

I

Why the Cape Route should be considered part of the *Silk Roads*

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1- An old trade system

Trade routes have criss-crossed Afro-Eurasian territories for several thousand years². While few people have travelled the entire length of the multiple walking and sailing roads that connect Europe, Asia and Africa - for instance, it would be humanly impossible for the same Pre-Industrial individual or even group to travel from Cabo da Roca (Portugal) to Nosappu-misaki (Japan) or from Ras Xaafuun (Somalia) to Nordkapp (Norway) - many objects have travelled similarly extraordinary distances. Changing hands countless times until becoming incorporated into material cultures quite different from those of their producers, pieces of metal, wood or stone often changed shape and received new forms and identities³. Likewise, ideas⁴ and beliefs⁵ were transmitted by word of mouth, (sometimes) retaining their original content, (always) adapting to be integrated into other systems of meanings.

² See Thierry Zarcone, *La Route du Jade*; Barry Cunliffe, *By steppe, desert & ocean* and Philippe Beaujard, “The birth of a single afro-eurasian world-system”.

³ See Jean-François Jarrige and Pierre Cambon, *Afghanistan, les trésors retrouvés*; and Wilfried Seipel, *Das Gold der steppe*.

⁴ See Denis Guedj, *Numbers. The Universal Language* and Colin Mckenzie and Irving Finkel (org.), *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*, 136-167.

⁵ See Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, Future*; Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, *Monks and merchants* and Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*.

Although for millennia there was no single term to define it, a unique network of paths that allowed trade and cultural exchanges between human groups was developed, alongside their movements within and/or from/to African, European and Asian contexts⁶. The main land routes of this system entered the romantic imagination of the late 19th century globalised western elite, as the possibility of adventures - which would cross plateaus, skirt the world's highest mountain ranges and travers vast deserts dotted with isolated oases - became tangible. While this elite, deeply immersed in an Orientalist vision, came to know these routes as "Silk Road", Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, the German scholar who coined the term, chose to use the plural in his study of 1877 "Über die Centralasiatischen Seidenstrassen", thus reflecting the multiplicity he observed on his voyages.⁷

A century later, historians and the UNESCO broadened the concept to include the sea routes of Asia. This development was marked by the large exhibition arranged in Nara in 1988⁸, for example, as well as by the launching of the Silk Road Project, Inc. in 1998⁹, in which the participation of the Japanese archipelago and the role of the maritime routes from the China Sea to the Persian Gulf were presented as part of a single system of trade and cultural exchange. This expansion of the concept has stimulated renewed reflections, such as those found in the works of Frankopan or Whitfield, as well as in the recent monograph by Brunning *et al.*¹⁰ While maintaining the traditional designation (which can still be somewhat misleading given the continued prominence of the originally Chinese product) these scholars consciously chose to make a small but quite significant change:

⁶ See Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*.

⁷ See Ferdinand von Richthofen, "Über die Centralasiatischen Seidenstrassen", 96-122 cited by Vadime Elisseeff, "Approaches Old and New to the Silk Roads", 1-2.

⁸ See *The Grand Exhibition of the Silk Road Civilisations*.

⁹ See Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Along the Silk Road*.

¹⁰ See Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*; Whitfield, *Silk Roads*; and Brunning *et al.*, *The Silk Roads*.

to use its plural form, the *Silk Roads*. In fact, if the term points to multiple paths, be they land, sea or river, it becomes easier to grasp the diversity and complexity of the interconnected flows that can be considered the umbilical cord of the Afro-Eurasian worlds.

However, the Cape Route has not been recognised as a part of this wide trading system and Rahul Oka's recent study summarising the articulation of several areas from antiquity to modernity is a clear example of this lacuna.¹¹ After presenting four maps that perfectly illustrate the *Silk Roads* in four periods (2000–800 BCE; 50 BCE; 700 CE and 1300 CE), Oka presents the mid-17th century Atlantic without any direct connection to the Indian Ocean, a significant oversight considering that 150 years had passed since the opening of the Cape Route by the Portuguese. The Belt and Road Initiative of the People's Republic of China also ignores this history. Following the perspective that *Silk Roads* should be envisioned as an umbrella term, encompassing a myriad of routes and trade dynamics, it is imperative that the Cape Route is also included in it. This book therefore argues that the Azores archipelago should be understood as an integral part of the Silk Roads, and that Lisbon, since 1499, should be seen as one of the principal ports within this system. Indeed, the new link between Europe, Africa and Asia established by the return to Lisbon of Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama¹² (c. 1460–1524) has lasted until the present day, with its importance withstanding even the construction of the Suez Canal.

In the following century, the Cape Route came to be used by other European nations. Da Gama's arrival in India was thus not an isolated episode in Portuguese or even Indo-Portuguese history, but a turning point in Afro-Eurasian history and in the global evolution of humanity; indeed, the single and naturally limited trickle of the Portuguese

¹¹ See Rahul Oka, "Trade, traders, and trading systems", 279-319.

¹² On Vasco da Gama as a crucial figure in the evolution of Eurasian connections, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and the Legend of Vasco da Gama*.

was soon followed by a European torrent which would come to subordinate a vast area of these continents under its imperial and later colonial power.

2- A shift from land to sea - a new maritime road

If it were possible to take a snapshot of the changes that took place on the *Silk Roads'* axes at the beginning of the 16th century, we would be able to see an increasing brightness for the sea routes, while the terrestrial ones retired into the shadows. Zooming in on the cosmopolitan Samarkand, it becomes clear that its two millennia-old history - from the arrival of the Achaemenid Persians to the rise of the Uzbeks¹³ – were marked by its privileged location. In fact, being at a major intersection of terrestrial paths, which continuously gave this city access to ideas and commerce, Samarkand seemed an indispensable, luminous and even irreplaceable metropolis.¹⁴ Yet, at the same time that Babur (1483–1530), the Uzbek chieftain and national hero who founded the Moghul dynasty in India, was forging his empire and repeatedly conquering and losing Samarkand, the Iranian plateau was unified in 1501 by Shah Ismail I (1487–1524), founder of the Safavid dynasty. Samarkand's lustre faded as the new Indian and Persian empires shifted their geostrategic interests to the Indian ocean, where a new force, emanating from the Portuguese, had emerged and become increasingly powerful over time, altering the millennial-old dynamics of the *Silk Roads*. As the volume of maritime trade grew exponentially, the politico-military concerns of the great Asian kingdoms and empires were also forced to focus on the maritime front. This was noted long ago, for example, by Denys Lombard, who stated that the arrival of the Portuguese in Canton

¹³ See Jean-Paul Roux, *L'Asie Centrale* and François Widemann, *Les successeurs d'Alexandre en Asie Centrale*.

¹⁴ See Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 113-140; and Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, 193.

(today Guangzhou, China) in 1513 and subsequent events represent the first time the Chinese authorities felt a simultaneous threat to its empire by land and by sea.¹⁵

These shifting macro dynamics can nevertheless be traced to a short voyage, in 1434, by a small crew aboard a tiny ship, in which Cape Bojador was passed. And with that passage an old view of the world was shattered and the doors to globalisation were opened.

At the behest of the determined Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), a handful of men under the command of Gil Eanes conquered the fear that had been shared by all Euro-Mediterranean peoples since Greco-Roman times.¹⁶ Legends of the dark sea and the lack of material stimuli had hitherto largely prevented them from exploring the unknown, formless, and frightening ocean that bathed its shores. Only the Vikings had explored the chain of islands to the north¹⁷. Yet, they soon had abandoned such expeditions to the west¹⁸, and, for the centuries that followed, the remainder of Europe's population was unaware of these voyages, though its memory became crystallised in the Norse Sagas.

While news of the passage of Cape Bojador and allusions to the riches and exoticism of the lands newly discovered quickly spread throughout Christendom, the Portuguese were able to maintain their monopoly on the tropical waters until these were divided with Castile in 1494 through the Treaty of Tordesillas.¹⁹ As a Christian and a Renaissance²⁰ prince, Henry the Navigator was motivated by the prospect of increasing the stature of his House and by the possibility of finding allies in the fight against Maghrebian Islam. Soon after his death, India was taking shape on the political horizon

¹⁵ See Denys Lombard, *Histoire de la Chine Impériale*.

¹⁶ See João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, *Henrique, o Infante*.

¹⁷ See G. J. Marcus, *The conquest of North Atlantic*.

¹⁸ See Stéphane Cuviaux, *La fin du monde viking*.

¹⁹ See Bartolomé Yun Casalilla, *Los imperios ibéricos*.

²⁰ See Gérald Chaix, *L'Europe de la Renaissance*.

of the Portuguese crown, due to the systematic policy of exploring the ocean led by the king Alphonso V (r. 1438-1481)²¹. While King João II (r. 1481–1495) devised a plan focused on accessing the Asian markets via a sea route, this was only achieved in 1498 during the reign of his successor, Manuel I (r. 1495–1521)²², a development which had a transformative effect on trade relations and the interconnectedness of the Afro-Eurasian worlds.

In fact, in May 1498, an armada under the command of Vasco da Gama landed in Kozhikode, changing the history of the Indian Ocean forever.²³ In so doing, the Portuguese accomplished an ancient European dream of gaining direct access to the spice market,²⁴ free from Muslim intermediaries, and creating a traditional commercial flow via a direct sea route between India and Lisbon. Though their initial objective was to obtain spices, the ships returned from their maiden voyage with information about other Asian regions and products such as porcelain or lacqware, which were still little known in Europe. A panoply of goods that had hitherto reached Christian Europe in dribs and drabs²⁵ could now be obtained in ample quantities. The European armadas, which had never ploughed the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans before, caught coastal Asia off-guard and the Portuguese were able to find commercial and military allies, while they also changed naval warfare with the introduction of cannons²⁶. Moreover, the effective use of naval artillery by the Portuguese led to their first military successes in the Indian Ocean, bringing about a significant change in the military tactics of coastal Asia. Indeed, the Portuguese were often hired as mercenaries due to their competence with firearms,

²¹ See João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, José Damião Rodrigues and Pedro Aires Oliveira, *História da Expansão e do Império Português*, 62-81.

²² See João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, *D. Manuel I*.

²³ See Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*.

²⁴ See J. Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*; and Raoul Mclaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean*.

²⁵ See David Abulafia, *The Great Sea*; and Caroline Boggis-Rolfe, *The Baltic Story*.

²⁶ See João Paulo Oliveira e Costa & alia, 2014, 105-112.

whose use was subsequently learned by many Asian peoples and even discovered by the Japanese.²⁷

3- The new hub of the *Silk Roads*

From its inception, this new circuit took on the same characteristics as all the others that are traditionally considered to be part of the *Silk Roads*. From a European perspective, and as already mentioned, it first served to increase the flow of spices between India and Europe, but soon the Cape Route was also used to spread Chinese porcelain, which until then had been circulating in the Indian Ocean but had not reached the far west. In fact, around 1520, porcelain pieces with the armorial symbols of the kingdom of Portugal were being produced in the kilns of China.

Various types of furniture in raw or lacquered wood, precious timber, silk and cotton fabrics, jewellery and precious stones were part of the cargoes transported at this time, while metals flowed the other way into Asia, just as they had at the time of the Roman Empire, but now accompanied by glass and crystal and by ivory from the West African coast. The circulation of exotic animals enriched the general knowledge of sixteenth century populations, as we can see from Dürer's famous engraving of the rhinoceros or in Namban folding screens.²⁸ Knowledge of the geography of the world was also globalised at this time, as we can see in Ricci's famous map, drawn in Beijing. Christianity, for its part, also benefited from this direct connection, becoming the first global religion.

This Atlantic route also brought other objects to Asia. Some took longer to be adopted, but in time became items of widespread daily use, such as the chair, or in early modern East Asia, the button. Indeed, the name of this object in Japanese is *botan*, derived

²⁷ See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution*.

²⁸ See Alexandra Curvelo, *Namban Folding Screens Masterpieces*.

directly from the word *botão* in Portuguese. The case of Japan, which had lived in semi-isolation until the arrival of the Portuguese in 1543, is one of the best examples of the function of the new maritime circuits of the *Silk Roads* that connected Lisbon to Nagasaki via the Cape Route. By the 1570s, there were already European-style assistance centres for poor and sick people, the *misericórdias*, on the island of Kyushu²⁹, and in Kyoto one could hear the sound of harpsichords and violins and admire mechanical clocks and world maps. In 1581, Oda Nobunaga observed a military parade sitting on an armchair³⁰, an Indo-European object which can be seen in Persepolis ruins low relieves, but not in India, and that became one of the most significant symbols of power in Europe, as the throne. In 1581, on Kyoto streets, that armchair, which had sailed along the Cape Route, was an exotic way of strengthening the political prestige of the most powerful warlord of the Japanese empire.

Two other examples support our argument regarding the role of the Cape Route as an axis of the *Silk Roads* — paper and gunpowder. As is well known, they were both Chinese inventions that travelled to Europe along the ancient *Silk Roads*. Yet, during the 16th century, after centuries-long processes of being absorbed and redeveloped, they returned to Asia via the Cape Route to serve European imperialism. From its foundation, the *Estado Português da Índia* functioned based on a complex system of communications and administration supported by considerable amount of paper documentation, a material which had not previously existed in either India or Southeast Asia. Moreover, printed books circulated rapidly in Asian cities, printing presses were set up in Goa, Macau and

²⁹ See João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, “The *misericórdias* among Japanese Christian Communities in the 16th and 17th centuries”.

³⁰ See George Ellison, “The cross and the sword”, 55-86; João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, *O Japão e o Cristianismo no Século XVI*; Catarina Simões, “Towards an Analysis of the Concept of the ‘Exotic.’”, 45-71; and Reinier H. Hesselink, *The Dream of Christian Nagasaki*.

Nagasaki, and Asian languages were given a new form of expression through the European alphabet.

As for gunpowder, the political reunification of Japan cannot be explained without considering the role of firearms, especially Oda Nobunaga's decisive use of them at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575. Not surprisingly, the title of the chronicle that reports the arrival of the first Portuguese adventurers to Tanegashima island is *teppo-ki*, that is, “the chronicle of the musket”.

In Portugal, meanwhile, a new model for palaces emerged in the mid-16th century in which the new architectural paradigms of Italian inspiration were combined with Indo-Persian gardens and fountains³¹, while Japanese fans became objects for women's use in Europe (as it is further developed on in Chapter 1). Simultaneously, throughout Europe, numerous aristocrats created their chambers of Art and Wonders, collections made of objects produced in several places within the Afro-Eurasian contexts. Regardless of whether they were manufactured in India, Ceylon, Persia, China or Japan, they all passed through Lisbon, as they were first transported on a Cape Route vessel.

From the 16th century onwards Lisbon became a point of direct connection with the African ports, the Indian commercial centres, as well as the markets of China and Japan, via Macau.³² A description of Lisbon from 1572 made by a companion of the Venetian Ambassador Antonio Tiepolo expounds on its cosmopolitan environment when he refers to the maritime connexions between Lisbon and Mediterranean ports, from Greece to Morocco, from the North Atlantic, especially cities of England, Flanders and France. These European routes were articulated with the West Indies, the Portuguese Atlantic islands, Brazil, Guinea Gulf, the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and East Asia. The

³¹ See Cristina Castel-Branco, *A Índia nos jardins portugueses*.

³² See João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, José Damião Rodrigues and Pedro Aires Oliveira, *História da Expansão e do Império Português*; and Anthony Disney, *The Portuguese Empire*.

commodities referred to by Tiepolo were from all parts of the world. Wines, tapestries, wool and linen clothes, iron objects and grains came from Europe; from the Atlantic islands came sugar, exotic birds, cattle, exotic skins, and slaves from African shores; from West Africa, came gold; sugar from Brazil; spices, precious stones, diamonds and pearls, precious woods, persian carpets and Maldive shells from the Indian ocean, and porcelains and silk from China³³. Most of these goods, as well as salt, wine and fish from Portugal were sent on from Lisbon to cities throughout Europe, from Seville to Moscow.

Considering this account, it truly seems fitting that Ann-Marie Jordan, in 2017, called Lisbon the first global city.³⁴

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³³ See Ant  nio Brehm and Lu  sa Antunes Paonelli, *Portugal na encruzilhada da Europa*, 124-127.

³⁴ See *The Global City. Lisbon in the Renaissance*.

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