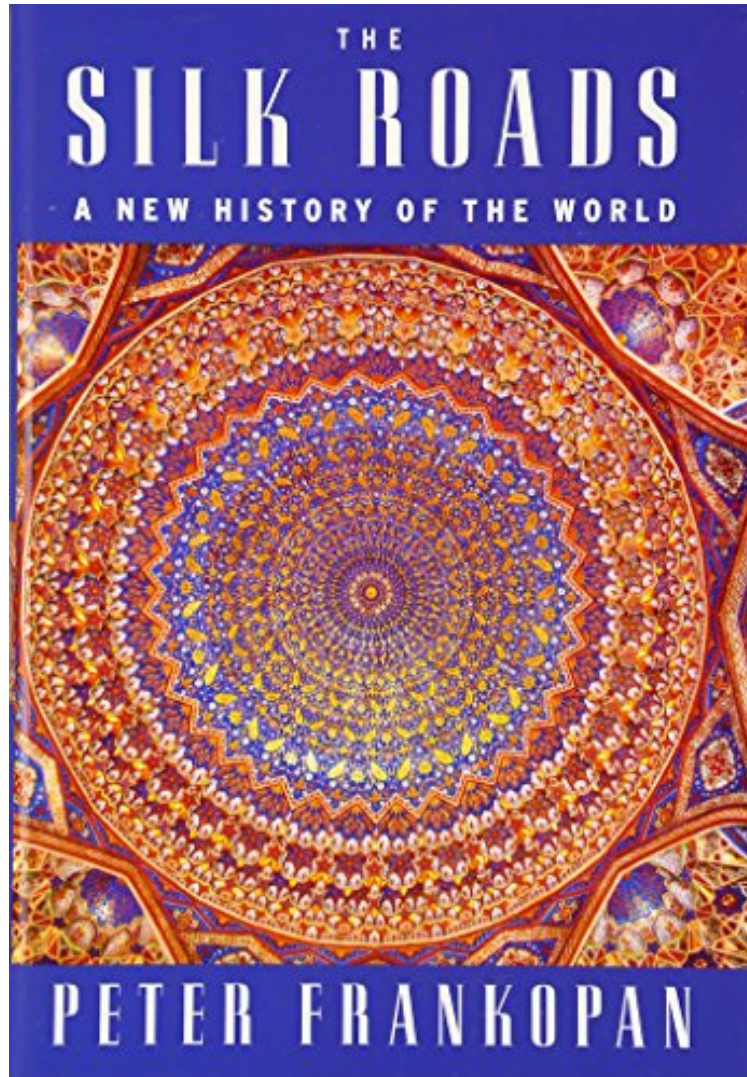


(Download) The Silk Roads: A New History of the World

The Silk Roads: A New History of the World

Peter Frankopan

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Peter Frankopan : The Silk Roads: A New History of the World before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Silk Roads: A New History of the World:

366 of 400 people found the following review helpful. Surprisingly Disappointing
By Down Happy I was very disappointed after reading all the wonderful reviews. Maybe they are reading a different book? I had assumed we would be learning about the history of the silk roads and the many dynasties that rose and fell along the route - the Songdians, the cities of the Tamir Basin for example. I thought this would be an Asian centric book showing the silk roads impact on Han Dynasty China and the steps that had to be taken to keep the route secure. I thought we would

learn of the earliest use of the silk road in trade between Sumeria and what is now northern Afganistan based on the early trade in Lapis and how this led to the later creation of Faience. Or perhaps how the silk road brought Buddhism to the west and mixed the artistic sense of the descendants of Alexander's army with the Central Asian Buddhist cave dwellers. I was very wrong in my expectations. Maybe I am missing something but this is still a Western-centric view, centered on Byzantium and medieval Europe. The first steppe dwellers we meet in any depth are the Mongols, who by that time, are a thousand years later than the early steppe dwellers who so profoundly influenced world culture both East and West. This book spends most of it's time in detailing the trade and fortunes of the West instead of focusing on the various kingdoms of the silk road. What is going on here? How could all the reviewers have missed this? This book is not as advertised a new history of the world, but rather a view of the economic impact of trade on the western world. For example, how does Columbus come to bear on the silk road? We read here about his expedition but no analysis relating to the silk road at all. That is one of many examples to show that the author does not seem to have much interest in writing about the silk road, but rather about how luxury good trade impacts the western world. This is my first book review although I have read dozens that I may not like. I am only writing this because it is not that I do not like what is written, but rather it is not what the book title implies and I want to give fair warning to others who may be like me in their interests.

138 of 149 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful Readable History

By Andrew Desmond

The Silk Roads is a wonderful invigorating work of history. It is directed to the general reader rather than the specialist. I found it be absolutely riveting. The essence of the book is that, in the West, our history is viewed through a very narrow lense. Schools teach its students of the Roman Empire, the subsequent Dark Ages, the Norman conquest in 1066, Henry VIII and the Tudors, the American War of Independence, the Industrial Revolution and the First and Second World Wars. The vast bulk of a map of the world from western Europe to China is passed over very quickly. With The Silk Roads, Peter Frankopan has attempted to redress this imbalance. As the author states: For centuries before the early modern era, the intellectual centres of excellence of the world, the Oxforads and Cambridges, the Harvards and Yales, were not located in Europe or the west, but in Baghdad, and Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand. Moreover, Frankopan gives the reader a perspective on the rise of Mesopotamia, Alexander the Great, the rise of Christianity in the eastern Roman Empire and then the subsequent rise of Islam throughout much of Asia. He then proceeds to discuss the Crusades, the rise of Genghis Khan and his mighty Mongol Empire and then the rise of China more specifically. He concludes by bringing the book up to the present day with the rise of Europe and the USA before suggesting that there is a reorienting of history underway again. In other words: we are witnessing the birthing pains of a region that once dominated the intellectual, cultural and economic landscape and which is now re-emerging. We are seeing the signs of the worlds centre of gravity shifting back to where it lay for millennia. Whether you agree or not with Peter Frankopans conclusions, the book remains a tour-de-force. Thoroughly recommended.

398 of 445 people found the following review helpful. Hagiography

By Customer

Expansive and informative for all who have not had the privilege of Central Asian travel, this book leaves me with some anguish. First, the joy of the read. The author's depth of knowledge and resource access, coupled with his polyglot skills, weave a centuries long tale of intrigue across a region of the world little known or travelled today. The endnotes are extensive, if somewhat dated. He has the ability to enliven each decade's heroes and villains. As a history aficionado and world traveler, I am grateful for his bringing to life the real world, and the historical world, of Central Asia. It has been little understood in the West - or the East. Now the hard part. The Islamic world of the 8th through 16th centuries was one of humanity's global centers. This history should be better understood, in light of its achievements and of today's relevance. Yet, the author serves this world as its hagiographer. Apologist is too strong a word, certainly. The endless cycle of hatred and violence between Shi'a and Sunni within this center of gravity during this time is passed over in one brief paragraph. The Councils of Nicaea and those that followed are described in excruciating detail. The story of the European debacle of the same time is repeatedly narrated, engrossing the reader in its internecine religious wars. The Asian steppe peoples' incursions of the 12th through 14th centuries are described too often as an enlightened event for all. Piles of skulls and cities entirely wiped off the face of the earth are ignored in favor of the administrative advantages of Mongol rule. Horsemanship is ignored in favor of bettering western siege towers. India subcontinent history, certainly as important as European, fairs poorly at best in this vast chronicle. Chinese history is ancillary to the main event. A secondary theme is economics. All trade is based upon 'luxury goods' in demand by voracious Asian and European rulers. Information is 'quickly transmitted' across the sands, mountains and rivers - this when 30 miles a day was the fastest a horse or man could travel. Decisions described by scholarly journals as economics based are ascertained as truth, often without reference. This is surprising given the plethora of multi-linguistic sources. Religion and money dictate virtually all decisions made over 3,000 years of history. I would suggest this is too myopic a view. This book would appear to be designed to the glory of Islam, its history and its advantage to all whom came in contact. Lesser peoples and religions are scorned. Animisities within African, European, Asian and Indian cultures flow for pages. Islam is simply a series of improvements upon past glorious battles and architecture. I have visited virtually every city and region described herein. The peace of Islam today is one of absolute submission - the real definition of the word Islam: submission. Other books in the vein of Central Asia would include The Poison King, Balthazar's Odyssey, The Ornament of the World, The Emergence of Modern Islam, Chasing the Sea, The Shied of Achilles and best,

Millennium by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto. Would love to rate it higher, but the perverse noise against non-Islamic culture and societies is bothersome. The ridicule of Western advances coupled to dictatorial domination and horrific tortures could just as easily describe Islamic, Indian, Chinese or Russian worlds. As for his Palestinian views, well, they are biased, leave it at that... Can't wait to enjoy My Fair Lady, his Mediterranean yacht for charter...

This is history on a grand scale, with a sweep and ambition that is rare. A proper historical epic of dazzling range and achievement. William Dalrymple, *The Guardian* The epic history of the crossroads of the world—the meeting place of East and West and the birthplace of civilization. It was on the Silk Roads that East and West first encountered each other through trade and conquest, leading to the spread of ideas, cultures and religions. From the rise and fall of empires to the spread of Buddhism and the advent of Christianity and Islam, right up to the great wars of the twentieth century, this book shows how the fate of the West has always been inextricably linked to the East. Peter Frankopan realigns our understanding of the world, pointing us eastward. He vividly re-creates the emergence of the first cities in Mesopotamia and the birth of empires in Persia, Rome and Constantinople, as well as the depredations by the Mongols, the transmission of the Black Death and the violent struggles over Western imperialism. Throughout the millennia, it was the appetite for foreign goods that brought East and West together, driving economies and the growth of nations. From the Middle East and its political instability to China and its economic rise, the vast region stretching eastward from the Balkans across the steppe and South Asia has been thrust into the global spotlight in recent years. Frankopan teaches us that to understand what is at stake for the cities and nations built on these intricate trade routes, we must first understand their astounding pasts. Far more than a history of the Silk Roads, this book is truly a revelatory new history of the world, promising to destabilize notions of where we come from and where we are headed next.

This provocative history challenges the view of the West as heir to a pure Greco-Roman culture. For Frankopan, the brutish West owes its more enlightened traditions to the lands east of Italy and west of China, which were, for centuries, 'the centre of the world'. Frankopan marshals diverse examples to demonstrate the interconnectedness of cultures, showing in vivid detail the economic and social impact of the silk and the slave trades, the Black Death, and the Buddhist influence on Christianity. *The New Yorker* In his new book, *The Silk Roads*, Frankopan has created something that forces us to sit up and reconsider the world and the way we've always thought about it. The book takes us by surprise right from the start. Nishant Dahiya, *NPR* This is deeply researched popular history at its most invigorating, primed to dislodge routine preconceptions and to pour in other light. The freshness of Frankopan's sources is stimulating, and their sheer range can provoke surprising connections. He likes to administer passing electric shocks. The sheer abundance of Frankopan's information can become an omnivorous pleasure, and its details add color and particularity to his text. He plunders data magnificently... A brave, subtly personal project of inspiring ambition and epic scope. Colin Thubron, *New York of Books* Peter Frankopan [is a] brilliant and fearlessly wide-ranging young Oxford historian. Frankopan marches briskly through the centuries, disguising his erudition with an enviable lightness of touch, enlivening his narrative with a beautifully constructed web of anecdotes and insights, backed up by an impressively wide-ranging scholarly apparatus of footnotes drawing on works in multiple languages... This is history on a grand scale, with a sweep and ambition that is rare. A remarkable book on many levels, a proper historical epic of dazzling range and achievement. William Dalrymple, *The Guardian* One of Mr. Frankopan's gifts as a storyteller is his ability to draw unusual connections across his vast canvas. [he] packs his tale with fascinating trivia. Frankopan has written a rare book that makes you question your assumptions about the world. Sadanand Dhume, *The Wall Street Journal* Frankopan casts his net widely in this work of dizzying breadth and ambition. Those opening to any page will find fascinating insights that illuminate elusive connections across time and place. Frankopan approaches his craft with an acerbic wit, and his epochal perspective throws the foibles of the modern age into sharp relief. *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) A glorious read. The author, the prodigious director of Oxford University's Centre for Byzantine Research, weaves into his narrative astonishing facts. Frankopan is an exhilarating companion for the journey along the routes which conveyed silk, slaves, ideas, religion, and disease, and around which today may hang the destiny of the world. Henry Porter, *Vanity Fair*. In his new book, *The Silk Roads*, Frankopan has created something that forces us to sit up and reconsider the world and the way we've always thought about it. The book takes us by surprise right from the start. Nishant Dahiya, *NPR* Superb. Peter Frankopan is an exceptional storyteller. The lands of the Silk Roads are of renewed importance, and Frankopan's book will be indispensable to anyone who wants to make sense of this union of past and present. Philip Seib, *The Dallas Morning News* Dazzlingly good ... [Frankopan blends] deep scholarly skill with a real literary talent. Dan Jones, *Evening Standard* (U.K.) A sweeping, fascinating chronicle of world history focused on trade in silk, spices, furs, gold, silver, slaves, and religion in a vast region from the Mediterranean's eastern shores to the Himalayas. Frankopan weaves together his many narrative strands with verve and impressive scholarship. A vastly rich historical tapestry that puts ongoing struggles in a new perspective. Kirkus (starred review) "The author's gift for vividness is reminiscent of Jan Morris, while his command of revealing facts or fancies is not far short of Gibbon's." Felipe Fernandez Armesto, *Literary* (U.K.) A very well-written

and wide-ranging study, founded on reading of staggering breadth and depth... Strikingly up to date. The author has used the most recent scholarship to impressive effect... And he is evidently constantly rethinking in the light of new scholarship... The book is full of fascinating insights... No one could read it without learning a great deal, or without having their conception of the course of history radically challenged. *The Times Literary Supplement* (U.K.) Beautifully constructed, a terrific and exhilarating read and a new perspective on world history. *Averil Cameron, History Today* This is, to put it mildly, an ambitious book By spinning all these stories into a single thread, Peter Frankopan attempts something bold: A history of the world that shunts the centre of gravity eastward Mr. Frankopan writes with clarity and memorable detail Where other histories put the Mediterranean at the centre of the story, under Mr. Frankopan it is important as the western end of a transcontinental trade with Asia in silks, spices, slaves and ideas. *The Economist* The Silk Roads, which covers several continents and many centuries, is based on astonishingly wide and deep reading and in all areas draws on the latest research It is full of vivid and recondite details. *Robert Irwin, The Independent* (U.K.) Why are we driven, physically, intellectually and emotionally, to reach out beyond the horizon toward the unknown; to explore, connect and communicate? That query motivate Peter Frankopan's splendid study Throughout he relies on economic analysis Recognizing that the fringes of the cloth are as interesting as its fabric, Frankopan also spins off on to the threads of social history Underlying the tightly researched history is a grander human truth. As a species, we are motivated by stories This invigorating and profound book has enough storytelling to excite the reader and enough fresh scholarship to satisfy the intellect Charismatic and essential. *Bettany Hughes, The Daily Telegraph* (U.K.) Timely... It deserves a place by the library fireplace. *Country Life* (U.K.) What does history look like if we shift our focus eastward and give due prominence to those who traversed the Silk Roads? This is the question Frankopan answers in this immensely entertaining work. Many books have been written which claim to be A New History of the World. This one fully deserves the title So ambitious, so detailed and so fascinating The Silk Roads demonstrates why studying history is so important. *Gerard DeGroot, The Times* (U.K.) Book of the Week Its time we recognized the importance of the East to our history, insists this magnificent study The breadth and ambition of this swashbuckling history by Peter Frankopan should come as no surprise A book that roves as widely as the geography it describes, encompassing worlds as far removed as those of Herodotus and Saddam Hussein, Hammurabi and Hitler It is a tribute to Frankopan's scholarship and mastery of sources in multiple languages that he is as sure-footed on the ancient world as he is on the medieval and modern Deftly constructed The Silk Roads is a powerful corrective to parochialism. *Justin Marozzi, The Sunday Times* (U.K.) An exhilarating tour of 2,000 years of history There is plenty of bang for your buck as you journey through The Silk Roads. Frankopan upends the usual world-history narrative oriented around ancient Rome and Greece and the irrepressible rise of Europe In a series of brisk chapters The Road of Faiths, The Road of Furs and so on studded with state-of-the-art research that is sourced from at least a dozen languages, the author brings wondrous history to vivid life In The Silk Roads, Peter Frankopan has provided a bracing wake up call. *Matthew Price, The National* (AE) About the Author PETER FRANKOPAN is a historian based at Oxford University. He is the author of *The First Crusade: The Call from the East*, a major monograph about Byzantium, Islam and the West in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He is a senior research fellow at Worcester College, Oxford, and the director of the Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research at Oxford University. His revised translation of *The Alexiad* was published in the United States in 2009. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Preface As a child, one of my most prized possessions was a large map of the world. It was pinned on the wall by my bed, and I would stare at it every night before I went to sleep. Before long, I had memorised the names and locations of all the countries, noting their capital cities, as well as the oceans and seas, and the rivers that flowed in to them; the names of major mountain ranges and deserts, written in urgent italics, thrilled with adventure and danger. By the time I was a teenager, I had become uneasy about the relentlessly narrow geographic focus of my classes at school, which concentrated solely on western Europe and the United States and left most of the rest of the world untouched. We had been taught about the Romans in Britain; the Norman conquest of 1066; Henry VIII and the Tudors; the American War of Independence; Victorian industrialisation; the battle of the Somme; and the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. I would look up at my map and see huge regions of the world that had been passed over in silence. For my fourteenth birthday my parents gave me a book by the anthropologist Eric Wolf, which really lit the tinder. The accepted and lazy history of civilisation, wrote Wolf, is one where Ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry crossed with democracy in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I immediately recognised that this was exactly the story that I had been told: the mantra of the political, cultural and moral triumph of the west. But this account was flawed; there were alternative ways of looking at history ones that did not involve looking at the past from the perspective of the winners of recent history. I was hooked. It was suddenly obvious that the regions we were not being taught about had become lost, suffocated by the insistent story of the rise of Europe. I begged my father to take me to see the Hereford Mappa Mundi, which located Jerusalem as its focus and mid-point, with England and other western countries placed off to one side, all but irrelevancies. When I read about Arab geographers whose works were accompanied by charts that seemed upside down and put the Caspian Sea at its centre, I was transfixed as I was when I found out about an

important medieval Turkish map in Istanbul that had at its heart a city called Balsghn, which I had never even heard of, which did not appear on any maps, and whose very location was uncertain until recently, and yet was once considered the centre of the world. I wanted to know more about Russia and Central Asia, about Persia and Mesopotamia. I wanted to understand the origins of Christianity when viewed from Asia; and how the Crusades looked to those living in the great cities of the Middle Ages Constantinople, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Cairo, for example; I wanted to learn about the great empires of the east, about the Mongols and their conquests; and to understand how two world wars looked when viewed not from Flanders or the eastern front, but from Afghanistan and India. It was extraordinarily fortunate therefore that I was able to learn Russian at school, where I was taught by Dick Haddon, a brilliant man who had served in Naval Intelligence and believed that the way to understand the Russian language and dusha, or soul, was through its sparkling literature and its peasant music. I was even more fortunate when he offered to give Arabic lessons to those who were interested, introducing half a dozen of us to Islamic culture and history, and immersing us in the beauty of classical Arabic. These languages helped unlock a world waiting to be discovered, or, as I soon realised, to be rediscovered by those of us in the west. Today, much attention is devoted to assessing the likely impact of rapid economic growth in China, where demand for luxury goods is forecast to quadruple in the next decade, or to considering social change in India, where more people have access to a mobile phone than to a flushing toilet. But neither offers the best vantage point to view the worlds past and its present. In fact, for millennia, it was the region lying between east and west, linking Europe with the Pacific Ocean, that was the axis on which the globe spun. The halfway point between east and west, running broadly from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the Himalayas, might seem an unpromising position from which to assess the world. This is a region that is now home to states that evoke the exotic and the peripheral, like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and the countries of the Caucasus; it is a region associated with regimes that are unstable, violent and a threat to international security, like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria, or ill versed in the best practices of democracy, like Russia and Azerbaijan. Overall, it appears to be a region that is home to a series of failed or failing states, led by dictators who win impossibly large majorities in national elections and whose families and friends control sprawling business interests, own vast assets and wield political power. They are places with poor records on human rights, where freedom of expression in matters of faith, conscience and sexuality is limited, and where control of the media dictates what does and what does not appear in the press. While such countries may seem wild to us, these are no backwaters, no obscure wastelands. In fact the bridge between east and west is the very crossroads of civilisation. Far from being on the fringe of global affairs, these countries lie at its very centres they have done since the beginning of history. It was here that Civilisation was born, and where many believed Mankind had been created in the Garden of Eden, planted by the Lord God with every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, which was widely thought to be located in the rich fields between the Tigris and Euphrates. It was in this bridge between east and west that great metropolises were established nearly 5,000 years ago, where the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in the Indus valley were wonders of the ancient world, with populations numbering in the tens of thousands and streets connecting into a sophisticated sewage system that would not be rivalled in Europe for thousands of years. Other great centres of civilisation such as Babylon, Nineveh, Uruk and Akkad in Mesopotamia were famed for their grandeur and architectural innovation. One Chinese geographer, meanwhile, writing more than two millennia ago, noted that the inhabitants of Bactria, centred on the Oxus river and now located in northern Afghanistan, were legendary negotiators and traders; its capital city was home to a market where a huge range of products were bought and sold, carried from far and wide. This region is where the worlds great religions burst into life, where Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism jostled with each other. It is the cauldron where language groups competed, where Indo-European, Semitic and Sino-Tibetan tongues wagged alongside those speaking Altaic, Turkic and Caucasian. This is where great empires rose and fell, where the after-effects of clashes between cultures and rivals were felt thousands of miles away. Standing here opened up new ways to view the past and showed a world that was profoundly interconnected, where what happened on one continent had an impact on another, where the after-shocks of what happened on the steppes of Central Asia could be felt in North Africa, where events in Baghdad resonated in Scandinavia, where discoveries in the Americas altered the prices of goods in China and led to a surge in demand in the horse markets of northern India. These tremors were carried along a network that fans out in every direction, routes along which pilgrims and warriors, nomads and merchants have travelled, goods and produce have been bought and sold, and ideas exchanged, adapted and refined. They have carried not only prosperity, but also death and violence, disease and disaster. In the late nineteenth century, this sprawling web of connections was given a name by an eminent German geologist, Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of the First World War flying ace the Red Baron) that has stuck ever since: Seidenstraenthe Silk Roads. These pathways serve as the worlds central nervous system, connecting peoples and places together, but lying beneath the skin, invisible to the naked eye. Just as anatomy explains how the body functions, understanding these connections allows us to understand how the world works. And yet, despite the importance of this part of the world, it has been forgotten by mainstream history. In part, this is because of what has been called orientalismthe strident and overwhelmingly negative view of the east as undeveloped and inferior to the west, and therefore unworthy of serious study. But it also stems from the fact that the narrative of

the past has become so dominant and well established that there is no place for a region that has long been seen as peripheral to the story of the rise of Europe and of western society. Today, Jalalabad and Herat in Afghanistan, Fallujah and Mosul in Iraq or Homs and Aleppo in Syria seem synonymous with religious fundamentalism and sectarian violence. The present has washed away the past: gone are the days when the name of Kabul conjured up images of the gardens planted and tended by the great Bbur, founder of the Mughal Empire in India. The Bagh-i-Wafa (Garden of Fidelity) included a pool surrounded by orange and pomegranate trees and a clover meadow of which Bbur was extremely proud: This is the best part of the garden, a most beautiful sight when the oranges take colour. Truly that garden is admirably situated! In the same way, modern impressions about Iran have obscured the glories of its more distant history when its Persian predecessor was a byword for good taste in everything, from the fruit served at dinner, to the stunning miniature portraits produced by its legendary artists, to the paper that scholars wrote on. A beautifully considered work written by Simi Nshpr, a librarian from Mashad in eastern Iran around 1400, records in careful detail the advice of a book lover who shared his passion. Anyone thinking of writing, he counsels solemnly, should be advised that the best paper for calligraphy is produced in Damascus, Baghdad or Samarkand. Paper from elsewhere is generally rough, blotches and is impermanent. Bear in mind, he cautions, that it is worth giving paper a slight tint before committing ink to it, because white is hard on the eyes and the master calligraphic specimens that have been observed have all been on tinted paper. Places whose names are all but forgotten once dominated, such as Merv, described by one tenth-century geographer as a delightful, fine, elegant, brilliant, extensive and pleasant city, and the mother of the world; or Rayy, not far from modern Teheran, which to another writer around the same time was so glorious as to be considered the bridegroom of the earth and the world's most beautiful creation. Dotted across the spine of Asia, these cities were strung like pearls, linking the Pacific to the Mediterranean. Urban centres spurred each other on, with rivalry between rulers and elites prompting ever more ambitious architecture and spectacular monuments. Libraries, places of worship, churches and observatories of immense scale and cultural influence dotted the region, connecting Constantinople to Damascus, Isfahan, Samarkand, Kabul and Kashgar. Cities such as these became home to brilliant scholars who advanced the frontiers of their subjects. The names of only a small handful are familiar today: men like Ibn Sīnā, better known as Avicenna, al-Bīrūnī and al-Khwarizmi in the fields of astronomy and medicine; but there were many more besides. For centuries before the early modern era, the intellectual centres of excellence of the world, the Oxforths and Cambridges, the Harvards and Yales, were not located in Europe or the west, but in Baghdad and Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand. There was good reason why the cultures, cities and peoples who lived along the Silk Roads developed and advanced: as they traded and exchanged ideas, they learnt and borrowed from each other, stimulating further advances in philosophy, the sciences, language and religion. Progress was essential, as one of the rulers of the kingdom of Zhao in north-eastern China at one extremity of Asia more than 2,000 years ago knew all too well. A talent for following the ways of yesterday, declared King Wu-ling in 307 bc, is not sufficient to improve the world of today. Leaders in the past understood how important it was to keep up with the times. The mantle of progress shifted, however, in the early modern period as a result of two great maritime expeditions that took place at the end of the fifteenth century. In the course of six years in the 1490s, the foundations were laid for a major disruption to the rhythm of long-established systems of exchange. First Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic, paving the way for two great land masses that were hitherto untouched to connect to Europe and beyond; then, just a few years later, Vasco da Gama successfully navigated the southern tip of Africa, sailing on to India, opening new sea routes in the process. The discoveries changed patterns of interaction and trade, and effected a remarkable change in the world's political and economic centre of gravity. Suddenly, western Europe was transformed from its position as a regional backwater into the fulcrum of a sprawling communication, transportation and trading system: at a stroke, it became the new mid-point between east and west. The rise of Europe sparked a fierce battle for power and for control of the past. As rivals squared up to each other, history was reshaped to emphasise the events, themes and ideas that could be used in the ideological clashes that raged alongside the struggle for resources and for command of the sea lanes. Busts were made of leading politicians and generals wearing togas to make them look like Roman heroes of the past; magnificent new buildings were constructed in grand classical style that appropriated the glories of the ancient world as their own direct antecedents. History was twisted and manipulated to create an insistent narrative where the rise of the west was not only natural and inevitable, but a continuation of what had gone before. Many stories set me on the path to looking at the world's past in a different way. But one stood out in particular. Greek mythology had it that Zeus, father of the gods, released two eagles, one at each end of the earth, and commanded them to fly towards each other. A sacred stone, the omphalos the navel of the world was placed where they met, to enable communication with the divine. I learnt later that the concept of this stone has long been a source of fascination for philosophers and psychoanalysts. I remember gazing at my map when I first heard this tale, wondering where the eagles would have met. I imagined them taking off from the shores of the western Atlantic and the Pacific coast of China and heading inland. The precise position changed, depending where I placed my fingers to start measuring equal distances from east and west. But I always ended up somewhere between the Black Sea and the Himalayas. I would lie awake at night, pondering the map on my bedroom wall, Zeus eagles and the history of a region that was never mentioned in the books that I read and did not have a name. Not so long ago, Europeans divided Asia into three broad

zonethe Near, Middle and Far East. Yet whenever I heard or read about present-day problems as I was growing up, it seemed that the second of these, the Middle East, had shifted in meaning and even location, being used to refer to Israel, Palestine and the surrounding area, and occasionally to the Persian Gulf. And I could not understand why I kept being told of the importance of the Mediterranean as a cradle of civilisation, when it seemed so obvious that this was not where civilisation had really been forged. The real crucible, the Mediterranean in its literal meaningthe centre of the worldwas not a sea separating Europe and North Africa, but right in the heart of Asia. My hope is that I can embolden others to study peoples and places that have been ignored by scholars for generations by opening up new questions and new areas of research. I hope to prompt new questions to be asked about the past, and for truisms to be challenged and scrutinised. Above all, I hope to inspire those who read this book to look at history in a different way.

Worcester College, Oxford April 2015