

The Three Silk Roads – Desert, Grassland, and Maritime – and China's Belt and Road Initiative

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THE SILK ROADS



Today's Talk

Let us take a document and artifact-based approach: what do surviving materials reveal about the different Silk Roads?

The Desert Route, in use 200 BCE-1000, peak use 600-755

The Grassland Route, most important between 1200 and 1400

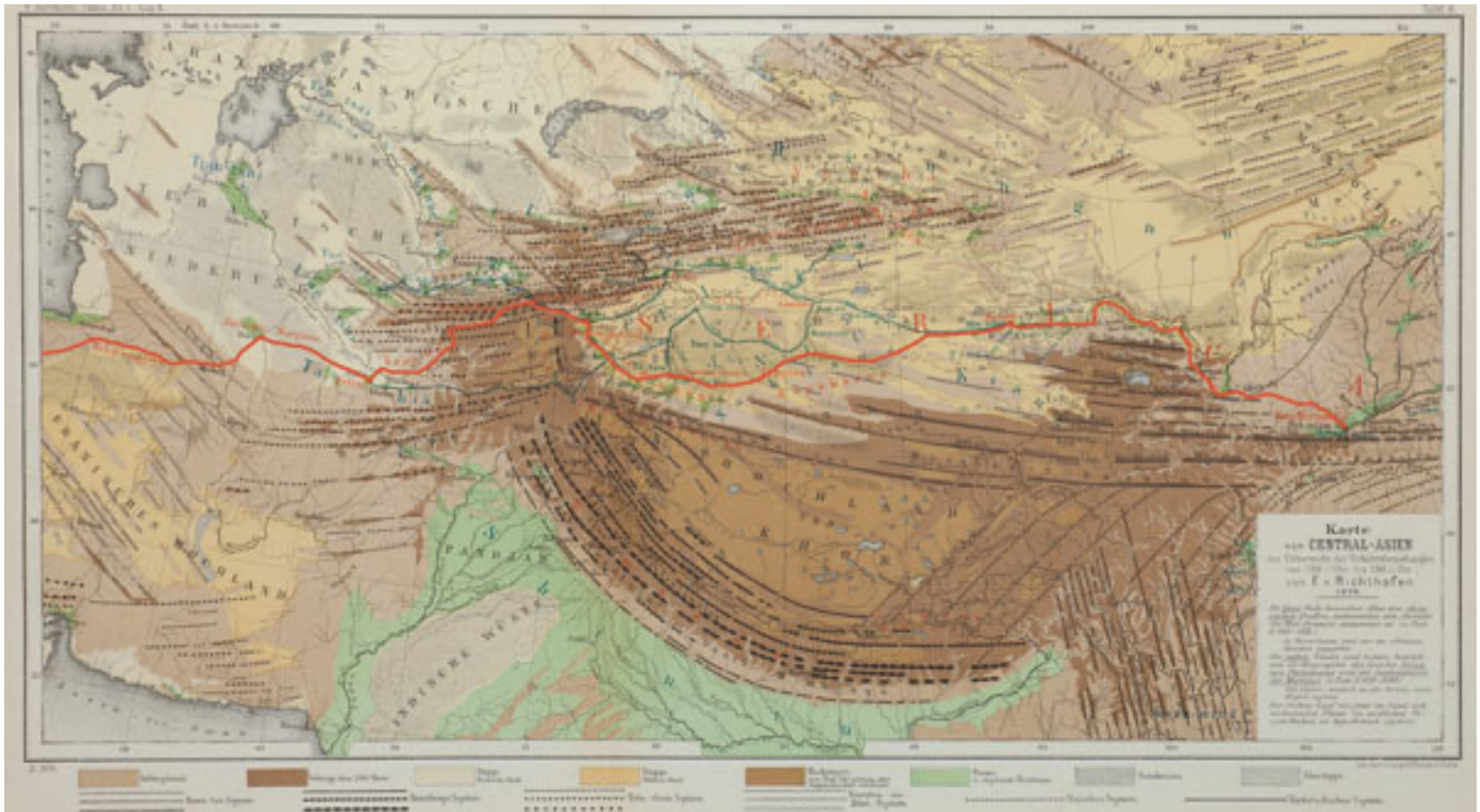
The Maritime Route, 400-1500. The longest maritime route in regular use before 1492

The Belt and Road Initiative, 2013-present

The Creator of the term “Silk Road”: Ferdinand von Richthofen 1833-1905



Von Richthofen's 1877 Map



BUT

There was no single Silk Road, but many overland routes.

No one used the term “The Silk Road” in the past.

Many different commodities – and not just silk -- were traded.

What von Richthofen Did not Know

Silk, especially plain weave silk, functioned as money from the 3rd to the 10th centuries. Silk was an alternative to coins – people did not use coins to buy silk. They used silk and/or coins to buy other items. In fact, silk was still accepted after 1000 CE by the various tribes of the north, and the Mongols particularly prized it.



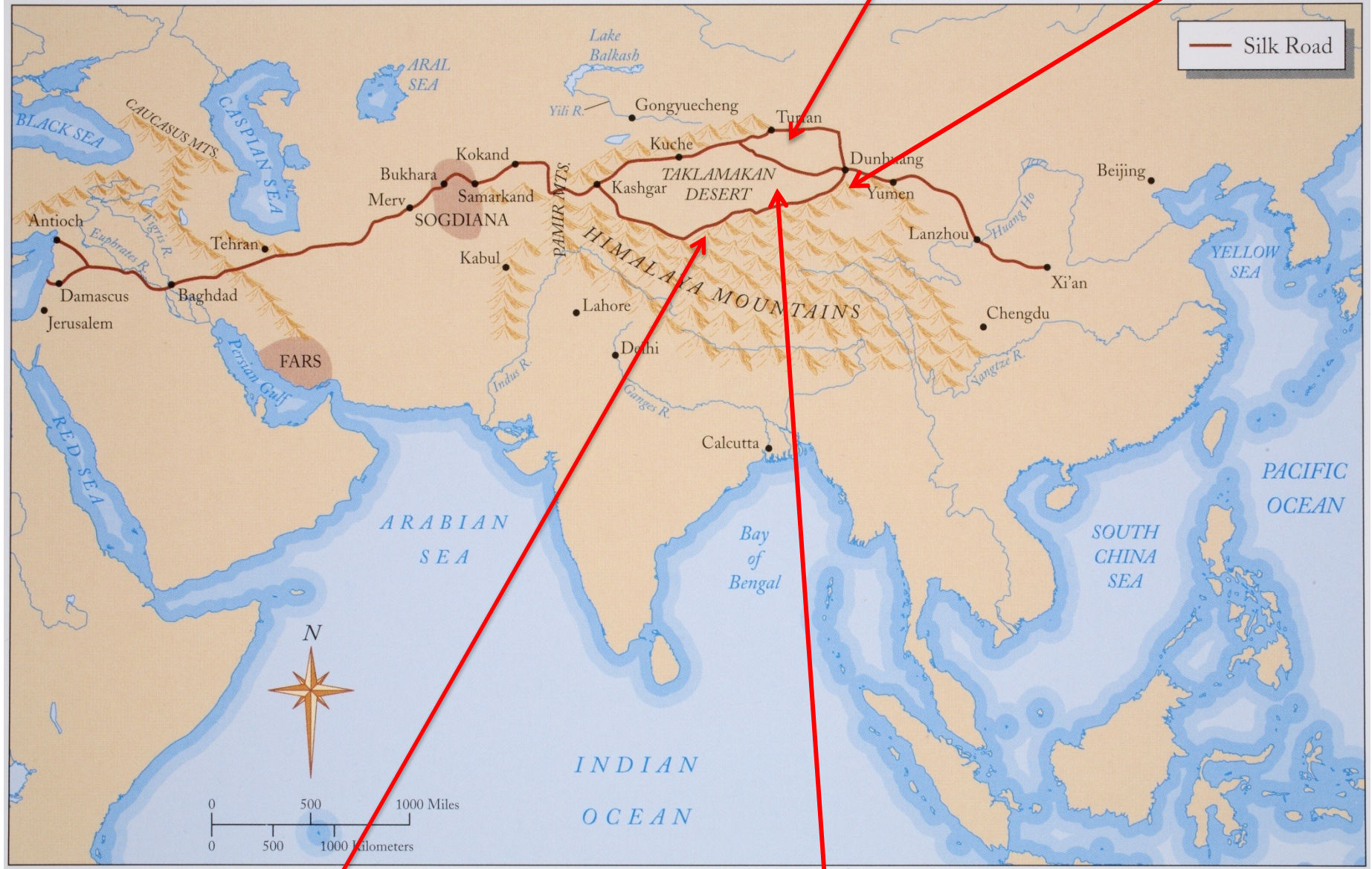
Silk at Loulan, 33 cm, 16 cm

Stein, *Serindia*, plate 37; Whitfield, *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, p. 147, Figure 41.

Part I: The Desert Route

Key source: excavated documents from Turfan, dated 273-769. Marc Bloch's distinction between intentional and non-intentional sources.

Dates in use: 200 BCE-1000 CE, peaked 600-755, continued even after 1000.



Turfan 吐鲁番

Dunhuang

Niyania 尼雅

Loulan 楼兰

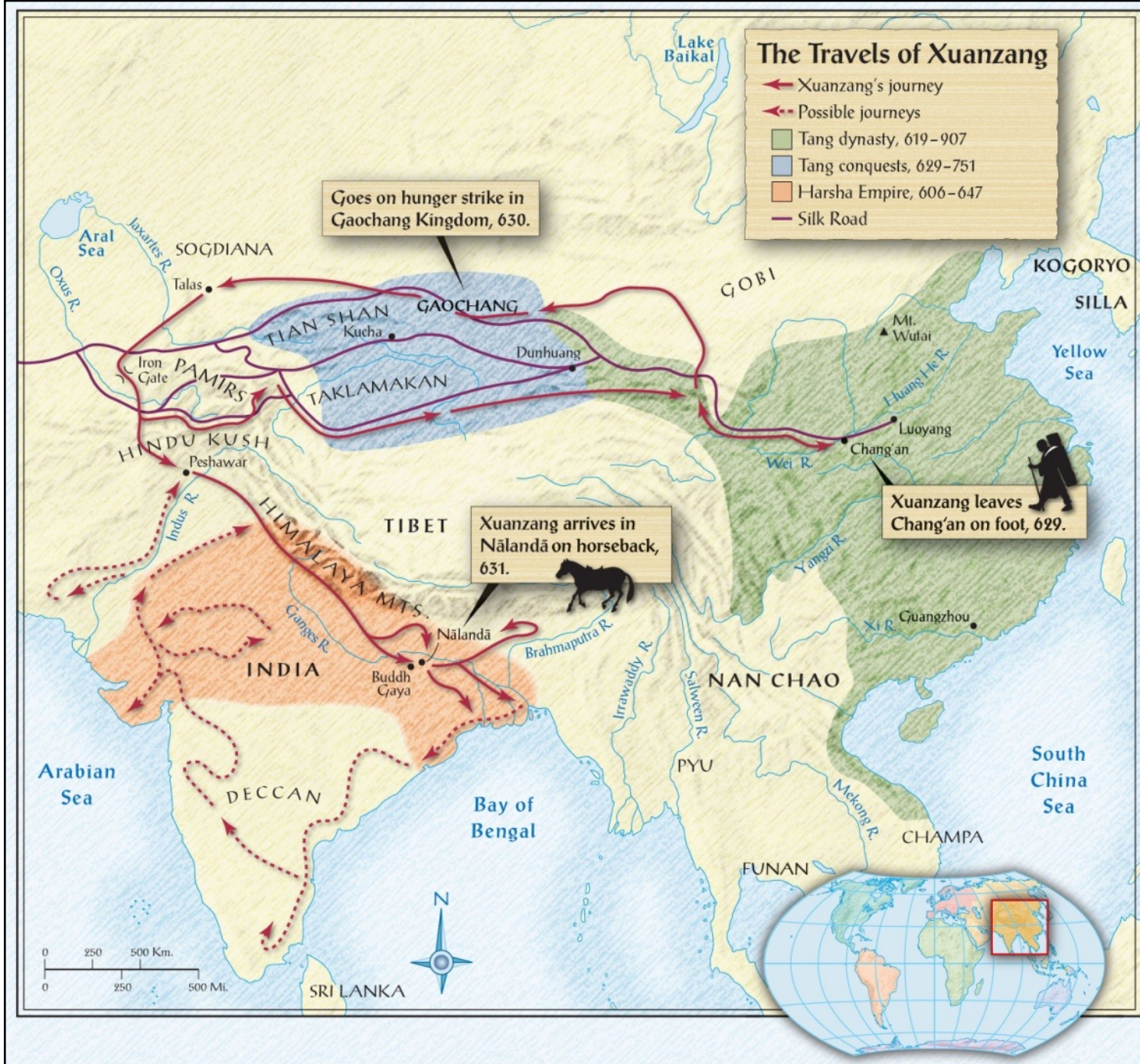
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V. Hansen photograph



V. Hansen photograph



Ruins of Gaochang City

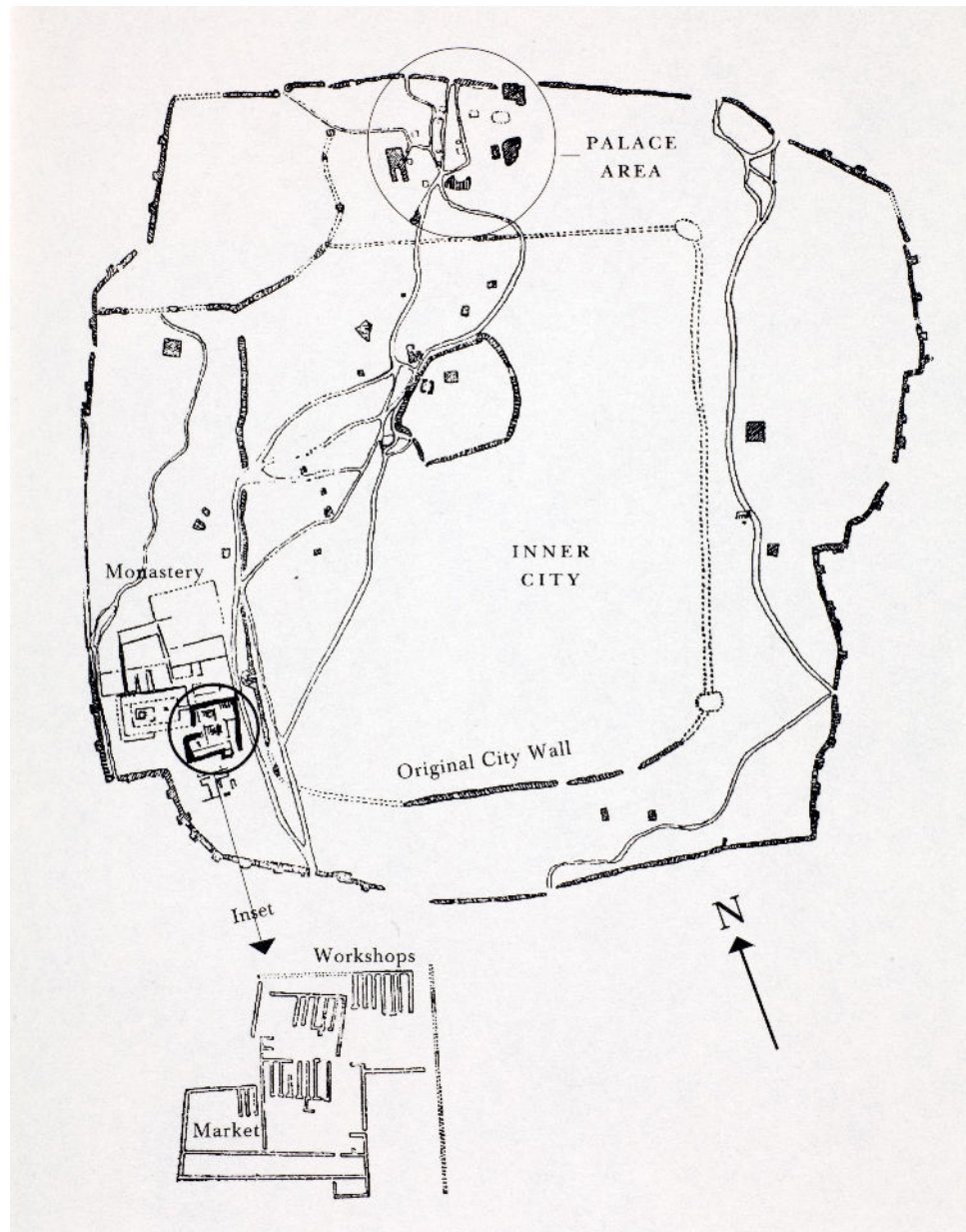


V. Hansen photograph



Gaochang City Walls

V. Hansen photograph





Source: *The Silk Road: A New History with Documents*, Plate 1



Source: *Xinjiang Chutu Wenwu*



Source: *Xinjiang Chutu Wenwu*



Source: *Xinjiang Chutu Wenwu*



貞和三年三月三日武城仰張善善表
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若正取元不與左德有將中柴菜園事
與德代質安次好柴度本向和子
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Intact contract deliberately placed in Astana tomb

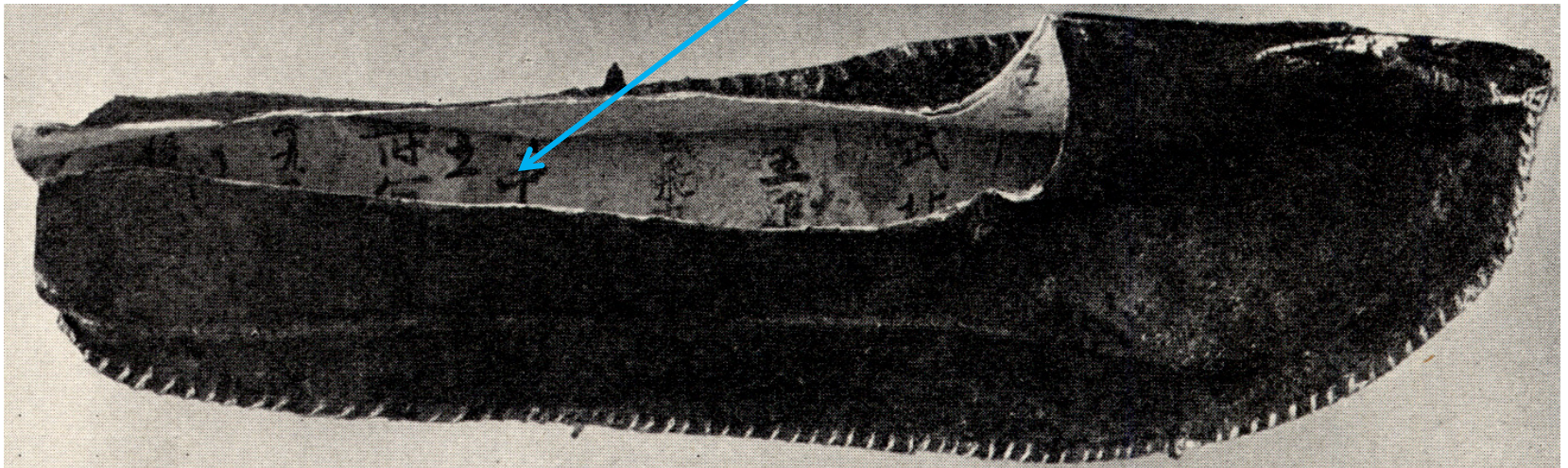
Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a form or ledger, consisting of approximately 20 lines of entries. The text is written in dark ink on aged, yellowish paper. The entries appear to be organized into columns, possibly representing different categories or items. The script is dense and somewhat difficult to decipher due to its cursive nature and the age of the document.

Handwritten text at the bottom of the page, possibly a signature or a date, enclosed in a decorative flourish.

Handwritten text on a folded piece of paper at the bottom right corner, possibly a note or a signature.



Source: *Innermost Asia*, plate XCIII, excavated artifacts from Astana



Astana V.1.03: Funerary shoe made from recycled paper with writing on it. A perfect example of a non-intentional source (according to Marc Bloch's terminology).



Royal order from the Gaochang King

A Snapshot of the Silk Road Trade:

The Scale-fee documents from Turfan

- Dated 600. 10 different shoe soles from 4 different sections of the original document.
- 48 merchants are named: 41 are Sogdian.
- Low frequency of trade: some weeks, no trade at all.
- Goods with the highest frequency: gold, silver, silk thread, aromatics 香, ammonium chloride.
- Quantities from 50 or 150 grams of gold to 800 Chinese pounds (either 160 or 480 kilos) of fragrance.

Source: Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, 99-102.

Constraints of Trade

- Everything must be carried overland, usually on the backs of pack animals (donkeys, horses, cattle) or carts – sometimes on camels. Caravans of 10-20 animals are typical.
- Only items of high value are worth the transport cost.
- Rare use of water transport through the desert.

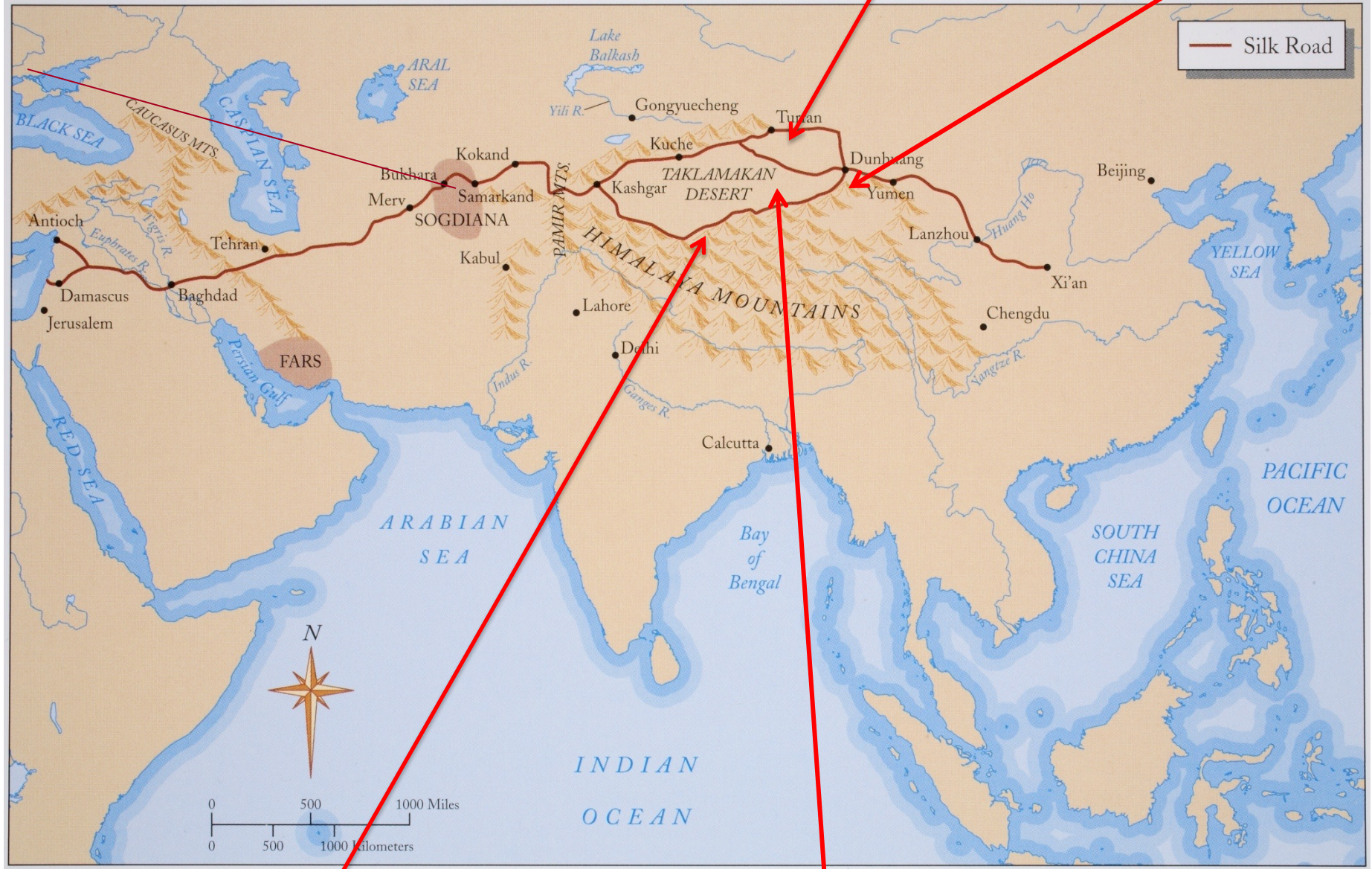
Sven Hedin's by Boat 1500 km in 82 days in 1899



Source: Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*, Plate 10; Hedin, *Central Asia and Tibet* (1903)

743 Turfan Market Register lists Low/medium/high prices for 350 Items

- Mostly local goods: flour, grain, onions, scallions, livestock, cauldrons, pots.
- Items from the Iranian world: ammonium chloride, aromatics, sugar, brass, medicine, inlaid daggers.
- Who is doing the buying?
- The soldiers stationed by the Tang government. 742 5000 soldiers in Turfan; local taxes pay for only 9% of their expenses. This is why the overland route declines after 755.



Turfan 吐鲁番

Dunhuang

Niyania 尼雅

Loulan 楼兰





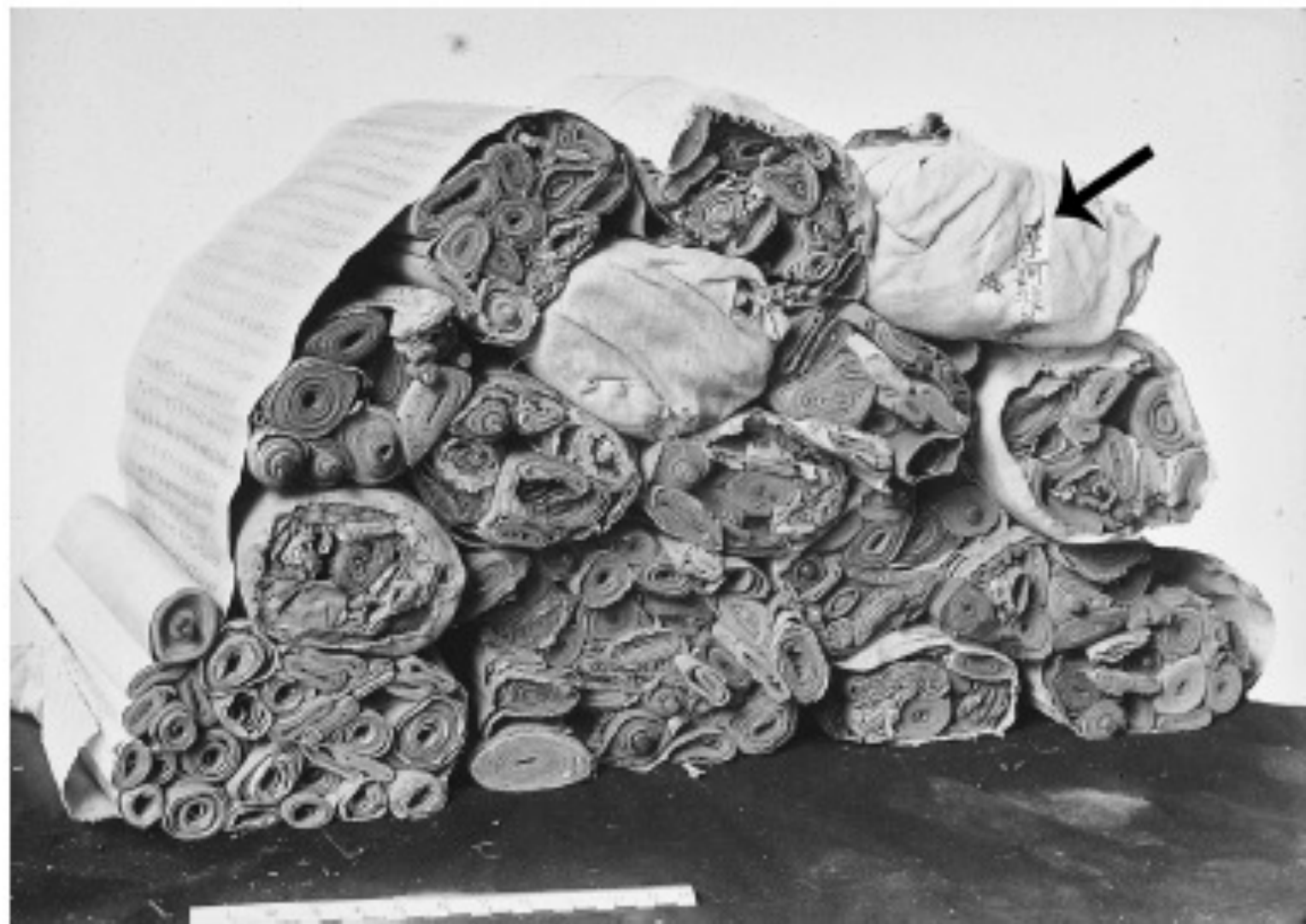
THE DUNHUANG CAVES AS STEIN FIRST SAW THEM

In 1907, when Aurel Stein first arrived at Dunhuang, the caves had no doors and were completely exposed to the elements. Visitors had to climb up the walls and through holes connecting the caves. Now under the management of the Dunhuang Research Institute, the caves all have walls and locked entrances, and a system of concrete walkways and stairways connects the 492 caves at the site. Courtesy of the Board of the British Library.



The library cave (Cave 17) at Dunhuang

Source: Silk Road Foundation Newsletter 3.2



CALL NUMBERS FOR A BUDDHIST LIBRARY

The Chinese scrolls in cave 17 were divided into bundles of a dozen or so and then each covered with a separate wrapper. Unusually, one label on the upper right is still visible; it gives the name of the Buddhist text along with its number from the *Thousand-Character Classic*, which served as the equivalent of a modern library call number. Courtesy of the Board of the British Library.

745 CE Tang Government makes a payment of 20,000 bolts of silk to Liangzhou (modern Wuwei, Gansu), 700 km east of Dunhuang (Pelliot# 3348)

Actual shipment includes:

5600 bolts of big-loom raw silk

550 bolts of Henan plain weave shi silk using threads of varying thickness

270 bolts of plain silk dyed red

270 bolts of plain silk dyed green

1927 hanks, 10/24 ounces, of silk floss

1700 bolts of Shaan prefecture shi silk

4361 bolts 3 decafeet 5 feet 4 inches of broad-loomed degummed silk

Converting the Shipment into Coins

5600 bolts of big-loom raw silk at 465 coins/bolt at 550 coins/bolt

550 bolts of Henan plain weave shi silk using threads of varying thickness at 620 coins/bolt

270 bolts of plain silk dyed red at 550 coins/bolt

270 bolts of plain silk dyed green at 450 coins/bolt

1927 hanks, 10/24 ounces, of silk floss at 150 coins/hank

1700 bolts of Shaan prefecture shi silk at 550 coins/bolt

4361 bolts 3 decafeet 5 feet 4 inches of broad-loomed degummed silk at 550 coins/bolt

Converting Coins into Grain

Total of 7017 hank/bolts, 10/24 ounces =
3,266 strings, 759 coins =

10,115 piculs, 6 pecks, 9.1 pints of foxtail millet
(32 coins/peck) + wheat + another type of
millet + naked barley (qingmai) + peas
(wandou)

Tang Military Support for Troops in the Northwest

Each year in the 730s and 740s the Tang government sent 900,000 bolts of silk to 4 different regional headquarters in modern Gansu and Xinjiang.

755 An Lushan Rebellion breaks out, and Tang immediately stops these payments

Desert Route: Summary

- Small-scale trade, at the level of a peddlers' trade.
- Most goods made or grown locally and travel short distances.
- Only long-distance trade involves light or extremely valuable goods that could be carried by small caravans (remember 160 or 480 kilos of aromatics in the scale-fee tax document).

Part II: The Grasslands Route

Key sources: Travelers' accounts

William of Rubruck, en route 1253-1255

Marco Polo, en route 1271-1298

Rabban Sauma, en route ca. 1275-1294

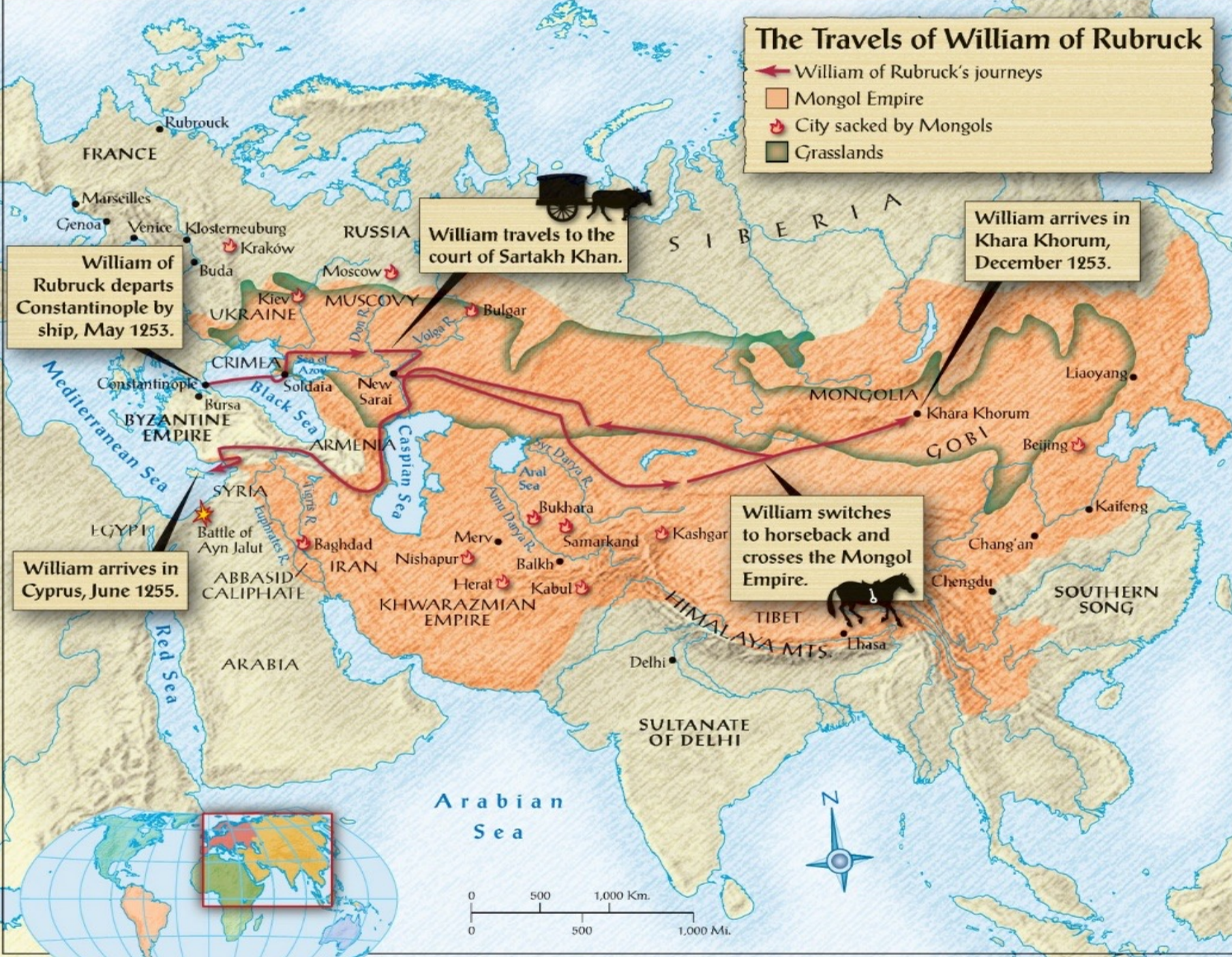
No excavated texts.

No hoards or excavated market goods; some urban sites.

Some transmitted objects and textiles

The Travels of William of Rubruck

- ← William of Rubruck's journeys
- Mongol Empire
- 🔥 City sacked by Mongols
- Grasslands



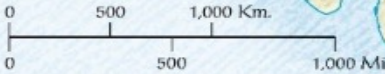
William of Rubruck departs Constantinople by ship, May 1253.

William travels to the court of Sartakh Khan.

William arrives in Khara Khorum, December 1253.

William arrives in Cyprus, June 1255.

William switches to horseback and crosses the Mongol Empire.



Safe Conduct Pass, or Paiza, 13th C

Mongols issue paiza passes to all envoys who are then given fresh mounts and food at each stop.

18.1 x 11.4 cm.

Metropolitan Museum of Art
1993.256



William's Description of the Mongol Empire

Vast territory of grasslands.

Bleak and poor.

Mongols move with their tents from one place to another.

Once the Mongol ruler Guyug (1246-1248) divided 500 carts tilled with silks, gold, and silver among his men to reward them for their military service. Mongols particularly cherish textiles.

Importance of Textiles

They are portable.

The Mongols can hang them in their tents or give them to their subordinates or make clothing from them.

Nasij cloth, 14th century:
Silk and Metallic Thread Lampas



79 x 56 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001.595.

Marco Polo 1254-1324

Role of ortagh merchants: they take the Mongols' looted goods and convert them into what the Mongols desire, especially lavish textiles.

Was Marco Polo an ortagh merchant? Most are Central Asians, but he, his father, and his uncle might have been.



Grasslands Route

Major differences from desert route:

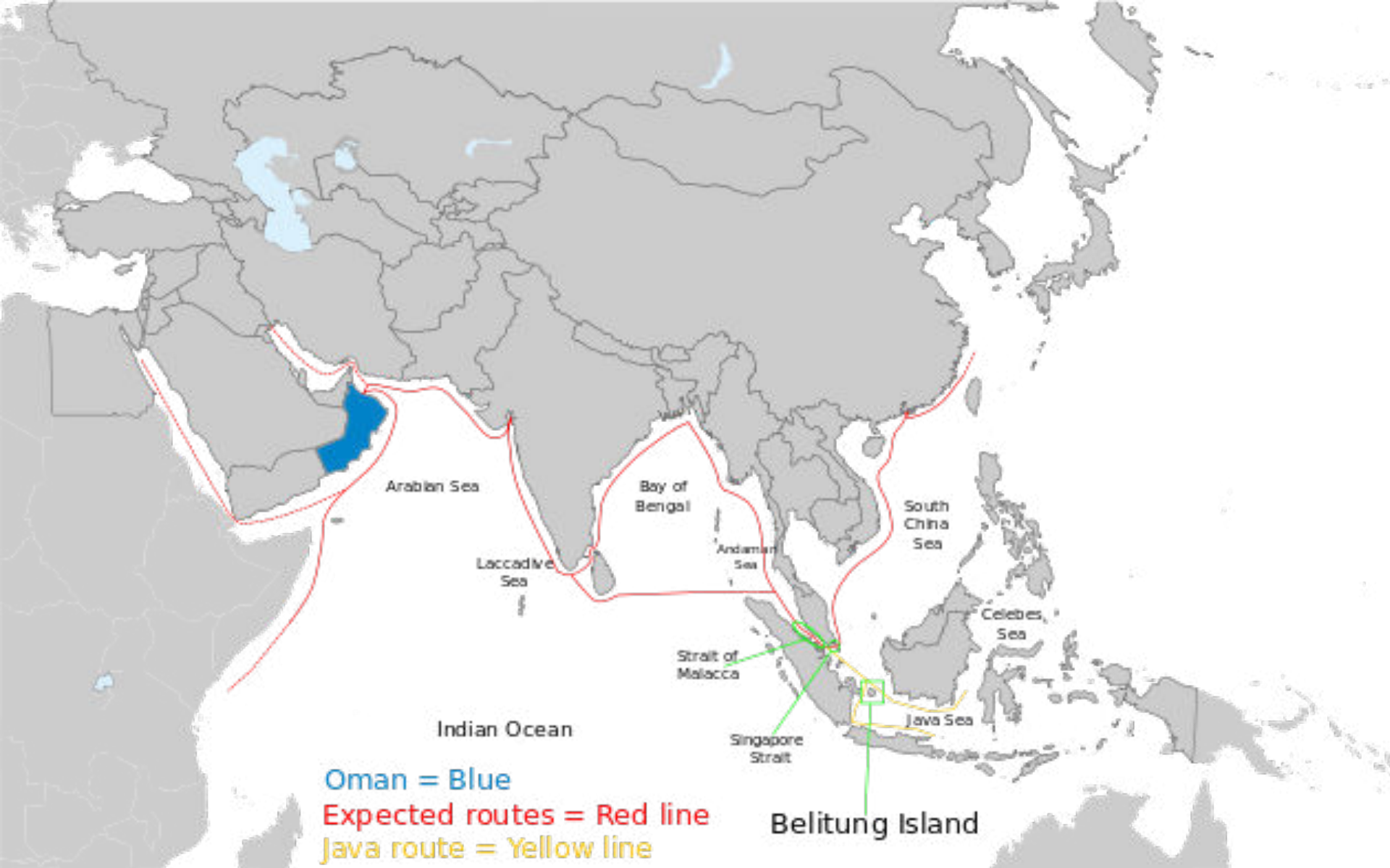
- Eurasia is united under Mongol rule, and travelers can move across great distances as long as they carry paiza.
- The Mongols depend on ortagh merchants to convert plunder into the goods, often textiles, they desire.
- The constraint of overland shipping costs persists.

Part III: The Maritime Route

- Key sources: *Song huiyao* (Administrative Records of the Song dynasty)
- Shipwrecks: what goods do they carry?
 - Beilitung, Indonesia 830
 - Quanzhou, China 1276-77
 - Sinan, Korea 1323
- Where were the ships built?
- From where did they depart and where are they going?

Beilitung Shipwreck

- 830 CE: Arab dhow (21 x 58 ft/6.4 x 18 m) found off the coast of Indonesia.
- Controversy over commercial excavation; exhibit at the Smithsonian cancelled.
- Sold for 32 million USD to Singapore government.
- Now on exhibit at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.
- Significance:
60,000 ceramic vessels, including some with pseudo-Arabic



Source: By Asie.svg: historicair 20:31, 20 November 2006 (UTC) derivative work: Chaosdruoid (talk) - Asie.svg, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16093080>





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Chinese Ceramic Ewer



<http://MalaysiaAsia.my>

Trade Goods: West Asian glass, Chinese lacquer, SE Asian spices and amber



Source: <http://www.asia.si.edu/Shipwrecked/shipcrew.asp>

Exports from Southeast Asia



Source: Encyclopaedia of Malaysia, volume I.

Southeast Asian exports

- gharuwood (Langkasukah)
- camphor wood (Langkasukah – on the west coast, across from Kedah, Or from Chitu)
- kingfisher feathers (S Vietnam)
- Tortoise shell (Phillipines)
- Elephant ivory (also Langkasukah)
- crowns made of gold (near Kedah)
- nutmeg (Maluku, west of Sulawesi = Moluccas)
- cloves (Maluku) – (caption to upper right) cloves in Rome 70 CE, Mesopotamia 1700 BCE, and China turn of the Common Era.
- dragon's blood, “medicinal resin from a palm fruit” S Malay peninsula
- dammar tree resin S Malay peninsula
- civet – glandular secretion for perfume – Borneo (vh? same as ambergris?)
- Pandanus mats (from present-day Singapore)
- Pepper from Java
- Rhino horn from Java
- Sandalwood from Lesser Sunda Islands, east of Java.

Historic Differences Between Overland and Maritime Routes

Overland traders have to cross through checkpoints and may be robbed; ships pay import duties only at the countries where they land, but face the prospect of shipwrecks.

Transport costs are much higher overland than by sea; quantities shipped in ships are much higher than those carried by caravans.

The Silk Road Today

Xi Jinping's July 2013 initiative:

Chinese: 一帶一路

English: One Belt, One Road

(There is no officially approved map.)

2016: Name changed to: Belt and Road Initiative

What is the appeal of the term today?

How is this modern initiative related to the past?

Q. What was the rationale behind the joint construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (OBOR)?

A. The ancient Silk Roads on land and sea contributed significantly to the prosperity and development of countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa for thousands of years. The “Silk Road Spirit”, which promotes peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit, remains a cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world. Against the background of the weak recovery of the global economy from the downturn, the initiative was proposed with the intention of promoting economic cooperation among countries by enhancing the orderly free-flow of economic factors and the efficient allocation of resources. The ‘Belt and Road’ run through the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa, connecting the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end and developed European economies at the other, and encompassing many countries with huge potential for economic development. It is also an effort to explore new models of international cooperation and global governance, which will make positive contributions to world peace and development.



Bridge and Road Building Tajikistan (May 2018)

Issues:

**Large loans at high-interest
rates**

**Terms of default (land for
money?)**

**Labor force (what
percentage Chinese? What
percentage local?)**

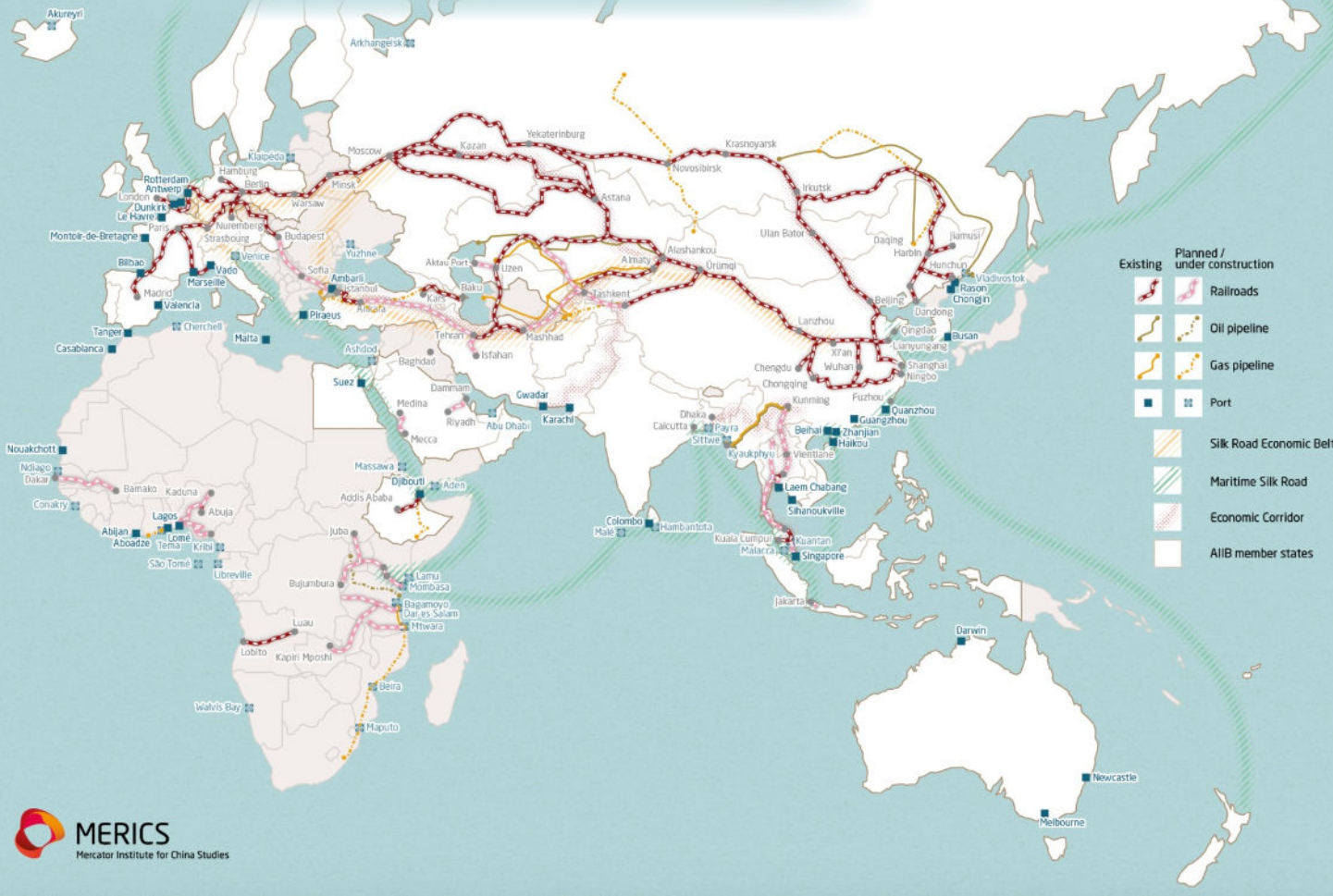
**Freight charges (discounts
to host governments)**

Route to Europe

Relationship to Xinjiang

The Belt and Road Initiative creates a global infrastructure network

China uses, acquires and builds railroads, ports and pipelines



Source:
https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Silkroad-Projekt_EN_2020_150dpi.png

THE SILK ROAD(S): The Enduring Power of a Metaphor



Source: <https://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch2en/conc2en/img/silkroad.png>