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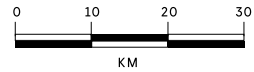


NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN HEMISPHERES

# LONDON, FLORENCE, HORMUZ, SAMARKAND, HANGZHOU, XI'AN

THE THOUSAND AND ONE STORIES OF THE SILK ROUTE

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Had Shakespeare not written him into life, most of us would know nothing about Henry V. We might have heard in school that the young king invaded France in 1415. But if we know that he married the daughter of the French king Charles VI, it is because Shakespeare wrote Catherine of Valois into a comic scene in which her maid teaches her English to prepare her for Henry's advances. The people knew Henry as a soldier, and had Shakespeare walked into Westminster Abbey, he would have seen Henry's popular "funerary achievements" of saddle, helmet, sword and shield. But everyone would have missed the choicest detail: the shield is lined with blue figured silk – from China.

When did that silk get to London? We know Henry was crowned in 1413 and died in 1422, but it has been suggested that the shield actually belonged to his father. In which case, the silk would have reached England in the 14th century. Let's start there and ask, who else at this time in

Europe received silk from China? Quite a number, it turns out.

The Church was one. For priests and deacons holding Mass, what better way to glorify God than to wear the finest material money could buy: Chinese silk? A church in Stralsund, a German port on the Baltic Sea, has preserved a dalmatic, or liturgical vestment, from the 14th century. A local tailor made it for the church deacon by sewing together five pieces of fine silk, known at the time as "cloth of gold". Its broad back displays vine tendrils twining around large lotuses and peonies. On the hem, peacocks face the viewer, while on the sleeves, phoenixes take flight. (Phoenixes were for womenswear in China, but the deacon wouldn't have known that.) It's a complicated textile, its surface stitched into patterns using fine threads of gilded leather. Like Henry's silk, the fabric is not traceable. It came from the East, probably all the way from China, although the gold thread may have been added in the Persian

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zone of the Mongol empire. Italians called it *panni tartarici*, Tartar (or Mongol) cloth.

In Italy, the finest 14th-century silk is not in cloth but in paint: Silvestro dei Gherarducci's *Madonna of Humility with the Eternal Father, the Dove of the Holy Spirit and Eight Angels*<sup>1</sup>. Italian silk weavers made a good substitute, but this looks like the real Tartar thing. Gherarducci, trained as a miniaturist at the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence, painted his *Madonna of Humility* there in the 1370s. He has Mary holding Jesus on her knee while he reaches for her tiny breast, though the child is more interested in looking at us than his mother. Everyone – except God – in this exuberant outburst of golden hues is wearing the same Chinese silk woven in an elaborate plant motif. The pattern is so precise that Gherarducci must have seen the cloth in order to paint it so well. It is impossible to say whether Mary's blue cloak with the golden edging is also Chinese silk, though as God is in a matching outfit, it is hard to imagine Gherarducci putting his models in anything less than the finest, and therefore most expensive, fabric the convent owned.

Silk in Florence, silk on the shores of the Baltic, silk on the battlefield. How did these fabrics reach Europe? As most ancient silk has decayed and fallen apart, so have our records. Like the tailor of Stralsund, we can only sew together the remnants that reach us. For that task, a good person to ask is Venice's best-known traveller. Marco Polo knew a lot about silk.

To approach the great port of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf by land, you descend gently from an arid upland onto a broad plain crisscrossed with streams. The landscape is dotted with an abundance of date palms and animated by brightly coloured parrots and other birds. This is how Marco Polo describes coming upon the "great and splendid city" of Hormuz. After two days crossing this plain, this "great centre of commerce" with

its "excellent harbour" heaves into view. "Merchants come here by ship from India," he writes, "bringing all sorts of spices and precious stones and pearls and cloths of silk and of gold and elephants' tusks and many other wares." Hormuz was a clearing house for these silks and cloths of gold, where importers sold them to buyers who then "distributed them to customers through the length and breadth of the world."<sup>2</sup> Polo was impressed with the city, but was keen to leave before the heat arrived. When the sirocco blows, it "withers up everything", forcing people to retreat to harbours outside the city and immerse themselves in ponds, right up to the neck. Try to bury someone who has died out in this hot wind, Polo learnt, and their limbs come away from their parched torsos when you pick them up.

When Polo visited Hormuz in the winter of 1292, he came not from the land side, as his description suggests, but from the sea – aboard a Chinese ship in the service of Khubilai Khan, Great Khan of all the Mongols and emperor of the Yuan Great State in China. With his father and uncle, Polo had spent over fifteen years in the Great Khan's service. All three were on their way back to Venice, where Polo would weave his experiences into memoirs, *Le Devisement du monde*. Part romance, part tourist guide, the book mixes personal experience with the sort of local information he thought a traveller to China should know. For every city he enters, he rattles off a list of what is made there and what you can buy. Almost every list highlights silk. In Zhuozhou you can find "fabrics of silk and gold" and in Taiyuan "a plentiful supply of silk", he writes; and in cities along the Yellow River you can expect "ginger and silk in great abundance" and, further north, "cloth of gold and silken fabrics of every sort". The grand old city of Xi'an, considered the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, boasts "great quantities of silk" as well as "cloth of gold and silken fabrics,"

1. Silvestro dei Gherarducci, *Madonna of Humility with the Eternal Father, the Dove of the Holy Spirit and Eight Angels*, 1370–75, tempera on panel, 164 × 90 cm. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

2. Marco Polo, *The Travels*, tr. Ronald Latham, Penguin Classics, 1958.







he continues. In the former Song-dynasty capital of Hangzhou, what amazed him wasn't just how much silk there was, but how widely it was worn by men and women alike. "They wear silk all the time," he exclaims.

Hangzhou had been a major centre of the silk trade for centuries before Polo showed up, sending its fabrics across China and to the rest of the world via its downriver port at Gaopu. There is little in Gaopu today that recalls maritime trade, but the recent excavation of a 14th-century government silk warehouse further east in Ningbo provides hard evidence from the Chinese end of the international trade in silk. Polo just tells us that Gaopu is "frequented by great quantities of shipping with valuable merchandise from India and elsewhere coming in". But goods arriving from India on Chinese ships meant Chinese goods going out, including silk. Polo reports that Chinese ships laden with goods regularly visited the Malabar coast of India in the summer. Securing their beached ships with large wooden anchors, the crews unloaded their merchandise and loaded new cargo, staying no more than a week for fear of plunderers. From there, merchants from Malabar and Gujarat picked up the Chinese goods and carried them to Hormuz. In his own tourist guide, a Chinese soldier who reached Hormuz in 1411, a century after Polo, told his readers that the two bulkiest commodities unloaded at Hormuz for shipment to the Levant were bundles of blue-and-white porcelain and rolls of "coloured satins and thin silks" – both from China.

You have heard of the Silk Road belting the waist of Eurasia, but Marco Polo hadn't. He had taken the overland route to China as a seventeen-year-old, but no one told him it was the Silk Road. The idea that there was such a thing came in 1877 from the German geologist, Ferdinand von Richthofen, who journeyed overland to China many more times than the Polos. He decided that the

corridor he travelled needed a name and called it Seidenstraße. Before that, no one thought to give the ever-shifting web of routes along which camel trains plodded a single identity. Goods left China, were traded and trans-shipped from oasis to oasis, city to city, from Xi'an to Samarkand to Aleppo, and then shipped out around the Mediterranean. But none knew this was the Silk Road. As our Henry V is Shakespeare's Henry V, so our Silk Road is von Richthofen's Seidenstraße.

Even in the best of times, overland transport is precarious. The goods in transit only reach their intended destination if brigands or sultans judge it more profitable to tax them rather than plunder them. Given how difficult it is to maintain security across empty regions, the chances of Polo's route staying open were not good. Which is why we find him in Hormuz. It was the only way home.

The Polos had wanted to return to Venice for some time, but Khubilai declined their request. Then an opportunity arose. One of Khubilai's obligations as Great Khan of the Mongols was to provide royal kinsmen with wives. In the 1280s, the Il-khan, his grand-nephew ruling what is now Persia, sent envoys to Beijing to ask for an imperial bride. Khubilai selected the teenaged Kökečün for this service and ordered her to be escorted west across the continent. But, by 1290, conditions on that route had deteriorated. And just then, Marco Polo returned from a mission to India, regaling his fellow courtiers with his adventures. The Il-khan's envoys heard his stories and decided to ask Khubilai to let them take Kökečün by sea. When he agreed, the Polos volunteered to join the expedition, and Khubilai let them go.

The voyage was a large operation. A fleet of fourteen ships set sail in January 1291 for the Indian Ocean. At each port where the expedition anchored, Khubilai's ambassadors called on the local ruler to



acknowledge Khubilai as his superior. Who could say no? If the purpose had solely been to deliver the princess, the voyage should have taken a year at most, but with other diplomatic tasks along the way, it took two. Was there Chinese silk in the holds? Most certainly. The hundred women in the princess's entourage needed fabrics for their clothes, and the emperor's envoys needed luxurious silk brocades as gifts for compliant tributaries. Silk was the voyage's assets coffer. The expedition carried two years' worth of provisions, but cash was also needed along the way, and silk was an international currency.

The overland route from China never closed permanently, yet good relations between regional potentates, dubbed Pax Mongolica, could unravel in a flash. When it was possible to pack silk onto camels, you did. When it wasn't, you had to innovate: either find a new route or, if you had the capital, send your goods by sea. The Silk Road was a simple idea but a complex reality. As Gherarducci painted silk on Jesus, the Ming dynasty tightened its borders. By the time the Stralsund tailor was stitching his pieces of silk together, the only reliable source for *panni tartarici* was Persia.

Odd, then, that the artisan lining Henry's shield should use Chinese silk, but kings must display only the best. It would have been a nice touch if Shakespeare had mentioned this detail, but he didn't. The only reference to Henry's shield is in Act III, when Pistol, a friend of Henry's in his dissolute youth, states that "sword and shield, in bloody field, doth win immortal fame".<sup>3</sup> That would do for Henry, but not for Pistol and his friends, who spend most of the scene in question wishing they were in a pub drinking beer.

When it came to bloody fields and immortal fame, *Henry V* was no match for *Tamburlaine the Great*,<sup>4</sup> the wildly popular play that Christopher Marlowe wrote a dozen years earlier to fictionalize the

life of Timur. Timur ruled Mongolian West Asia by straddling the Silk Road at Samarkand when Henry was just a lad. According to a Spanish envoy, González de Clavijo, sent to Samarkand in 1404, Chinese silk was the city's most prized import. Marlowe follows suit in his play, wrapping the throne of the king of Persia in silk, having Timur promise to dress his future queen in the fabric, and imagining the wealth of Damascus by picturing the townspeople walking around "in silk and cloth of gold" – more *panni tartarici*.

Marlowe caught Timur's ruthlessness just right, but knew nothing about the bold innovations he used in order to coerce Samarkand into becoming the greatest city between Tabriz and Beijing. Need to increase production? Bring in 150,000 artisans. Short of affordable silk? Transplant weavers from Damascus. Short of food and raw materials? Surround the city with vineyards, melon patches and cotton plantations. Nowhere for merchants to lay out their wares? Broaden the main street, vault it with a roof, and punch in windows at intervals to let in the light – and get it done in twenty days. And when people grumble that you have knocked down their homes to do this, win back their hearts by paying them generous compensation.

This Samarkand blossomed after Marco Polo's time, though in any case his Silk Route took him much further north, and then his return voyage dumped him in Hormuz. Hormuz was not Samarkand, but it still had something that made Polo marvel. He calls it a *ventier*. Every house is fitted with one of these ventilators "to catch the wind," he writes. All the householders had to do was to turn the contraption "to face the quarter from which the wind blows and let it blow through the house. This they do because they cannot endure the overpowering heat. But no more of this now,"<sup>5</sup> he concludes, and sets off for Tabriz before the heat can catch up with him.

3. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, c. 1599–60, Act III, Scene II.

4. Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, 1590.

5. Marco Polo, *op. cit.*





































