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Introduction

The Silk Road

Large cargos of Indian pepper, pearls, perfumes, and ivory reached the Roman empire in the first century. Roman amphoras, coins, and gems unearthed in India, Thailand, and Vietnam show the other direction of the exchange (fig. 1).¹ Chinese silk and Indian cotton preserved in Palmyra, glass bowls and ceramic jugs of western origin in southern East Asian graves, and the stunningly global collection of objects discovered in two sealed rooms in Begram (Afghanistan) give us an idea of the enormous distances across which goods traveled in ancient Afroeurasia (fig. 2).² Mobile populations of the steppe also played their part. Kurgans (burial mounds) as far apart as Mongolia and the northern Black Sea contain stylistically similar funerary objects as well as Chinese silk, mirrors, and Mediterranean styles of jewelry.³ Afroeurasian connections have led to an upsurge of research in recent years. Archaeological evidence has increased, and research techniques have improved. Yet the explanation that is offered for this truly “global” movement of goods by land and by sea tends still to be rather simple: “the Silk Road.”

The Silk Road is made the reason why people and precious objects traveled over very long distances, just as it is said to account for the distribution of spices, foods, coins, medicines, and disease across Afroeurasia.⁴ It is seen as the route that enabled the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and religions among people living far apart. And it is taken to explain migration, cosmopolitanism, and the ambition of people to cross forbidding deserts, forests, and mountains. Even climate change, it seems, traveled along the Silk Road.⁵ World historian Craig Benjamin writes that the Silk Road “shape(d) the future course of global history.”⁶ And Peter Frankopan in his bestselling book uses the Silk Road to retell world history.⁷ The Silk Road has become the story of global connections before globalization. It embodies the romantic vision of a common past that we wish to lie at the heart of human history.⁸



FIGURE 1. Roman gold coin pendant from Khlong Thom, Thailand, mid- to late second century CE. Suthiratana Foundation. Photo © Brigitte Borell



FIGURE 2. Egyptian enameled glass goblet from Begram, Afghanistan, early to mid-second century CE. National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. Photo © Thierry Ollivier

Yet the Silk Road never existed. It is the invention of nineteenth-century geographers who traced Eurasian routes attested in ancient texts.⁹ They had not yet seen archaeological remains that both prove and complicate the idea that trade routes connected China, India, and Europe in antiquity. Han Chinese historiography has much to say about diplomats traveling between the Han court and what they called the Western Regions, where they learned about traders dealing with India, Parthia, and the Roman empire.¹⁰ Greek and Roman writers knew about “silk people” (*seres*) who lived far away beyond the known world.¹¹ They had also heard about a city called Thina, from which silk yarn and cloth were shipped to ports in the Bay of Bengal.¹² The Alexandrian astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy mentions a path that ran from the Euphrates past the “Stone Tower” to a town called Sera, the capital of the *seres*.¹³ Wherever precisely this path may have been, traders knew of it.

Testimonies for Afroeurasian long-distance contacts extend over many centuries. Palmyrene mummies wrapped in decorated silks and other precious textiles are roughly contemporary with complaints in Roman literature about the degeneracy of emperors and women adorning themselves with the diaphanous material of the *seres*.¹⁴ Yet precisely how the silk and silk-mixes that ended up in the graves of Palmyrene nobles, many showing traces of prior use for other purposes, can be connected with the appearance of *serica* (silken materials) of only supposedly Chinese origin in Rome or Alexandria is unclear.¹⁵ It is equally unclear how the large amounts of silk that Han emperors sent as tribute to steppe chiefs reached the Parthian kings who are said to have waved silken banners in triumph over the Romans in the battle of Carrhae.¹⁶ More obscure still is what any of this has to do with the craving of Han emperors for exotic animals, with Roman traders arriving at the Han court, and with Xinjiang manuscripts recording trade between China, Central Asia, and India in medieval times.¹⁷ Mass-produced silk sent as tribute to steppe chiefs; incidental journeys to and from the Han court; high-quality textiles of multiple origins and uses in Palmyrene graves; *serica* of unclear origin mentioned in Roman literature; a reference by a first-century Egyptian author to a city, somewhere beyond India, called Thina—the capital of the *seres* known to Ptolemy in the second century—and another, two hundred years later, to a “very long road,” used “repeatedly” by merchants, that ran via two great mountain ranges and the Stone Tower to the land of the *seres*; Roman coins and gems in India, and some imitations of them in Thailand and Vietnam: all these have merged into the imagining of a global trade network.¹⁸ Granted, ancient historians have to live with patchy evidence; but the Silk Road lacks any chronological cohesion, political context, or, most importantly, economic history.

When the term “Silk Road” was invented in nineteenth-century Europe, it soon came to stand in general for Chinese relationships with Asia, Egypt, and Europe in premodern times.¹⁹ Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) went on to represent it as a network of trade routes that supplied the west with commodities from the east.²⁰ Although von Richthofen was the first European geographer to visit China, and was well acquainted with the translations of ancient texts, he was not a historian. His exploration of ancient trade routes between East Asia and the Mediterranean was related more closely to his argument that the geographically isolated China could be linked by rail and sea to Europe.²¹ A generation later Albert Herrmann (1886–1945), with more translations of Chinese texts at his disposal, mapped the commercial route network in greater detail.²² The Swedish explorer Sven Hedin (1865–1952) discovered the first archaeological sites and manuscripts in the Tarim Basin (present-day Xinjiang) and disseminated the paths of the Silk Road to a wide international audience.²³ At that time, the Silk Road imaginary merged with international politics and with a fascination for the ancient languages that had spread across Central Asia.²⁴ Through the thousands of manuscripts that found their way into European museums, the Silk Road was identified as the road that Buddhist missionaries and merchants had used between India and China. In combination with Han Chinese reports about a diplomatic silk trade, the multilingual manuscripts of Xinjiang were the tangible proof that the Silk Road had existed, linking metropolitan China via the Tarim Basin with Central Asia, India, and the empires further west. Many cities in Xinjiang, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and southern Kazakhstan nowadays regard themselves as cities on the early Silk Road. Apart from boosting tourism, the Silk Road provides many post-Soviet states with a sense of historical significance and national pride.²⁵ The Karakoram highway, also called the China–Pakistan Friendship Highway, was built as a reincarnation of the ancient Silk Road, serving to reinforce Pakistan’s cultural and economic orientation toward China.²⁶ The Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) in China, dubbed the “New Silk Road,” seized on the international allure of the ancient one, whose great antiquity conjures up a deep history of Afroeurasian economic connectivity for everybody’s profit.²⁷ Five thousand kilometers of Silk Road comprising thirty-three archaeological sites between China and Kazakhstan were declared UNESCO World Heritage in the wake of the BRI.²⁸ Dozens of museums and exhibition centers in Gansu province (northwest China) now transmit the idea of the Silk Road to a Chinese and international public:²⁹ it has become a tool for rewriting the history of China as the driver of global peace, prosperity, and trade. Around the world, Chinese historians and archaeologists are engaged in tracing Chinese material remains that were supposedly distributed via the ancient route.³⁰

Scholars are well aware that the Silk Road was never just a trade route. Nor did it start in China and end in North Africa or Europe. It was a multidirectional exchange system formed by many smaller exchanges, and a great variety of actors.³¹ World archaeologists use it as a shorthand term for global approaches to culture exchange in order to overcome archaeologies that cut different parts of Africa, Europe, and Asia into separate civilizations.³² Others deploy the Silk Road as a metaphor for ancient global developments, such as the dispersal of genes, plants, and foods.³³ Yet paths, routes, and the question of when the Silk Road “opened” continue to linger behind much valuable research. Despite extensive Bronze and early Iron Age exchange networks,³⁴ most scholars date the so-called opening of the Silk Road to the late second century BCE, when Zhang Qian was sent to the Western Regions by Emperor Wu.³⁵ Zhaoyu Wang has pushed the date forward to 36 BCE, when two Han generals suppressed a Xiongnu revolt and finally concluded a lasting peace treaty with them, allowing trade along the northern steppe route to flourish.³⁶ The widely acclaimed Silk Route historian Xinru Liu suggests, by contrast, that organized trade networks had already emerged in the third century BCE, when Qin empire-building led to confrontations and exchange with the Xiongnu along the new northwestern frontier.³⁷ Nicola Di Cosmo, another specialist in Eurasian history, takes a similar stance, but dates the “opening” to the fourth century BCE, when the Warring States expanded into the Ordos plateau.³⁸ Archaeologist Lucas Nickel observes that not a single Chinese artifact from before the first century CE has come to light in Central Asia.³⁹ And sinologist Valerie Hansen cautions that very few Chinese goods reached further than Central Asia before the fourth century CE.⁴⁰

The “silkroadification” of Afroeurasian history has provoked critical responses in many disciplines.⁴¹ Sociologist Tim Winter calls the Silk Road a meta-narrative that “folds together Athens with Nara, Kenya with Korea, Oman with China, regardless of whether there were any substantive historical connections between such places.”⁴² The idea, he claims, had sneaked—or worse still, had been deliberately inveigled⁴³—into daily language as a geographical image of global interconnectivity before colonialism. Without much grounding in detail, the Silk Road arranged people and their practices over territories and maps with the purpose of reconstructing the past in the service of the present and certain futures.⁴⁴ The Iranist Khodadad Rezakhani has pointed to a further ideological underpinning of Silk Road research: emphasizing China and Rome (and the latter’s eastern Mediterranean ports) as the start and end points of trans-Eurasian trade, it ignored the vast Middle Eastern landmass and the role of its peoples in the history of Eurasia.⁴⁵ World historian David Christian and, more recently, Ravi Mishra have deplored the neglect of mobile populations in the history of Silk Road exchange.⁴⁶ Anthropologist

Magnus Marsden stresses, moreover, that Silk Road narratives, concentrating on China, Rome, and India, have overemphasized state-driven, state-centric, and state-controlled connections at the cost of addressing lived forms of local exchange and trade connecting Afroeurasia. Such narratives have perpetuated rather than overcome ideas of civilizations as self-contained entities with only their centers interconnected. Afroeurasia was in actuality rather a space of shifting boundaries and local interactions; a mobile world of fluid connections and entanglements.⁴⁷

As an approach to ancient economic history, the Silk Road paradigm is, frankly, useless. Fired by German colonial aspirations in the nineteenth century, it suggests that routes and road construction stimulate economic development and trade. In contemporary China, it intimates a Chinese origin of free trade and peaceful global relationships that led, and will lead in the future, to prosperity and progress across the world.⁴⁸ Its continuing allure far beyond China, meanwhile, seems to lie in its unique combination of conceptual fuzziness and concreteness with regard to routes, people, and commodities.⁴⁹ Yet it has nothing to say about why particular routes, if we can trace them at all, were frequented by particular people, goods, and ideas, nor does it tell us anything about different intensities, or changing directions and distances, of their movements. Standing as the unquestioned origin of global trade and exchange, it has stifled the search for other concepts that better explain transimperial connectivity. Made up of a handful of nodes of consumption and production connected by caravans and ocean routes, “the Silk Road” has erased alternative histories of Afroeurasian exchange.

Beyond the Silk Road

Going beyond route-based thinking, this book investigates local developments and relationships that made goods move over long distances. Silk Road historians rightly insist that exchanges across imperial boundaries were immensely important for the development of ancient empires. The acquisition and display of foreign objects, foreign human beings, and exotic animals by kings and emperors were hardwired into imperial self-representation. Transimperial exchange generated large amounts of income for governments in the form of taxes and tribute, just as it did for local producers, financial intermediaries, and transport businesses. Whether in the form of prestige goods for kings and courts, or commodities affordable by a wider range of people, transimperial goods contributed to imperial consumption, identity, conceptions of space, and the transformation of empires over time. Rather than being an exotic side show, transimperial exchange was essential for the

formation of imperial elites and religious communities, for health systems and construction work, and for the provisioning of armies and garrisons along frontiers. In order to understand the economies of the ancient world, we need to understand their transimperial or Afroeurasian connections and interaction.⁵⁰

The story of Afroeurasian connectivity cannot be reduced, however, simply to one of routes crossing continents and oceans. We need to understand how goods and people reached these routes, what political circumstances contributed to their use and regular maintenance, what exactly people exchanged across imperial boundaries, and what forms of consumption propelled particular goods over large distances. Not only do these questions require a deep dive into imperial politics and local economies, but they also create quite a number of methodological problems. First of all, and for academics most irritatingly, there are very uneven kinds and quantities of evidence available for the vast space of the Afroeurasian region.⁵¹ Second, and no less problematic, ancient long-distance exchange does not fit easily into our modern concepts of global economics and trade. And third, widely differing research traditions have shaped our knowledge on the spaces that contribute to the story to be told here.⁵² I will briefly expand on each of these problems.

Quite considerable quantities of literary texts from Han East Asia and the Greco-Roman Mediterranean have been transmitted over the centuries, in addition to documents on papyri, parchment (dried animal skin), and bamboo slips that have survived in the ground thanks to specific environmental circumstances. These two imperial zones are also documented by an ever-increasing amount of archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic material. Though in total the sources available are much fewer than for more recent times, they allow us to research in detail the economies not just of imperial courts and capitals, but also of wider geographical spaces and social groups. We can gain an understanding of economic differences between various parts of the empires, and of relationships between the hegemonic centers and peripheries, as well as processes of integration and resistance. In the Indian subcontinent, too, considerable bodies of literary texts, inscriptions, and archaeological material are available for research. Yet there is a great discrepancy between what is discussed in the highly normative literary texts representing ideals of statecraft and social behavior, and archaeological and epigraphic evidence that represent historical practice.⁵³ Considerable methodological problems are involved in relating these normative texts, usually compiled and reworked by ancient scholars and monks over many centuries, to specific historical circumstances. Yet other empires, such as those of

Central Asia and Iran, have left behind very little written material. Much of what we have consists of legends on coins, in addition to contracts or receipts on parchment or stone, mostly written in the administratively dominant, but not everyday, Greek language. Exceptions are the Aramaic Astronomical Diaries and administrative documents that have survived from Babylonia and cover our period up to the early centuries of the Common Era.⁵⁴ These offer a wealth of information about the political history, administration, and economic development of this central region of the Seleucid and Arsacid empires. But they provide only a partial view on the development of the much wider space of the empires of which they had become a part. Archaeological research has dramatically increased our knowledge of Central Asia and Iran in recent years, however. We now know much more about agrarian and non-agrarian economic strategies, irrigation, settlement patterns, and interaction over long distances. Yet especially for the Central Asian empires, we lack basic information about the principles of government that guided these activities, and how they changed over time. Worse still, many mountain regions, forests, steppes, and deserts whose populations participated in the production and exchange of the goods that ended up in elite households or graves have left us no written expression at all. In order to avoid privileging China and Rome at the two ends of the Afroeurasian landmass, we need approaches that allow us to encompass less well-documented spaces in our global research program.

The methods and approaches developed in economic history over the past two hundred years, moreover, do not provide good fits for investigations of ancient economic exchange, let alone its transimperial dimensions. There were no global markets, no currency exchange systems, no global cultures of consumption, and no media of long-distance communication comparable to those of more recent times. There were also no state economic policies such as protectionism or customs regimes designed to create comparative advantages among competing nation states. Ancient empires regarded themselves as universal total worlds with, in principle, no rivals.⁵⁵ Imperial coinages, monetary zones, and marketplaces did exist in most locations under discussion in this book, but coined money and markets were not the only media of exchange and places where transactions took place. Especially over long distances, diplomatic gift-giving, tribute relationships, and state systems for supplying armies or imperial workforces could outweigh the importance of, or interrelate with, transactions in free markets. Though armies and migrant workers formed only small portions of ancient populations as a whole, they prompted more infrastructural change than private exchange could ever stimulate. Imperial coinages were minted mostly for

state purposes and lost their monetary value in transimperial exchange. They could be accepted instead as precious-metal pieces or desirable objects to be displayed and treasured; but in such cases they changed their meaning and function. Merchants, itinerant workers, and artisans could profit from routes and infrastructures built and protected by states and armies; yet often their journeys relied more heavily on local knowledge and pathways traced by locals. And private traders were rarely fully independent; their success was dependent, rather, on local social networks or dependency structures, or embedded in royal, religious, or governmental networks. Approaches that ignore these complications are bound to fail to grasp the nature of ancient transimperial exchange.

Differing national and disciplinary traditions of scholarship, furthermore, have focused on widely different questions and interpretive models.⁵⁶ Scholars of Greco-Roman economies have long looked for markets (Western-style), in order to identify their potential or limitations regarding economic development and growth in the Greek or Roman Mediterranean worlds. Development economics or market theories have guided most of this research over the past 150 years. Asian economies, by contrast, have been approached through the neo-Marxist theory of an “Asiatic mode of production,” which suggests that Asian imperial governments deployed highly centralized and authoritarian economic strategies which involved restriction of movement and high tributary claims from populations, especially if agriculture was based on state-sponsored artificial irrigation. This contrast in approaches to Greco-Roman and to Asian economic principles fostered an overstated bias against “oriental” economies, regarded as exploitative and stagnant, as opposed to free market economies developing dynamically in the Mediterranean.⁵⁷ Indian scholars, moreover, have debated whether imperial state-formation or rather more local processes drove economic development in the subcontinent. Scholarship on China has often foregrounded an imperial bureaucratic state that allowed little space for markets or private trade to develop.⁵⁸ Researchers on Egypt and the Near East under Greek and Roman rule, meanwhile, grappled with the Asian–Mediterranean contrast by proposing either grand transformations from vertically integrated “command” to market economies, especially under Roman rule, or saw no scope for transformation at all, even when these spaces were taken over by Mediterranean conquerors.⁵⁹ A global perspective on ancient economies requires us to go beyond such academic meta-narratives. What might appear as significant differences in different parts of the Afroeurasian world may simply result from the long shadows of academic traditions that still guide contemporary research. How, then, is it possible to investigate transimperial exchange “beyond the Silk Road”?

A New Approach to Ancient Economies from East Asia to North Africa

We need a new approach that takes into consideration all these problems without ignoring the considerable advances made in ancient economic history over the past decades. I will make four suggestions, as follows.

(1) Empire was the political form under which economies expanded in most parts of the Afroeurasian world between 300 BCE and 300 CE. To be sure, elites or “peers” had interacted over long distances in the centuries before large empires formed, and significant spaces that participated in transimperial exchange during the imperial period did not form empires themselves—most notably, Southeast Asia and the southern Indian subcontinent including Sri Lanka, the southern Arabian Peninsula, and the western Eurasian steppe.⁶⁰ Yet with the growth of empires long-distance exchange notably increased. They brought along widespread administrative languages, a greater standardization of means of exchange and legal systems, concentration and redistribution of resources, a growth of consumption centers, and usually some imperial ideology that fostered the convergence of cultural behavior and consumption habits. Ancient empires differ from both pre-imperial interaction spheres that can be traced archaeologically, and modern nation states that tend to provide the foil for our imagination of ancient states. Ancient empires were highly composite political organizations, usually established by violence, and held together by fiscal and military systems that drew local populations into the imperial regime. The expansion of physical infrastructures, their protection and maintenance, access to adjudication, common coinages, shared religious practices, and shared cultures of consumption are all typical consequences of imperial consolidation over time.⁶¹ Many subjected elites participated in and profited from the imperial regime and its military.⁶² Their participation allowed them not only to maintain some degree of local power and standing, but also to acquire or retain material and symbolic means by which they nurtured their own networks of followers and dependents.

Yet the degree of imperial integration and the institutions that fostered integration varied immensely. State integration and penetration of imperial institutions grew quite considerably in the Roman and Han-Chinese empires, while they were much weaker in the Hellenistic and South Asian empires. For Central Asia we lack sufficient information to address these issues at all. Nevertheless, the ability of kings, emperors,

and courts to harness large amounts of resources led in all imperial spaces to large and rich imperial centers such as Chang'an, Rome, Alexandria, Seleucia, Pataliputra, Taxila, and possibly Begram (ancient Kapsi or Alexandria-of-the-Caucasus) that became outsized nodes of consumption.⁶³ Imperial armies and cavalries swallowed large amounts of financial and other resources, as well as propelling money, humans, and infrastructural development across the imperial spaces. Imperial mobility also affected neighboring states.⁶⁴ Through a complex interplay of imperial mobility consumption, politics, fiscal administration, military service, and various kinds of ideologies and religious cults that established social cohesion, shared pasts, and common gods, empires developed highly layered relationships and connections of at the same time political, economic, military, and ideological kinds.⁶⁵ Emperors, courts, and governments also developed complex relationships with the constituencies over which they ruled, and with allies and collaborators at closer and further distances.

(2) Network approaches thus provide better tools for analyzing imperial and transimperial relationships than do market- or state-centered theories of economic development and transimperial connectivity. Within network approaches we do not need to distinguish categorically between commodities exchanged via markets and those moving via other channels, a distinction that often cannot be made on the basis of the evidence. Nor do networks require state structures and a legal framework in order to function, and markets are just one of the many means whereby their participants interact with each other.⁶⁶ Networks are driven by imperial or private interests, and the relationships that strengthen them can be commercial, political, or social, and in many cases combine more than one of these motivations. Within a network it is also not of prime interest whether a person acts for his or her own profit (e.g., as an independent trader) or for someone else's (e.g., as a state or commercial agent). At the most general level, networks allow goods and people to move. They are webs of relationships, deployed for particular purposes between people operating at varying degrees of social and geographical distance from each other.⁶⁷ Put a little more technically, a network ties together actors (the nodes of the network) that aim to achieve certain goals with various networking tools (the links between the nodes).⁶⁸ Network actors can either be individuals or groups, or more abstract entities such as armies, temples, courts, or cities. Tools of interaction may be physical, such as physical infrastructure or transport animals. Or they may be institutions such as diplomacy, monetary exchange, formal dining habits, or religious rituals.

Markets can also be networking tools, both as physical places and as institutionalized systems of distribution that under certain circumstances can connect actors very effectively.

Networks benefit from coordination and standardization processes. Network actors can coordinate their interests better if they share standards: common media of exchange, the same language, common laws and behavior, or common consumption habits.⁶⁹ State-issued coinages or administrative languages and law are powerful means of coordination and standardization, but they are not the only ones. Network actors can develop their own network standards, such as sets of norms shared by particular religious or social groups: they can fix exchange rates by regular practices, or languages that are relatively easy to learn or widespread in their sphere of communication, and they can form trust and friendship networks where state protection is absent. Such network standards interact with imperially set standards in many interesting ways. Networks, moreover, are multicentered, which adds to their usefulness. Information and knowledge can travel via third and fourth parties, and thereby link distant actors who do not know each other personally. Thus, for example, market information can be disseminated through a network of people who simply trust the network, and thereby allow information to travel over long distances and across political borders to actors who otherwise would not trust, or even have access to, distant information. Networks have therefore also been called “bridging devices” as they create bridges between relationships for different primary purposes (political, economic, military, or religious), and at different geographical scales (local, regional, or long-distance).⁷⁰

(3) The intersection of economies of different scales is of prime importance for the development of transimperial exchange: local, regional, imperial, inter-, and transimperial.⁷¹ Farming, pastoralism, fishing, or a mixture of these in tightly knit social networks were the realities of most people in the ancient world. Tenancy and sharecropping arrangements, moreover, were the dominant relationships through which the fruits of local production were absorbed into larger, regional, economic circuits. When local and regional economies became part of empires, surplus, formerly channeled into local and regional tribute relationships, became part of larger imperial economies.⁷² Local kings and elites, previously the main beneficiaries of taxes and rents, remained powerful actors under these circumstances. They either collaborated with the imperial regimes and negotiated some share, or they maintained their local networks in opposition to the imperial regime. Networking tools and actors allowed local, regional, and imperial economies to interrelate and were

critical for the movement of goods across the borders of direct imperial control.

While local and regional surplus fed into wider imperial economic circuits, imperial expansion affected local and regional economies as well. Military campaigns, diplomatic missions, migration, and settlement along military frontiers all contributed to the expansion of knowledge that fed back into other parts of the empire. One crucial condition for globalization in the modern world has been said to be “glocalization”: the integration of faraway knowledge and behavior into local behavior and experiences.⁷³ Similar processes can be seen in the ancient world. For example, the pillar- and rock inscriptions that the Mauryan king Ashoka erected in places as far away from his capital as Kandahar (in present-day Afghanistan) and Karnataka deep in the south of the sub-continent propelled knowledge of the king to these places. Conversely, Ashoka’s missions to the Hellenistic kingdoms made these realms familiar to those who gazed on the inscriptions in their local environments. Geographical treatises and maps of imperial worlds, sponsored by courts and kings, brought home the vastness of the imperial space that reached the outer limits of the inhabitable world. Yet they also showed that these spaces could be penetrated by travel and trade.⁷⁴ Imperial expansion moved the limits of the known world further outward, and imperial literature intimated that both traders and conquerors had discovered the edges of the world. Archaeology and documentary records amplify the picture. They show that these edges were vibrant frontiers where worlds came together, fostering transimperial economic activities and interaction.

(4) Frontiers were thus central to transimperial exchange. Geographically and politically, frontiers develop typically between or along the boundaries of direct imperial control. Ecologically, imperial frontiers often coincided with ecotones between socio-biological habitats: littorals, piedmonts, desert and steppe fringes. Rivers, coasts, or mountains, just like political frontiers, were seldom simply dividing lines or stopping points.⁷⁵ All such frontiers have been conceptualized as spaces of complex interaction, where people of different political and economic systems meet, form bridges, and get entangled.⁷⁶ Imperial frontiers tend to be spaces of violent confrontation at first, usually created by imperial conquest or intrusion. But rarely do such confrontations remain violent forever. Unless either side is set on eliminating the other, or withdraws to other places, a compromise must be reached. Metropolitan authors tend to construct frontier situations as an encounter with odd, barbarous, or even deadly “others,” thereby articulating their complete

misunderstanding of social environments that they have never encountered. Yet frontier-zone actors themselves normally come to terms with each other by creating what has been called a “middle ground.”⁷⁷ This makes frontiers sites of collaboration and economic opportunity.

The concept of the frontier complicates that of transimperial exchange as a simple matter of conquest and building of physical infrastructures.⁷⁸ As we said at the beginning, imperial courts and populations relied on transimperial goods. The acquisition of these goods involved long journeys across political and ecological frontiers, and thus specific relationships between imperial centers and peripheries. Traders, kings, and armies are often regarded as the makers of these relationships—civilizing forces that developed remote places and thereby opened access to much-desired objects and rich resources. Yet frontiers were social spaces of their own. Frontier populations had lived through long periods of local social confrontation and landscape development during which social and ecological boundaries loosened. We know of sites, or sacred spaces, where people of different or hostile socio-economic backgrounds met in peaceful ritual.⁷⁹ We can observe such rituals and the gradual development of collaboration in places where sedentary agriculture and pastoralism met.⁸⁰ Pastoralism and farming had often become interdependent along the fringes of oases, deserts, or mountain foothills over long periods of time before they were absorbed into imperial orbits.⁸¹ Semi-sedentary desert and steppe people, moreover, had been employed by their sedentary neighbors during military campaigns, or as seasonal workers, before they became brokers of transimperial exchange.⁸² Nicola Di Cosmo has thus warned us not to construct frontiers where they had already disappeared or were invoked by metropolitan writers wishing to emphasize the civilizing force of empire.⁸³ In order to avoid this trap, we have to be aware that frontier-zone processes are very variable, and their outcomes not easily cast into common patterns. Yet they can be productively compared as pivotal places of social confrontation, mediation, and conditions of transimperial exchange.

About This Book

Based on these analytical principles, the account presented here is organized into the following sections: political contexts (Part 1); economies and networks of different scales (Part 2); and trans-imperial exchange and frontier-zone processes (Part 3). Grounded in many years of collaborative research that was published in the three-volume *Handbook of Ancient Afroeurasian Economies* (2019–2023),⁸⁴ it attempts a synthesis of this work, presenting major

evidence and arguments as well as shared results. However, synthesizing some 2,100 pages of already quite condensed discussion has required restrictions at the level of detail, and a selective approach to the phenomena described. Given, too, the vast amount of scholarship on which the *Handbook* was based, references to primary and secondary sources have also had to be selective. In many cases, the reader will simply find references to fuller discussions in the *Handbook*—readily available in full Open Access—where expert discussions of primary and secondary sources are also available. By adopting this practice, I hope to have maintained some disciplinary rigor, while at the same time presenting a global perspective that cannot be gained from histories of discrete parts of the interconnected Afroeurasian world alone.

The Afroeurasian world under consideration in this book comprises what Ian Morris has called the “Lucky Latitudes” of the globe. These saw exceptional population growth and amounts of long-distance exchange from the Bronze Age (ca. 3000–ca. 1000 BCE) onward.⁸⁵ The Lucky Latitudes spanned the area roughly from the northern Eurasian steppe to the northern parts of the Indian Ocean, and from the China Seas to northwestern Africa. Between about 300 BCE and about 300 CE extensive zones within these latitudes went through a period of dynamic empire formation and transformation.⁸⁶ The Macedonians under Alexander the Great conquered the Persian (Achaemenid) empire in the last quarter of the fourth century BCE, and by the beginning of the following century his rival successors had each carved out parts of that empire for themselves. Meanwhile, Chandragupta Maurya expanded his rule dynamically in the northern Indian subcontinent between the Hindu Kush and the Ganges, while his grandson Ashoka spread a new religious mission deep into the south of the subcontinent. In East Asia, the Qin, followed by the Han, succeeded in pacifying the Warring States in the last quarter of the third century BCE, and the Xiongnu formed the first steppe empire in Inner Asia, possibly in a process of interdependent imperial co-evolution. The Parthians under the dynasty of the Arsacids emerged as a new imperial power in one of Alexander’s successor empires, eventually conquering the vast Iranian plateau, northern Mesopotamia, and Babylonia in the course of the second century BCE. The Roman empire formed as a powerful political successor to the Hellenistic empires from the late third century BCE onward, taking over one region after the other, and with further additions in northern Africa and Europe. Then, at the end of the period, the imperial world underwent a serious political crisis. The Romans saw a number of short-lived emperors, often selected by local soldieries, and encountered increasing problems along their frontiers during the third century CE. The Satavahanas, who had ruled in the central Indian subcontinent after the Maurya, lost their power in the early decades of the same century. In East Asia the Later Han empire disintegrated

into smaller kingdoms, while the Xiongnu confederacy had shown signs of fracturing already since the late first and early second centuries. Arsacid rule over Iran ended with the defeat of the last Arsacid king by the Sasanians, a dynasty of Persian origin, who also ousted the Central Asian Kushans and Iranian Indo-Parthians from the Indian subcontinent as far south as the Ganges. Thereafter, new exchange networks and new reasons for long-distance exchange developed in Afroeurasia. The six hundred years that are under discussion in this book can thus be seen to constitute a meaningful era of world history.⁸⁷

The opening chapter situates Afroeurasian connectivity in the landscapes within which it unfolded: mountains, steppe, deserts, alluvial plains, and the vast oceanic space that surrounds two thirds of the Lucky Latitudes. While introducing the environmental conditions of economic activities in these latitudes, I highlight particular landscape affordances that people exploited in order to overcome ecological barriers, and increase their radiuses of interaction. Chapters 2 and 3 then dive into the imperial development of six interconnected spaces that formed, as I will argue, the political contexts of transimperial connectivity. These chapters prepare the ground for presenting Afroeurasia as, both politically and economically, a dynamic space of expanding networks. Chapter 4 suggests that the development of empires involved the growth of cultivated areas and urbanism, as well as of strategies for accessing economic surpluses available for consumption, from which, in turn, further economic activities were able to profit. Chapter 5 focuses on specific actors and their networking tools that led to more and greater radiuses of exchange under imperial conditions. From a much wider range of actors and tools that contributed to the expansion of exchange networks, I have selected kings and their inner circles, armies, and local elites as the most dynamic networking actors, and money, donative practices, and particular consumption rituals as tools with which they created and expanded their networks. Though differing greatly in social composition and economic power, it was their activities and consumption that mobilized large amounts of goods over long distances, and across imperial frontiers. In chapter 6, I look at the particular dynamics of transimperial merchant networks, which were, however, rarely independent of other networks. High-risk journeys of particularly valuable cargos involved large numbers of actors who in varying imperial contexts combined political, fiscal, diplomatic, religious, and commercial activities to achieve their goals. It is at this level that state and private economic activity are most closely connected. Chapter 7 turns to frontiers as spaces of transimperial significance: the kingdom of the Nabataeans who dominated the northern Arabian Peninsula, which was crucial for the distribution of spices from southern Arabia to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean; the port site of Barygaza, the major harbor on the western Indian coast that served the exchange system connecting the

northern subcontinent with coastal Arabia, Mesopotamia, and coastal East Africa; Sogdiana with the oasis of Marakanda—present-day Samarkand—where the interaction between sedentary and mobile populations paved the way for the vibrant commercial networks of Central Asia in later periods; and finally the Egyptian Eastern Desert, through which enormous quantities of imports from India and southern Arabia passed to the Mediterranean. All these frontiers show cultural and economic situations specific to their own time and context. Yet they unleashed dynamics that went far beyond their local social environments, which made them prime movers of transimperial exchange for long periods to come.

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