. Squarcina, eds., *I Mondi di Marco Polo: il Viaggio di un Mercante veneziano nel Duecento* (Venice, 2024); also published in English: *The Worlds of Marco Polo* (Venice, 2024).

valuable essays, and since it is available in either Italian or English, the present tense is generally used here even though the Venice exhibition closed only a few days after the London one opened. The actual exhibition proved to be a prime example of what can only be described as incompetent presentation; no doubt the curators were as frustrated as visitors by the decisions of the design team. Darkened rooms (understandably, when they contain textiles or other light-sensitive objects) were only part of the problem. Captions in Italian and English in black print on a dark gold background are hard to read at the best of times, and when they are very low down they are virtually useless. Relevant passages from Marco Polo's book of travels inscribed on the wall in gold letters prove only partly legible when the lighting only illuminates the middle of the passage. Although the complex history of the text of Polo's book is well explained, the display of a large number of medieval copies of Polo's book is mainly of interest to specialists, and more can be made of the importance of Pipino's abridged Latin translation, which at some stage became known to Columbus – an opportunity, perhaps, to obtain material from the Biblioteca Columbiana in Seville Cathedral.¹⁸

The exhibition moves from place to place along the routes that Polo would have followed on his way to and from China, rather as the London exhibition moves from place to place from Japan to western Europe. The high point of the Venetian exhibition is surely the section devoted to Armenia, whose role in long-distance trade towards the interior of Asia was crucial at this time. Goods transited through Armenian lands as they passed from Tabriz to Trebizond or from Tabriz to the Mediterranean, because in the days of Marco Polo Laiazzo (Ayas) on the shores opposite the important port of Famagusta in Cyprus hosted Italian merchants, who were showered with privileges by the Christian kings of Cilician Armenia. Wonderful sculptures, notably a relief showing an Armenian ruler in Persian or Turkic costume

¹⁸ Or indeed the MS of Pipino at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, MS 109/178, and MSS in the Bodleian and the British Library: C. Dutschke, 'The truth in the book: the Marco Polo texts in Royal 19.D.i and Oxford, Bodley 264', *Scriptorium*, vol. 52 (1998), pp. 278-300.

shooting an arrow at a wild animal, speak for the meeting of cultures within the thirteenth-century Caucasus. In addition to a rich collection of items from the National Museum in Yerevan, the exhibition contains some of the most impressive Armenian manuscripts of this period, preserved in the extraordinary library of the Armenian monks who still live on the island of San Lazzaro within the Venetian lagoon. Further along, some dazzling examples of Persian silk textiles are another high-point of the exhibition.

Ultimately, though, this, like the tail end of the London exhibition, becomes a display of somewhat disconnected objects that illustrate the luxurious aspects of life along the so-called Silk Roads. It is obvious (and stated) that these were the rare possessions of elites, if and when they turned up far from their place of origin. To hear more about the daily life of merchants and indeed the urban proletariat, attracted to cities such as Chang'an in the early Middle Ages or Hangzhou in the late Middle Ages, would fill out the story both exhibitions seek to tell. Local trade mattered a great deal too, and there is a wider debate to be held about the relative importance of local and long-distance trade in pre-industrial economies. In addition, the maritime routes deserve more attention. The truth is that the maritime routes were able to carry infinitely larger cargoes than camel caravans, extremely long though many of these were – shipwrecks reveal that vessels could convey half a million pieces of pottery, used as ballast but also for sale – and the prosperity of the maritime kingdom of Śri Vijaya in early medieval Sumatra, and of Singapore and its successor, Melaka (Malacca) in the late Middle Ages, was built on the almost constant flow of goods along the 'Silk Route of the Sea'.

Both major exhibitions contain superb material, but there are both gaps and side-tracks in the stories that they tell. The myth of the Silk Roads is challenged, but with insufficient vigour. On the other hand, one can only congratulate the curators of both exhibitions for avoiding the current tendency towards virtuous preaching and finger-wagging. A rich past is explained in its own terms, as it should be.