

THE  
SILK  
ROADS

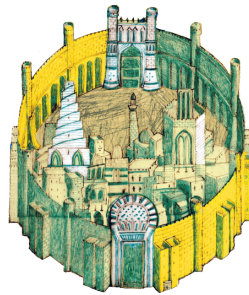


*To my beloved Katarina, Flora, Francis and Luke*

*P. F.*

*For Judy and John, my parents*

*N. P.*



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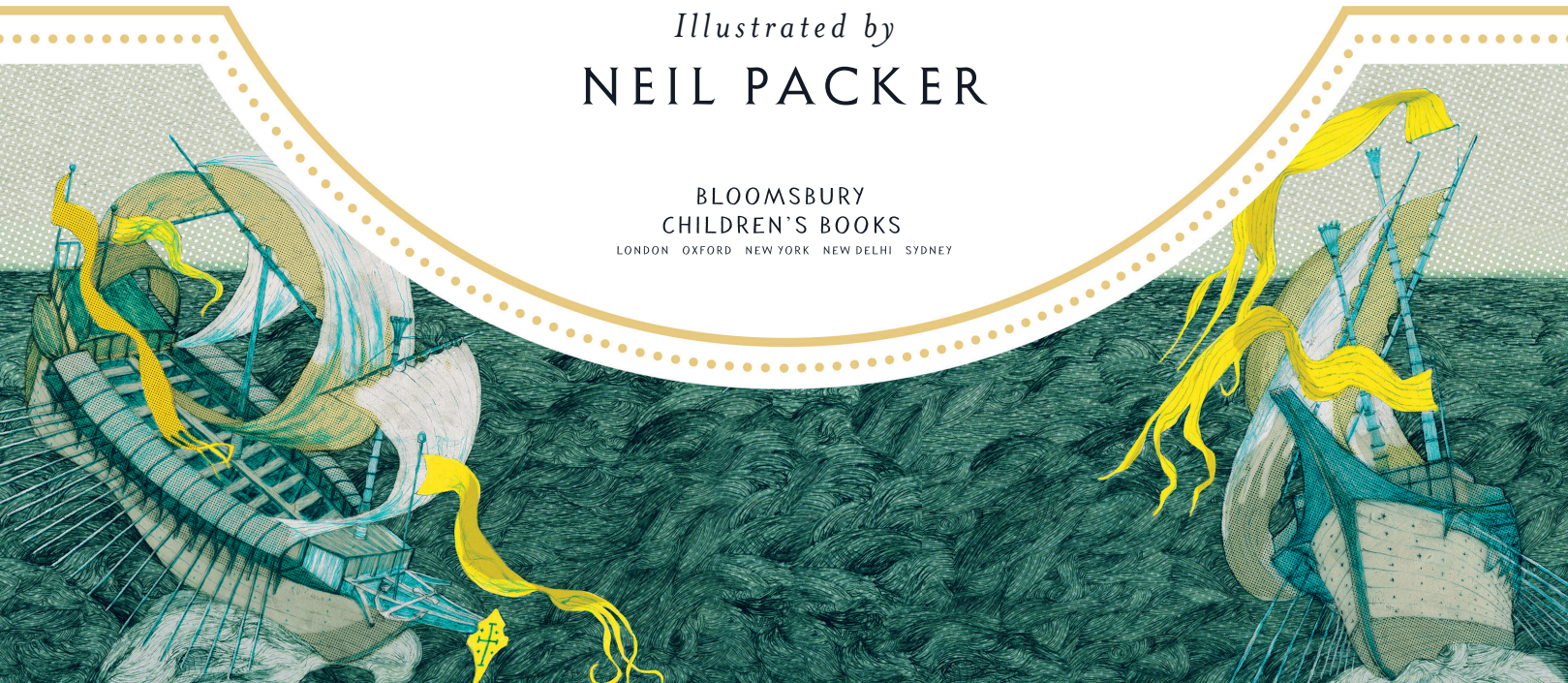
THE  
**SILK  
ROADS**

*A New History of the World*

PETER FRANKOPAN

*Illustrated by*  
NEIL PACKER

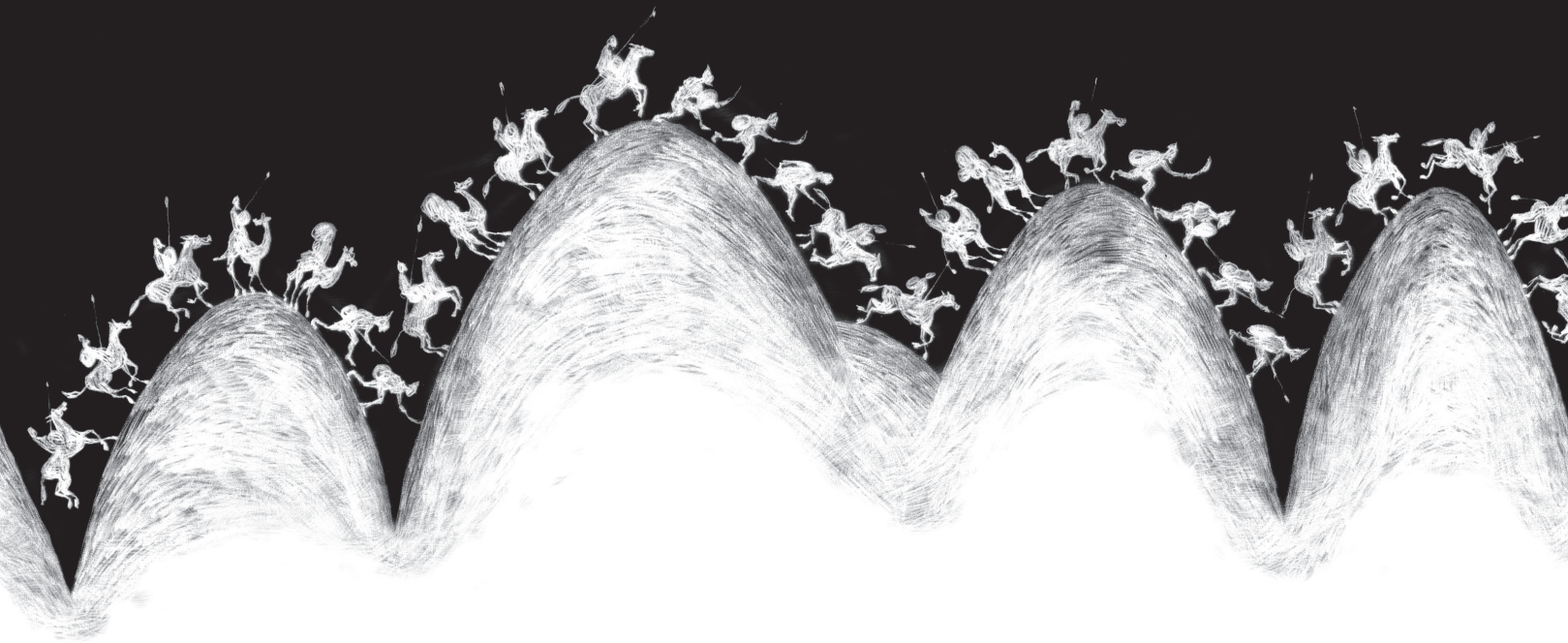
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ARCTIC OCEAN

Beaufort Sea

Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)

Greenland Sea

Bering Sea

Alaska

Gulf of Alaska

Baffin Bay

Davis Strait

Denmark Strait

Cape Farewell

NORTH AMERICA

NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN

PACIFIC OCEAN

Gulf of Mexico

Caribbean Sea

Canary Islands

Western Sahara

SOUTH AMERICA

SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN

*The World Today*  
Maps are wonderful ways to help us think about the world. This is a map of the world in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It does not tell us much about what people think of each other or what is going on in the world but you can still learn a lot by studying it, and considering why we know so much more about some parts of the world than others.



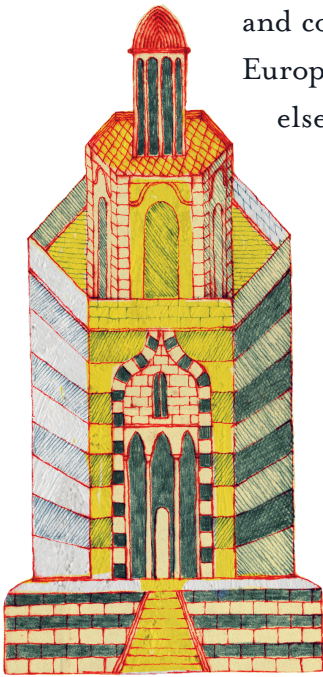
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# Introduction



**W**hen I was a boy, I had a map on my bedroom wall. I used to stare at it when I woke up in the morning and before bedtime, admiring the size of the continents and the oceans, looking at the location of the mountain ranges, deserts and rivers, and trying to memorise the names of all the countries and their capital cities.

At school, I learned a lot about the history and geography of the country and continent where I lived. I loved learning about Britain and about Europe. But when I spoke with my parents, it was often about things elsewhere that I felt I should know about. In many parts of the world, people were fighting each other – and I could not understand why. Places were changing, sometimes in a way that was good and sometimes in a way that was bad. When I listened to the news, I realised that millions of people’s lives would be affected either way.



We study history to understand the past, but also to try to help explain the present. History is a bit like tracing back your footsteps and trying to work out how and why you took a particular route to where you are now standing. It is interesting and exciting to look at individual turns or steps you made, but it can also be revealing to look at the journey as a whole.

Staring at the map on my wall, I wanted to learn about Russia, whose leaders at that time built nuclear weapons that were pointed directly at targets very close to where I went to school. I wanted to learn about the Middle East, where there seemed to be terrorist acts taking place almost every day, but which I also realised was the birthplace of lots of religions. I wanted to find out about China, Iran, India, Pakistan and Southeast Asia – places that were not just the size of empires but had dominated the past and seemed to be enormously important in the modern world too. I longed to learn about the people, history, geography and culture of Africa and to understand if there were similarities and differences between one part of the continent and another.

I never got the chance to do that at school. Instead, I was taught a lot about Henry VIII and his six wives (divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived – in that order). I wish I'd had a book that could have told me about all the other places. I wanted to understand how everything fitted together. Why, for example, was there nothing worth studying in between the Romans arriving in Britain and the Battle of Hastings – a thousand years later?

And so I decided to spend my life reading and writing about history and looking for connections that would help explain the past better than how I had been taught as a child. I have had lots of help from scholars and writers, many of whom lived hundreds – and in some cases thousands – of years ago. One very important person was called Ferdinand von Richthofen (his nephew became a famous First World War fighter pilot, known as the Red Baron). He thought long and hard about how to come up with a name to describe the way that Asia, Europe and Africa are connected. He could have chosen the name of any of the goods and commodities that were transported over thousands of miles – like spices or ceramics; he might even have chosen something to do with languages, travel or biology. But he decided on something that caught the imagination of other scholars – something that has stuck to this day: the Silk Roads.



The Silk Roads do not have a start or an end point, because they are not actually real roads at all. They are a web of networks that have allowed goods, people and ideas, but also disease and violence, to flow east to west and west to east – from the Pacific coast of China and Russia to the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa, and also from Scandinavia in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south. You might even think of the Silk Roads as the world’s central nervous system, linking all the organs of the body together, or perhaps as veins and arteries pumping oxygen and carbon dioxide away from and towards the heart. To understand the body, you need to look under the skin, and you also need to see how the body as a whole works, rather than just looking at one part of it.

In this book, we are going to visit places you might not have heard of before. Some have disappeared and are now gone: Merv, in modern Turkmenistan, was once so large and so beautiful that it was called ‘the mother of the world’. The magnificent city was destroyed by fighting 800 years ago, and never recovered.

Some places have changed. Today, Kabul is known as the capital of war-torn Afghanistan. But 500 years ago, the city had gardens that were famous hundreds of miles away. Mosul, in Iraq, is a city that was recently devastated by ISIS, who inflicted terrible suffering on the inhabitants, whom they used as human shields. However around 1000 years ago, it was famous for its magnificent public buildings, its bathhouses and its craftsmen who produced some of the finest arrows, saddles and stirrups in the world.

*Kabul is known as the capital of war-torn Afghanistan.  
But 500 years ago, the city had gardens that  
were famous hundreds of miles away*

Some people will tell you that we are living through difficult times. It might feel that way sometimes. But the truth is that this is the best time to be alive – ever. Travel has never been easier: you can get from one side of the world to another more quickly than any of your ancestors could. There have been astonishing improvements in health, for example with the survival rates of mothers and newborn babies rising dramatically in recent decades, or with the number of people who have access to clean water.



These improvements mean that children all over the world have better prospects than their parents and grandparents – or any of their ancestors – of surviving childhood and growing up healthy.

The chances of children being able to read and write are also now greater than at any time in the past. We can find things out faster and more cheaply than any generation before us in human history. We have extraordinary freedom to move, to learn and to live. It might not feel like you have superpowers. But you really do.

I began a long journey with the map in my bedroom all those years ago. I still love looking at maps, gazing at places that I don't know much about and trying to learn more about them. I hope that's something we all might be able to do.

To understand the world of today and tomorrow, you need to understand the world of yesterday. And to do that, the best place to start is at the beginning. As luck would have it, that means starting with the Silk Roads.

*We have extraordinary  
freedom to move,  
to learn and to live*

PETER FRANKOPAN





## The Ancient World

The first towns and cities in history grew up along the Silk Roads. The names of many of the most famous places in the Ancient World seem mysterious to us today. But this was a world where empires exchanged goods, ideas, languages and faiths across thousands of miles. This is where our story begins.



ASIA

ALTAI MOUNTAINS

HIMALAYAS

CHINA

INDIA

PACIFIC OCEAN

INDIAN OCEAN

Kashgar

Dunhuang

Ji

Anyang

Seoul

Kyoto  
Osaka

Chang'an

Kaifeng

Luoyang

Zhengzhou

Hefei

Jiankang

Suzhou

Hangzhou

East  
China  
Sea

Guangzhou

South  
China  
Sea

Lhasa

Patna  
Varanasi

Luang Prabang

Hanoi

Bagan

Siem Riep

Bay of Bengal

Hampi

Tanjore

Madurai

Anuradhapura

Palembang

Jakarta

Shash  
Samarkand

Balkh

Kabul

Peshawar

Kandahar

Harappa  
Multan

Mohenjo-Daro

Ujjain

INDUS  
VALLEY



# The Roads of the Ancient World



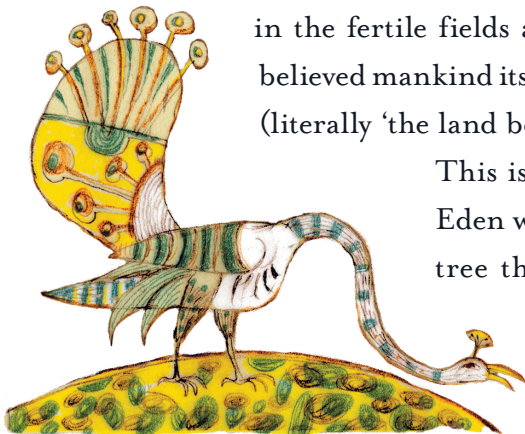
The heart of Asia is where civilisation was born. In ancient Mesopotamia along the banks of the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers and steeped in the Indus Valley stood the very first towns and cities known to mankind. The abundance of water oozing from the banks was vital for the inhabitants of the cities built there; citizens of Babylon, Nineveh and Uruk in Mesopotamia and Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Dholavira in the Indus Valley would be able to go about their business refreshed,

clean and healthy. Water was also important to help crops grow

in the fertile fields along the riverbanks. Little wonder that many believed mankind itself was created in the fertile fields of Mesopotamia (literally 'the land between the rivers').

This is where it was widely believed that the Garden of Eden was located, 'planted by the Lord God' with 'every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food'.

Control of the thriving fields and cities allowed kings to reign and empires to be built.



However, their rulers also knew that if they were going to last, they would need to be not only well ordered but well organised too. Law and order were very important, and, unsurprisingly, some of the first laws in human history were recorded in the heart of Asia, such as those laid down by Hammurabi, king of Babylon, 4,000 years ago. People in the ancient world were smart: road systems were built enabling post to be delivered quickly across distances hundreds of miles apart; authorities made sure that customers were not ripped off by traders and received what they paid for. Charging and collecting the right tax was carried out across the heart of Asia not only smoothly but (usually) fairly.

The greatest empire of all in antiquity was Persia. Situated in the centre of Asia, it spanned lands between the Mediterranean and the Himalayas. Cities like Persepolis, Pasargadae and Susa were home to magnificent buildings that showed off the wealth of their citizens and the power of their kings. The Persians were famous for being willing to try something new and adopting the habits, fashions and foods of the people they conquered. They were also known for their love of luxury. The Persians were always keen to learn new things and to improve on what they had if they could.

### *The greatest empire of all in antiquity was Persia*

They made fearsome enemies too, as the Greeks knew all too well. The Persians' attempts to expand their empire further still led to epic battles at Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis where the fate of the cities of Greece and the Aegean hung by a thread.

Eventually the tables were turned when Alexander the Great, widely thought to be the most brilliant general of all time, conquered Persian forces in Egypt before crushing a massive army sent to stop him at Gaugamela in what is now Iraq. After his victory, he began an extraordinary march into the heart of Asia, taking city after city, building new towns, roads and fortresses along the way to protect his gains. Alexander knew it was important to treat the local populations well: 'It is their loyalty,' he told his men, 'that will make our empire permanent and stable.' And so he made himself master of the heart of the world, overseeing a realm that fanned out in all directions before he died at the age of just 32 in 323 BC.



Alexander's advance helped deepen the connections linking east with west. Goods, people and ideas – about religion, literature and education – that were already flowing in each direction began to do so even more rapidly. Rulers in India even started to issue orders in several languages, including Greek and Aramaic, so that they could be understood by people of all backgrounds and cultures. Soon merchants, travellers, holy men and teachers began to throng along the Silk Roads.

Horizons were expanding elsewhere too. In China, the Emperor Gaozu and his wife, Empress Lü Zhi, founded the Han dynasty around 200 BC and expanded territory under their control westwards. Soon, the legendary historian, Sima Qian, began to gather information about the world that lay beyond the barren desert and the menacing mountain ranges on the western border of modern China. He looked also to the seemingly endless belt of flat steppe lands that ran from the Black Sea to the Pacific coast. Qian's reports to the imperial court in the second century BC recorded his amazement at the flourishing market towns that studded central Asia, 'where all sorts of goods are bought and sold'.

Most trade took place from town to town and between one local community and another. But rare and exotic items, like jewels and pearls, spices and even food (such as cucumbers, pistachios and peaches), were expensive and produced good profits that made long and difficult journeys worthwhile.

*Alexander the Great was widely thought to be the most brilliant general of all time – master of the heart of the world.*



Merchandise was carried by caravans of hardy camels, though as the many skeletons seen alongside routes through the desert sands of western China showed, the heat and lack of water combined with regular sandstorms could be deadly.

One of the most important commodities traded was silk, a delicate and difficult material to produce, made from the cocoons of worms that eat mulberry leaves. Silk was not just valuable due to the wealth and status it demonstrated of those who wore it, but because it was sometimes used instead of money.

It was particularly popular with the nomadic tribes who spent their summers and winters living on steppes, tending their sheep, horses and livestock. The horses bred in Central Asia were highly prized, especially in China, where they were admired for their strength. These horses were so fast that they were said to be descended from dragons. Some even became famous and were the subject of poems, sculpture and pictures. So loved were the horses that one ruler even ordered his 80 favourites to be buried alongside him when he died.

The nomads, however, had a terrifying reputation. One group, the Xiongnu, were believed to eat raw meat and drink blood. One writer described them as a people who 'have been abandoned by heaven'. They were feared partly because they lived in different ways to those who dwelt in the cities or worked the land as farmers, but also because of their reputation for swarming in large groups in order to attack or threaten towns and cities. Often they would then be bought off with big payments – sometimes in the form of large amounts of silk.



As the Silk Roads wove more closely together, contacts between people grew too, and eventually systems were created that were much like the passport controls we have today. As long as 2,000 years ago, China introduced a system whereby records were kept of travellers who arrived at their borders. These records included details about where visitors came from, what goods they were bringing with them, and when they arrived and left. It allowed the Chinese administration to calculate correctly how much tax should be collected from those that were passing through, to ensure that officials did not profit at the expense of merchants, and to gather knowledge of who was buying and selling what, where and when. The Chinese collected information from far and wide, receiving reports from as distant as the Mediterranean and the Roman empire, whose inhabitants were said to be tall, handsome and wealthy.

For their part, the Romans also made great efforts to find out information about the routes, towns and peoples living in Asia; it is said that they sent ambassadors as far as China itself. And so silk became a symbol of wealth in the Roman empire too, even though some complained that it was expensive and came from outside the empire (which meant that Roman money was going into someone else's hands). Others thought silk clung too close to the body and that Roman ladies should spend less time thinking and caring about what they looked like.

Nevertheless, the scale of trade across continents was huge, not only in silk, but also in copper, gold, frankincense and a blue semi-precious stone called lapis lazuli that came from mines in Central Asia. Cities founded across the spine of Asia flourished,

with magnificent buildings constructed in places like Chang'an, Balkh, Nisa and Palmyra, while countless new towns were founded in Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau and beyond. The power of kings and rulers residing there soared as their wealth rose, allowing them to build fabulous palaces and to make sure their realms were well-managed: for millennia it has been understood that justice and good administration were the key ingredients for stability and success, and this time was no different.

Although the world 2,000 years ago was not always peaceful, and there was often competition between and within the different states lying along the Silk Roads, there were close connections that linked Asia, Europe and North Africa. Coins and objects, such as decorated silver bowls found their way from Rome to the Far East, while products and materials from the distant extremities of Asia made their way to the Mediterranean.

Writers in India commented on the arrival of 'beautiful large ships' that were 'splashing white foam' as they crossed the ocean, bringing traders from far-off Rome wanting to buy

*Writers in India commented on the arrival of 'beautiful large ships' that were 'splashing white foam' as they brought Roman traders across the ocean.*



pepper before sailing home. Pots from factories in North Africa were used for cooking and storage thousands of miles away in what is now Scotland. There was a busy trade too in glazed ceramics from Persia, transported by ship to what is now Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and China.

While the ancient world was much more sophisticated and interlinked than we might think, our ancestors many centuries ago were no less curious about people, places and rare things than we are today. This was as true of the Silk Roads as it was of cultures like the Olmec and the Mayans in Central America or the Sao and Bantu-speaking peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, all of whom flourished over vast territories more than two thousand years ago. Scientific and technological developments have changed the speed at which we can travel and trade in this day and age, enabling us to learn about other continents more quickly than at any point in history. You will often hear globalisation being talked about as though it is something new but really it is not.

