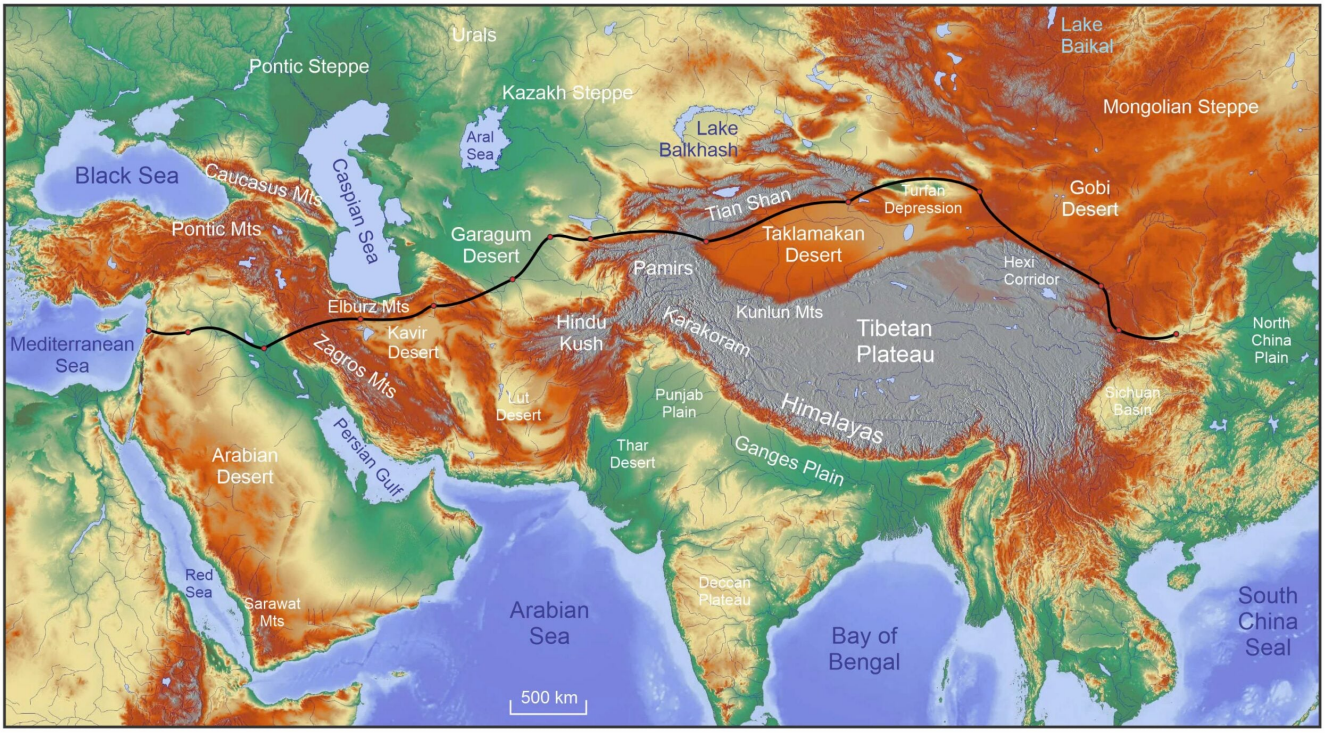
Silk Roads: Paths for the Faithful

The Silk Roads were overland routes connecting China to the Mediterranean Sea, which allowed the trading of silk, paper, gold, jewels, horses, and other goods. These began during the 2nd Century BCE at the time of the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Dynasty in the East. The Silk Roads remained active until the 15th Century CE, when they were largely replaced by maritime trading routes. At present they are mainly used for archeological research and tourism. The illustration shows a modern camel caravan in the desert near Dunhuang. As well as trade goods, the Silk Roads facilitated the movement of religious ideas. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam followed the Silk Roads into China. Mithraism, Manichaeism and Islam spread into Europe.

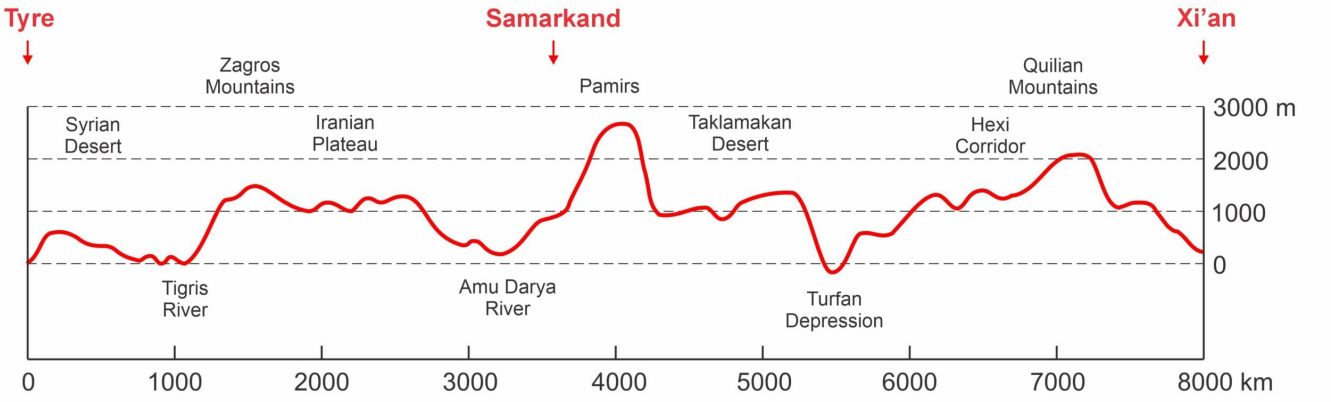
Central Asia

A map of the present political boundaries in central Asia will allow us to get our bearings:

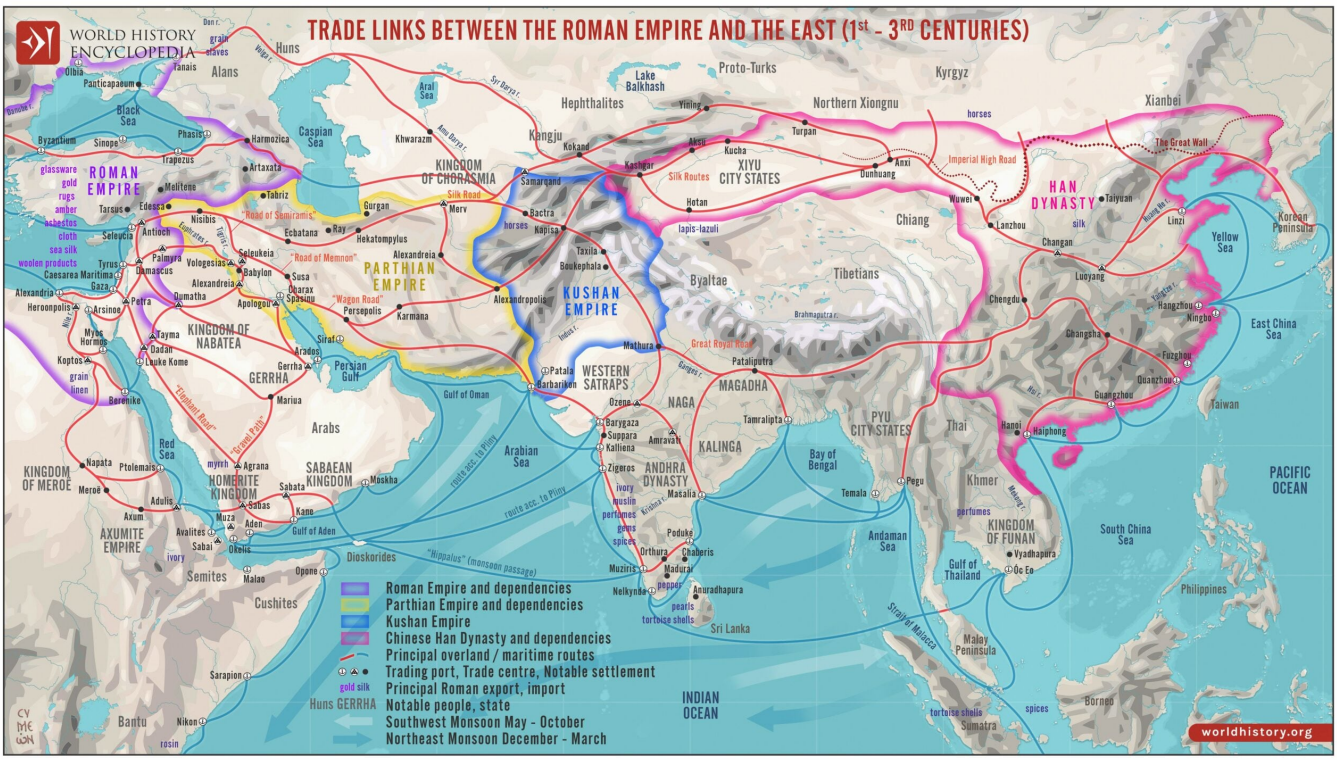
The following map shows the topography of the region and traces one of the many possible Silk Roads from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Tyre on the Mediterranean.

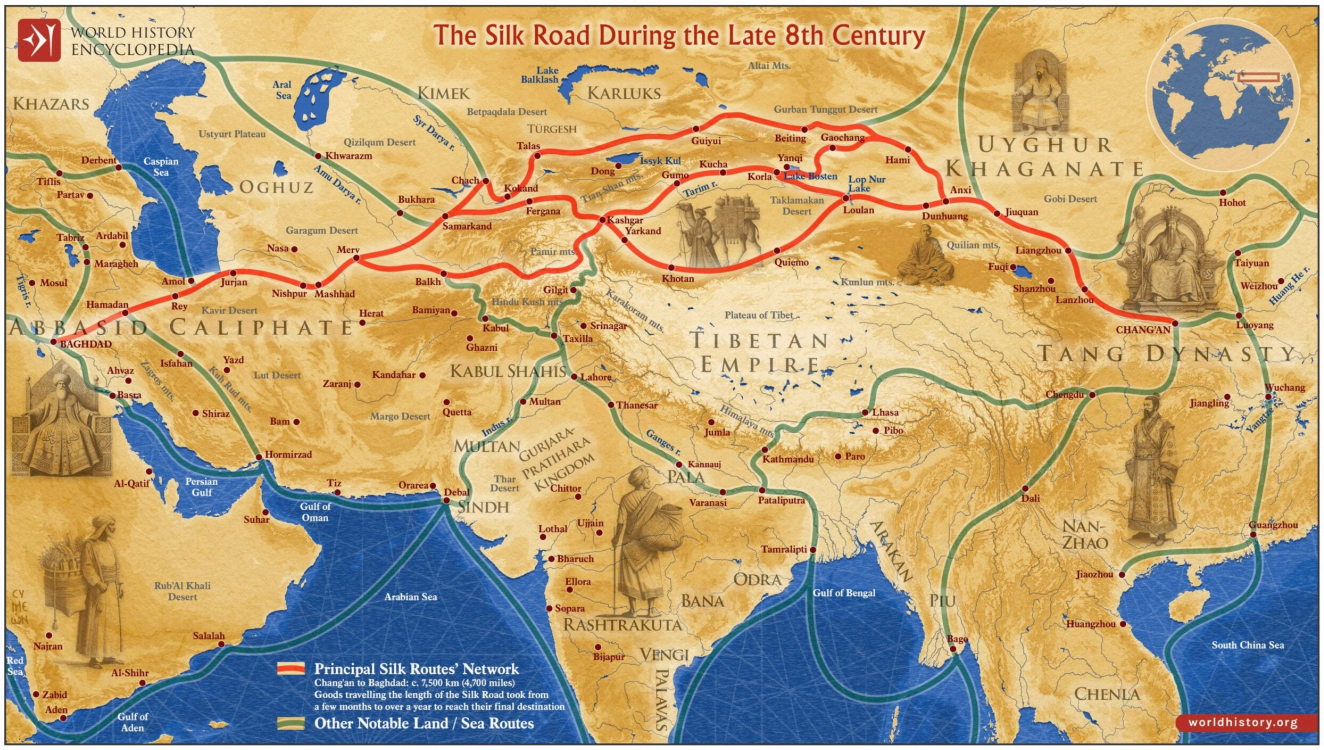


The following diagram, modified from Wood (2002), shows the changes in altitude (in meters above sea level) over the journey. It also notes the main mountains that are traversed, the deserts that are crossed and the main rivers on the way.



The Silk Roads spanned some 8000 km and were active for about 1700 years. They are described in multiple recent books (Frankopan, 2016; Hansen, 2017; Millward, 2013, Torr, 2018, Whitfield, 2024; Wood 2002). A striking TV series from Japan can be downloaded from archive.org. The following two maps by Simeon Netchev show the Silk Roads at two different points in time: the first map when trade began between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty in the 1st Century BCE, and the second map when the Silk Roads were at their height during the late 8th Century CE with the Tang Dynasty in China and the Abbasid Caliphate in the West. The first map also shows the maritime routes connecting China, India and Europe, and the monsoon winds that facilitate them. These sea connections are sometimes considered the "Golden Road" (Dalrymple, 2025, pp 4-5).

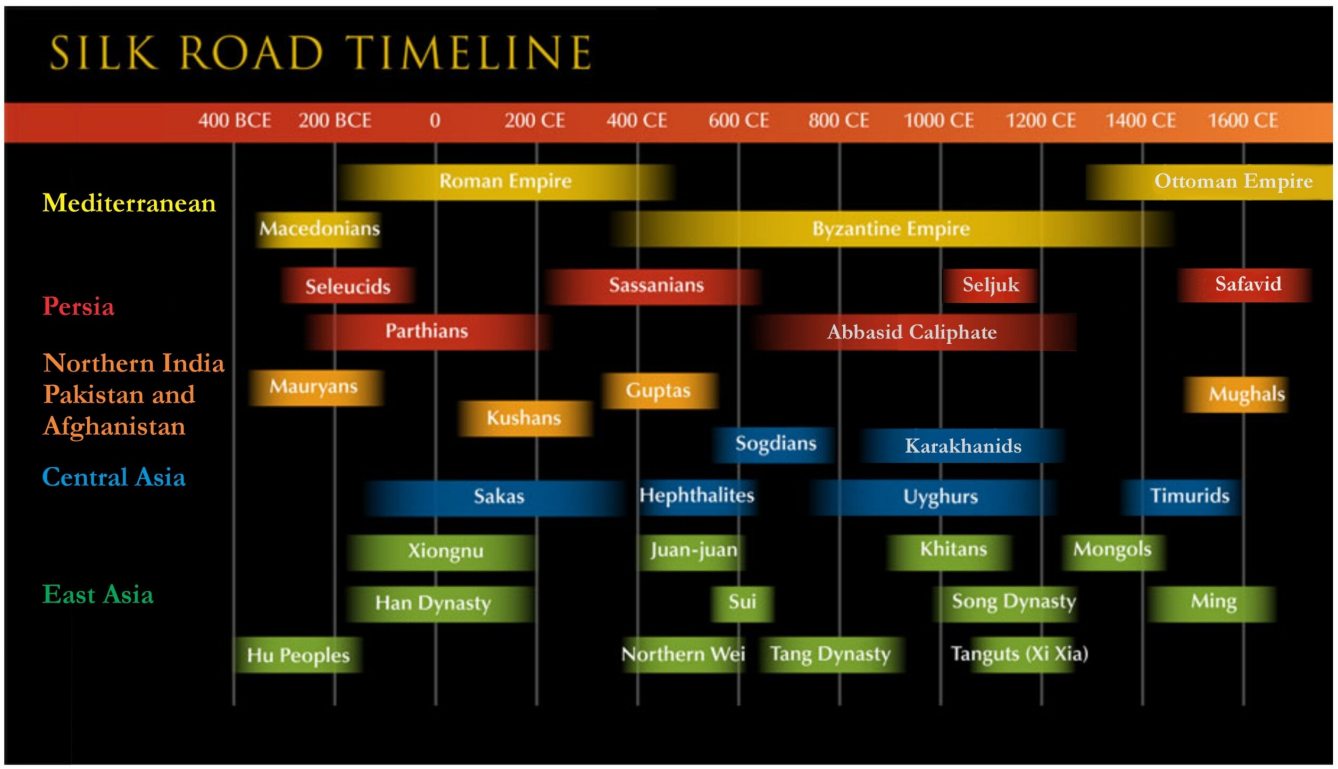




The Mongol Empires (1206-1368) supported trade along the Silk Roads. However, in the 14th Century CE the Mongol Empires fragmented, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) blocked overland connections between the Silk Roads and Europe. Trade between China and Europe continued

using the maritime routes. Vasco da Gama made his first voyage from Portugal to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. The overland Silk Roads soon became used only for local trade, and desert sands reclaimed many of the ancient trading posts (Beckwith, 2009, pp 232-262; Torr, 2018, pp 105-126).

Many different empires established themselves for periods of time in central Asia (Beckwith, 2009). The following diagram, modified from Waugh (2009), shows some of the most important. Though having its capital in the east, the Mongol Empire (1206-1368 CE) extended all the way to Europe.



The Library at Dunhuang

Since it will play a role in much of what will be said about the movement of religions along the Silk Roads, we shall briefly mention the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (□, dūn, tumulus/mound + □,huáng, shining/brilliant). Dunhuang, located on an oasis containing Crescent Lake and is surrounded by sand dunes, was an important stop on the Silk Road from the time of

its beginning in the 2nd Century BCE (Hansen, 2017, pp 288-335). Nearby is the Jade Gate – an opening in the Great Wall of China that allows entrance to the Hexi Corridor connecting the cities of Chang'an and Luoyang to the deserts of Xinjiang in Western China.

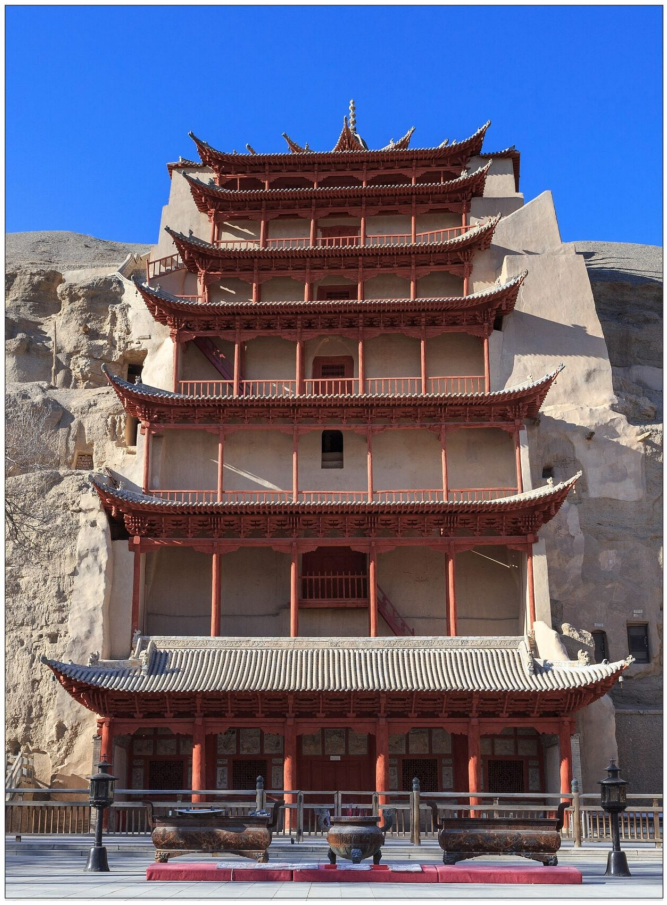
Buddhist monks first arrived in Dunhuang in the early centuries of the common era. In the 4th Century CE, they began carving caves into of the sandstone cliffs 25 km southeast of the city. These Mogao Caves – "Caves of a Thousand Buddhas" – are a system of about 500 separate temples decorated with wall paintings and sculptures and connected by intricate stairs and platforms. By the 9th Century, the monk Hong Bian had made the Three Realms Monastery near the caves into an important center of learning. When he died, his statue was placed in Cave 17. On the wall behind him were painted two banyan trees with a water bottle and a cloth bag hanging on the branches. Under one tree an acolyte holds a fan; under the other, a disciple holds the monk's staff.

In 1002 CE the Karakhanids spread into the Taklamakan Desert and destroyed the Buddhist City of Khotan (Sinor, 1990). Though they had once followed both Buddhism and Christianity, the Karakhanids had converted to Islam in 934 CE and considered all other faiths as infidels. Fearful that Dunhuang might also be destroyed, the monks put all their treasured manuscripts and paintings in Cave 17 with the statue of Hong Bian, and sealed the cave off from the outside world (Rong, 1999).

In 1900, while sweeping sand from the temple floor of Cave 17, a Daoist monk, a custodian for the caves, realized that the rear wall was false and discovered that the sealed-off chamber contained piles of ancient manuscripts. In sum there were about 50,000 manuscripts and other objects in the cave, which became known as the "Library Cave." In 1907 the newly discovered treasure trove was examined by the explorer Aurel

Stein, who purchased many of the manuscripts for the British Museum (Morgan & Walters, 2012). Paul Pelliot visited in 1908 and bought a set of manuscripts for the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

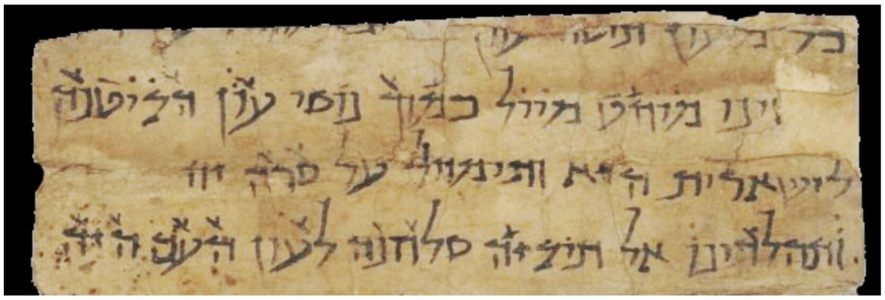
The following illustration shows on the left the entrance to the Mogao Caves. Most of the building is from the 20th Century. On the upper right is the statue of Hong Bian in the Library Cave. On the lower right is an impression of what the cave must have looked like in 1900.



Most of the manuscripts found at Mogao concerned Buddhism and were written in Chinese. However, some of the manuscripts related to other religions such as Manichaeism, Christianity, Judaism and Daoism. Many ancient languages other than Chinese were also represented: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Sogdian, Hebrew, and Old Uyghur.

Judaism

One of the manuscripts from the Library Cave is a Hebrew prayer for forgiveness (*selihah*). At one time it was folded up, perhaps so that it could be carried easily in a small container as an amulet to ward off evil. The text does not directly quote scripture but is very biblical in its wording. The following illustration shows the complete manuscript on the upper left. The photograph has been lightened to facilitate reading. On the upper right is an enlargement of the first 4 lines together with a transcription (Koller, 2024). The English translation of these 4 lines is below together with a quotation form the book of Numbers showing a similar style.



כל מיעון תיסר עון

[נק]ינו מיחַט מִייל כַּמוך נוסי עָון הַבִּיטָנה

לישארית הזא ותימחל על סָרָה זה [

ותהלָתינו אל תיבזַה סלַחנָה לָעון הָעַם הָזֶה

every abode(?). Remove iniquity

we are clean of sin! Who is a God like you, who bears iniquity? Look please at this remnant, and pardon for ... this defection

Do not spurn our praise. Forgive please, the iniquity of this people

Compare: Numbers 14:19

> Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy

The manuscript is dated to around 800 CE. This and a few other Hebrew manuscripts from other stations on the Silk Road

suggest that Jewish merchants were involved in the trade between China and the West. There may therefore have been Jews in China during the Tang dynasty or even earlier. A group of Jews in Kaifeng in central China petitioned the emperor to build a synagogue in 1163 CE (Berg, 2024). Their ancestors may have originally travelled to China over the Silk Roads. Their descendants still live today in China.

Zoroastrians

The religion of Zoroastrianism was established toward the end of the second Millenium BCE, and became the state religion of the main Persian Empires: the Achaemenid (559-331 BCE), Parthian (559 BCE – 331 BCE) and Sasanian (224–651 CE). Zoroastrian priests were generally called *magi*.

(i) Biblical Magi

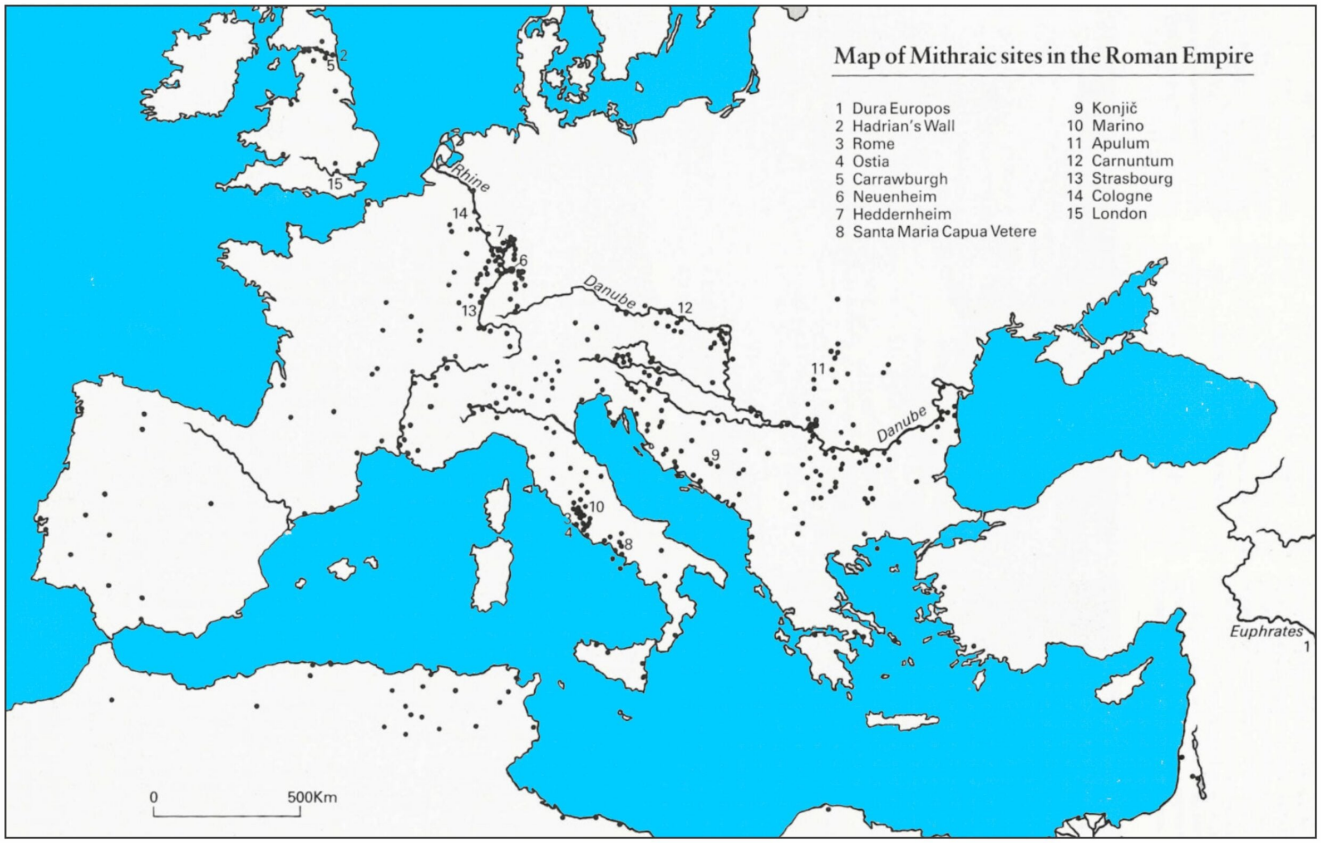
The Gospel of Matthew relates how three *magi* (translated as "wise men") came from the East to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem.

> Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
>
> Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (*Matthew* 2: 1-2)

These wise men may have been Zoroastrian priests from Persia. If so, they would have travelled along the Silk Roads. The illustration below shows a mosaic representation of the magi from the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuove in Ravenna (565 CE). The magi are shown in typical Persian clothing: flowing capes and Phrygian caps.

(ii) Mithraism

Mithraism was a Roman Mystery Cult focused on the God Mithras, one of the many Gods (*yazata*) worshipped in Zoroastrianism. The cult involved secret meetings in underground temples called Mithraea, archeological evidence for which has been found throughout the Roman Empire:



Mithraism was active from about 50 CE to about 300 CE. In the 4th Century CE Christianity was mandated as the sole state religion in the Roman Empire (Edict of Thessalonica, 380 CE). Thereafter Mithraism essentially vanished.

The Mithraeum was set up for a communal feast for the initiates, who were almost always men and mainly soldiers. One essential part of the temple was a fresco or sculpture of Mithras slaying a bull – the "tauroctony." No one really understands what this sacrifice means. It might have something to do with redemption and salvation, much like the crucifix in a Christian church.

The iconography was stable across its many different locations. In the center, the God Mithras slays the bull. Above are representations of the sun and the moon, and below the bull is attacked by a crab, a snake and a dog. The following illustration shows a tauroctony from the 2nd Century CE unearthed from the Villa Borghese in Rome:

The cult was originally believed to have been imported into the Roman Empire by soldiers who had fought in the Parthian wars, a series of conflicts occurring from 54 BCE to 217 CE, and who had thereby been exposed to the Gods of Zoroastrianism. However, there are relatively few Mithraea in the Eastern reaches of the Empire. And there is no evidence that the worship of Mithra in Persia involved any of the apparent rituals that occurred in the Roman Mithraea. Some have therefore suggested that the cult was a Roman invention (e.g. Stoll, 2022). Indeed, some of the earliest Mithraea are concentrated near the city of Rome (Chalupa, 2016), Nevertheless, the cult was devoted to one of the Zoroastrian gods, and most of the early descriptions of the cult acknowledged its Persian origins (Boyce et al, 1991, pp 468-490).

One possibility is that Roman Mithraism allowed its cult members to embrace an “otherness” and make themselves distinct from their fellows:

> the imagery of Mithras dressed in the Persian garment and soft shoes with Phrygian cap on top of his curly hair alluded to the Greek topoi of Persians who were Rome's 'exotic other' and 'fiercest foe'. Such an iconography enabled the Roman Mithraists to depict their god as a foreign deity and to identify themselves as those Roman elites who had the knowledge of worshiping the foreign god. The Oriental imagery of Mithras created a boundary for Mithraic brotherhood and distinguished the cultic community from other forms of religiosity and religious groups in the wider cultural and religious boundaries of Rome. Whatever its origin, the Roman mystery cult of Mithras strongly relied on Roman attitudes and romantic visions of Persia and the Parthians in particular. (Mahzjoo, 2024).

(iii) Sogdians

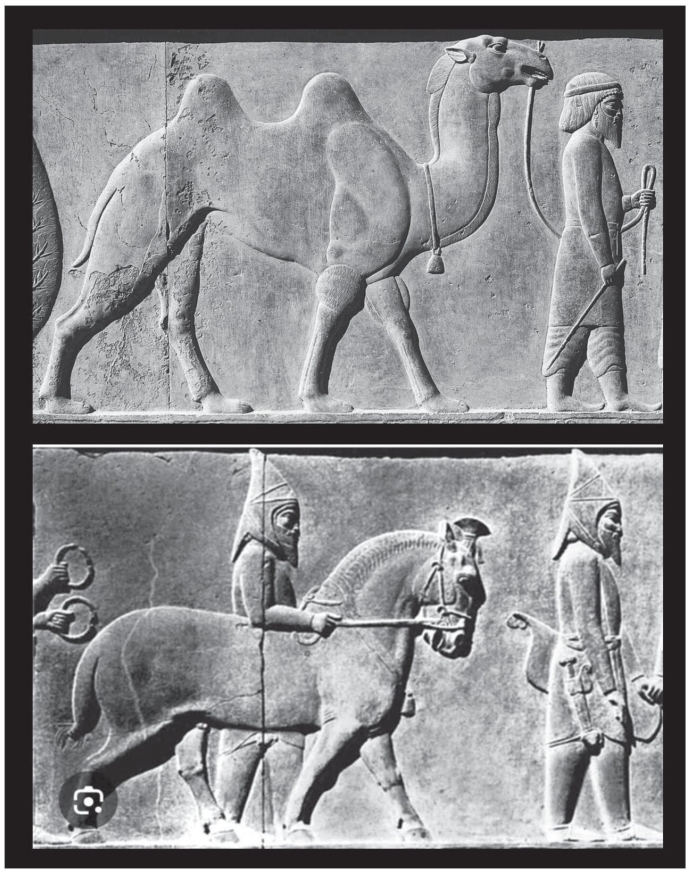
At the time when trading was at its height, the main middlemen on the Silk Roads were Sogdian merchants (Pin Lyu, 2024). Sogdia was the name for the area of land between the Amu Darya (or Oxus) and the Sri Darya Rivers. Its capital was Samarkand. The following map shows the location of Sogdia in Central Asia. The black lines show several of the Silk Roads:

The Sogdians were descendants of the ancient Scythians. At the time of the Achaemenid Empire, when they were known as Saka, they paid tribute to the Persian Emperor in the form of camels and horses.

During the time of the Sasanian Empire, Sogdia was at the eastern limits of the empire and practiced Zoroastrianism (Grenet, 2015). When the empire was invaded by the Muslims, these frontier regions were able to maintain their religious practices for several centuries.

During the Abbasid Caliphate the Sogdians traded extensively with the Chinese and established large merchant colonies in cities of northern China.

The following illustration shows on the left two bas-relief representations of Saka bringing camels and horses to the Emperor at Persepolis (6^{th}-5^{th} Century BCE). On the right is a Tang dynasty porcelain statuette showing a group of Sogdian musicians on a camel. This was found in Xi'an and dates to 723 CE.



Zoroastrian funerary practices mandated that the corpse should not be allowed to pollute either the air or the land. Neither cremation nor burial was possible. Zoroastrians typically laid the corpse out on a stone bed and allowed vultures to strip the flesh from the bones. In China, Zoroastrians compromised by constructing closed tombs within which the deceased was laid out on a funerary couch and allowed to decay above ground. If the deceased was a rich merchant, this funerary bed could be quite ornate. The following illustration shows on the left a carving from a 6th Century Zoroastrian funerary couch in Northern China, now in the Miho Museum in Japan. The upper half of the carving shows a Zoroastrian priest caring for the sacred fire during the funeral service for the deceased. He is recognized by the face mask that prevents him from contaminating the fire with his mortal breath. The mourners are behind the priest. A camel is recognized to the right of the sacred fire, and several pack horses are seen below. The upper right of the illustration shows how the complete

funerary couch was set up.

The lower right shows a small ceramic statuette of a Zoroastrian priest with a face mask. Although he is sometimes considered a camel driver, he is more likely a priest tending to the sacred fire. The face mask is just too typical. The statuette was found in northern China and dates to the 8th Century CE.

Buddhism

Gautama Buddha lived in the northeastern region of India in the 6th or 5th Century BCE. After his death his followers taught the new dharma throughout the Indian subcontinent. The Mauryan

Empire (320 BCE–185 BCE) expanded to incorporate Greco-Persian lands in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ashoka (304–232 BCE), the third Mauryan Emperor, promoted Buddhist thought throughout his domain.

(i) Gandhara

Few representations of the Buddha occur form the first centuries of the new religion. Since the teaching proclaimed that the everyday world was transient and misleading, artistic representations may have been considered unworthy. This changed when the faithful encountered artists of the Greco-Persian world in a region of northwest India called Gandhara. Realistic sculptures of the Buddha and his disciples proliferated. The following illustrations shows sculpture of the Buddha made in the Gandhara from the 1st, 2nd and 5th Centuries CE:

(ii) Colossal Buddhas

As their religion spread along the Silk Roads, Buddhist monks

began to carve statues of the Buddha out of the sandstone cliffs along the route. Some of these assumed colossal sizes (Wong, 2019). The earliest large Buddhas, up to 15 m tall, were carved at the Yungang Grottoes near Datong in Northern China beginning in 465 CE. Colossal seated Buddhas, 33 and 23 m tall, were carved in the Mogao caves near Dunhuang in the 7th and 8th Centuries CE.

And around 600 CE, in Bamiyan, located in present-day Afghanistan, 130 km northwest of Kabul, two huge standing Buddhas were carved, one 38 m and the other 55 m tall. Since details such as the folds in the robe and the facial features could not be carved in the sandstone, these were added to the rough-hewn statues using stucco. The arms were constructed using stucco on wooden armatures. Over the years much of the stucco work eroded away leaving the large ungainly limestone forms.

The people in the area when the statues were carved were Hephthalites. These people followed several different religions (Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism) and tolerated the work of the Buddhist monks.

In 2001 the Taliban enforced a Muslim edict forbidding artistic representations of human beings. The two Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed.

The following illustration shows at the top a panorama of the Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley before their destruction. The lower left of the illustration shows a close-up of the larger of the two Buddhas. The lower right compares before and after its destruction.

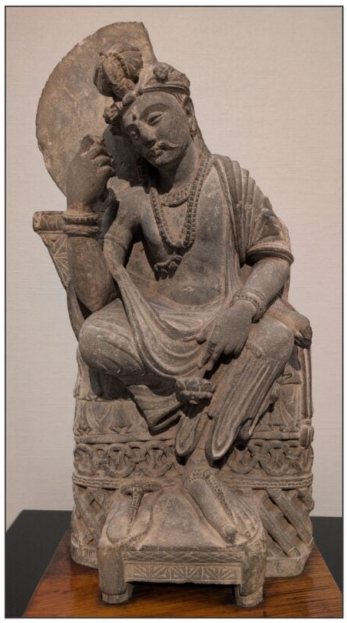
(iii) Avalokistesvara

Avalokistesvara was the bodhisattva of compassion. His name in Sanskrit means “he who looks down,” i.e. he who considers the concerns of the faithful. As Avalokitesvara travelled along the Silk Roads to China he slowly changed gender from male to female (Stein, 1986; Suebsantiwongse, 2025; Yu, 2001). In China she became known as *Guānshìyīn,* (□□□, look/observe+people/world +sound/voice: “the one who perceives the cries of the world”) or Guanyin. As the deity moved to Japan, she became known as Kannon, and veered back toward masculinity.

Avalokistsevara characteristically holds a lotus flower and sometimes prayer bead. Sometimes he or she has multiple heads which make her vision and hearing more acute. Occasionally the deity has multiple arms the better to aid those in need. As Guanyin, she often carries a vase of pure water to relieve suffering.

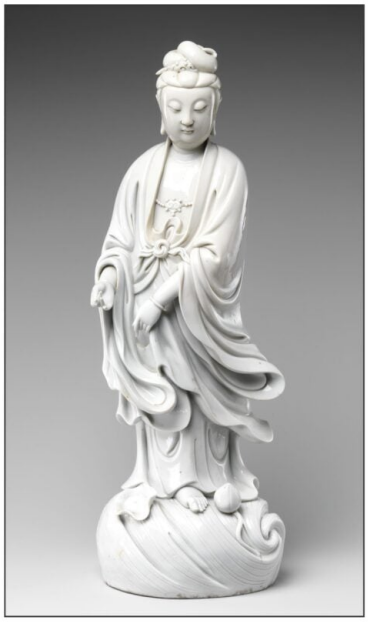
The following illustration shows the transformation of Avalokistesvara. In order from left to right and then form up to down:

1. Stone, Avalokistesvara, Gandhara, 3rd Century CE
2. Bronze, Avalokistesvara, Gandhara, 4th Century CE
3. Stone, Avalokistesvara, Northern China, 6th Century CE
4. Wood, Avalokistesvara with multiple heads, Northern China 11th Century CE
5. Wood, Avalokistesvara “seated at royal ease,” China, 11th Century CE
6. Bronze, Avalokistesvara, Nepal, 14th Century CE
7. Gilded Wood, Kannon, Japan 11th Century CE
8. Porcelain, Guanyin, China 17th Century CE
9. Jade, Guanyin, China, 19th Century CE
10. Titanium callosal statue (78 m) Nanshan Guanyin, Hainan Island, 21st Century CE







(iv) The Diamond Sutra

As Buddhism travelled along the Silk Roads to China, the sacred texts began to be translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. One of the most important translators was Kumarajiva (344–413 CE) who was born in Kuqa on the northern edge of the Taklamakan desert. His father was a Buddhist monk from Kashmir. Around 400 CE Kumarajiva travelled to Chang'an where he wrote most of his translations of the Buddhist literature.

The original Diamond Sutra was likely composed shortly after the time of Gautama Buddha's life in the 5th Century BCE. However, it was not formally written down in Sanskrit until the 2nd or 3rd Century CE. The sutra narrates a dialogue between the Buddha and his elderly disciple Subhūti about the nature of reality and how to attain the wisdom that would release one from suffering. The world is transient and illusory; one must release oneself from any attachments; one must seek emptiness. The following is from Red Pine's introduction to his translation of the sutra (2001):

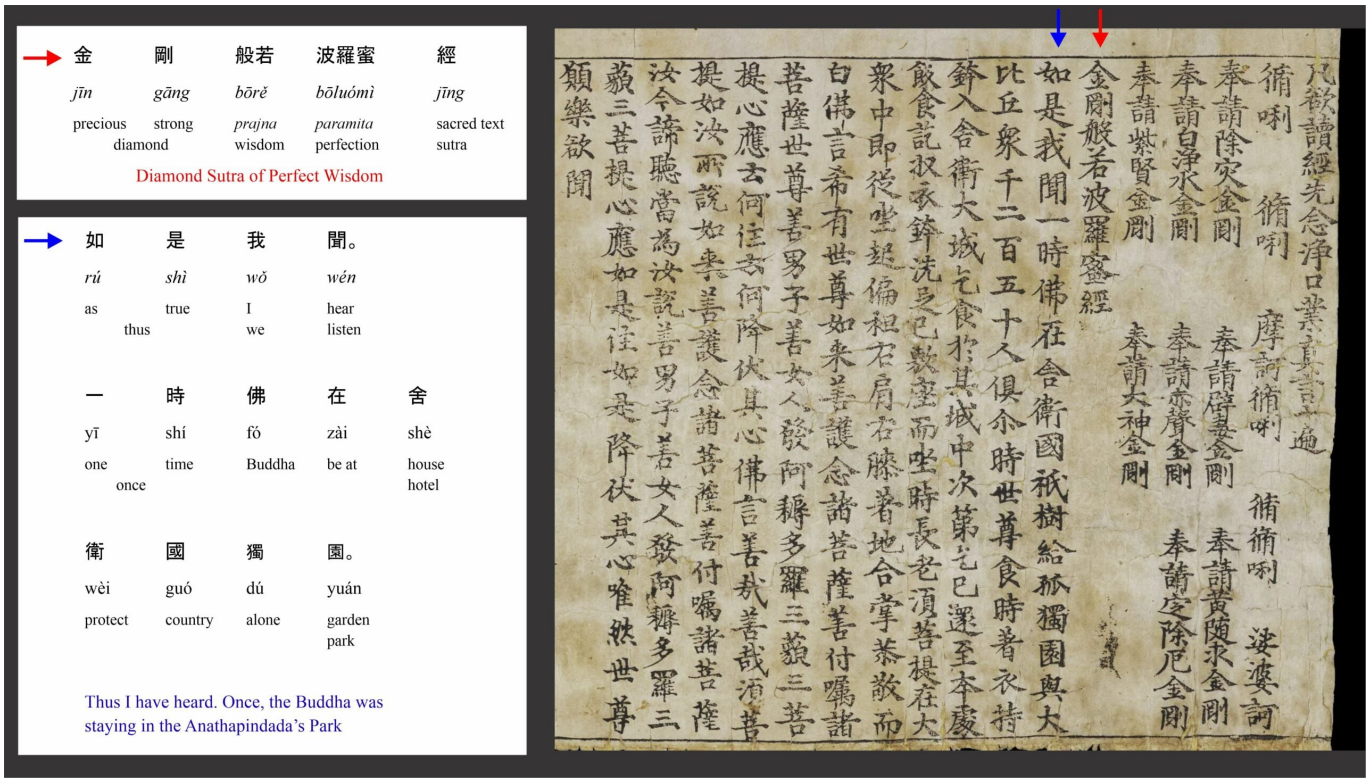
following his Enlightenment, the Buddha had taught people to free themselves from suffering by realizing the impermanence and interdependence of everything upon which their suffering depended, including and especially themselves. The Buddha called this the realization of *shunyata* (emptiness), the view that because nothing exists independently of other things, it has no nature of its own, and every-thing is therefore empty, and this emptiness is the true nature of reality. Later, when the Buddha began teaching people to view emptiness itself as empty and to put the emptiness of emptiness to work in the liberation of all beings, few disciples grasped this new teaching, which he called the perfection of wisdom, the wisdom beyond wisdom.

One of the most important discoveries in the Mogao Caves near

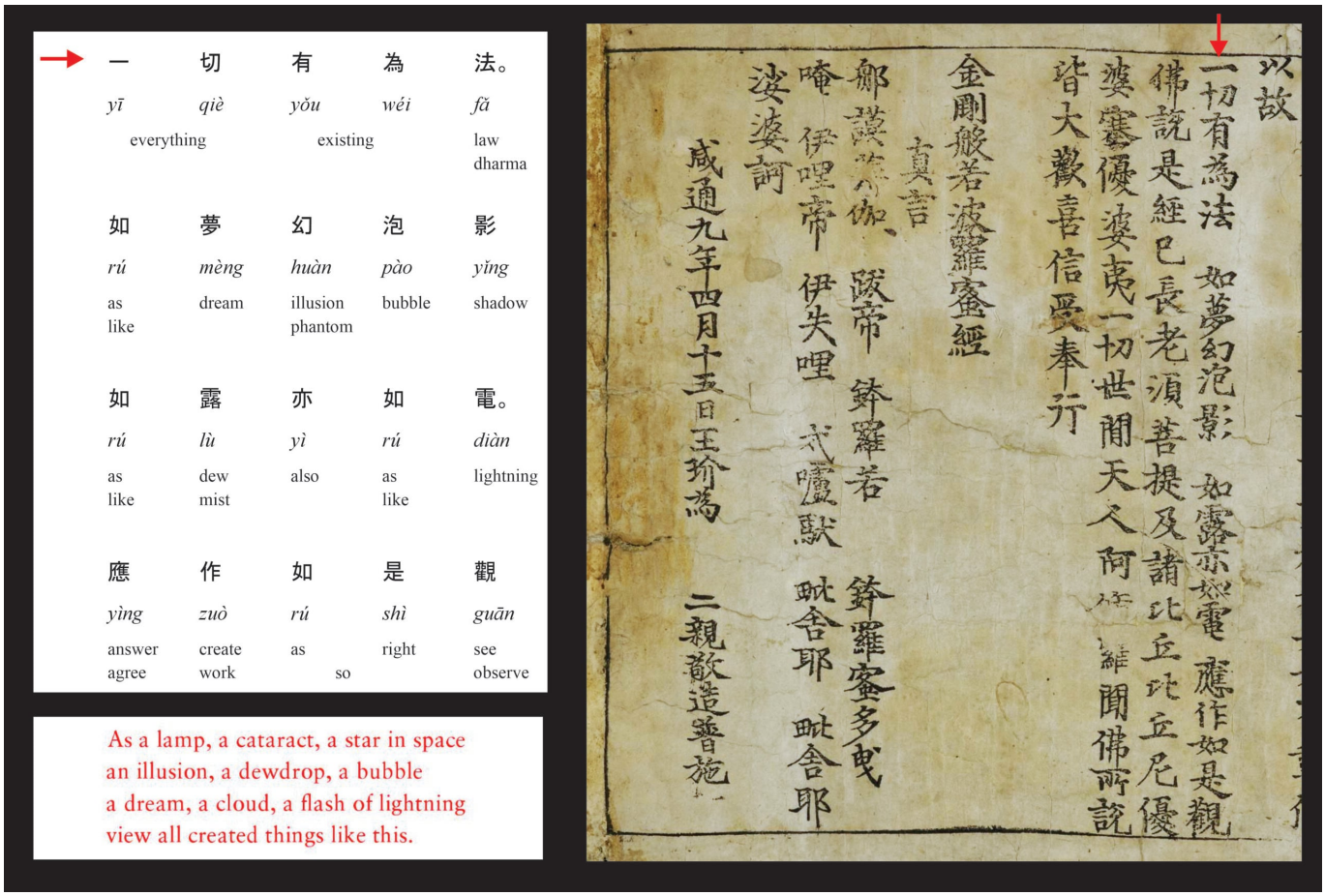
Dunhuang was a woodblock-printed copy of Kumarajiva's translation of the Diamond Sutra. The pages were printed by Wang Jie in 868 CE, probably in Sichuan, and then pasted together to form a scroll about 5 m long. The colophon gives the date and notes that the sutra was being made freely available to all who wished to read. This is the oldest printed book of which we have a copy.

The frontispiece of the scroll shows a woodblock drawing of the Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas, and supernatural guardians. In the lower left is the disciple Subhūti. The following illustration shows this print together with details of the Buddha and his disciple redrawn by Zhao Ming An.

The following illustration shows the first page of text in the scroll along with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first few words of the sutra:



And the following illustration shows the last page of the scroll which includes the famous verse that the Buddha uses to describe the transience of the world. On the left, a character-by-character translation is followed by the English version of Red Pine, based on both the Sanskrit and the Chinese versions of the sutra (2001):



Christianity

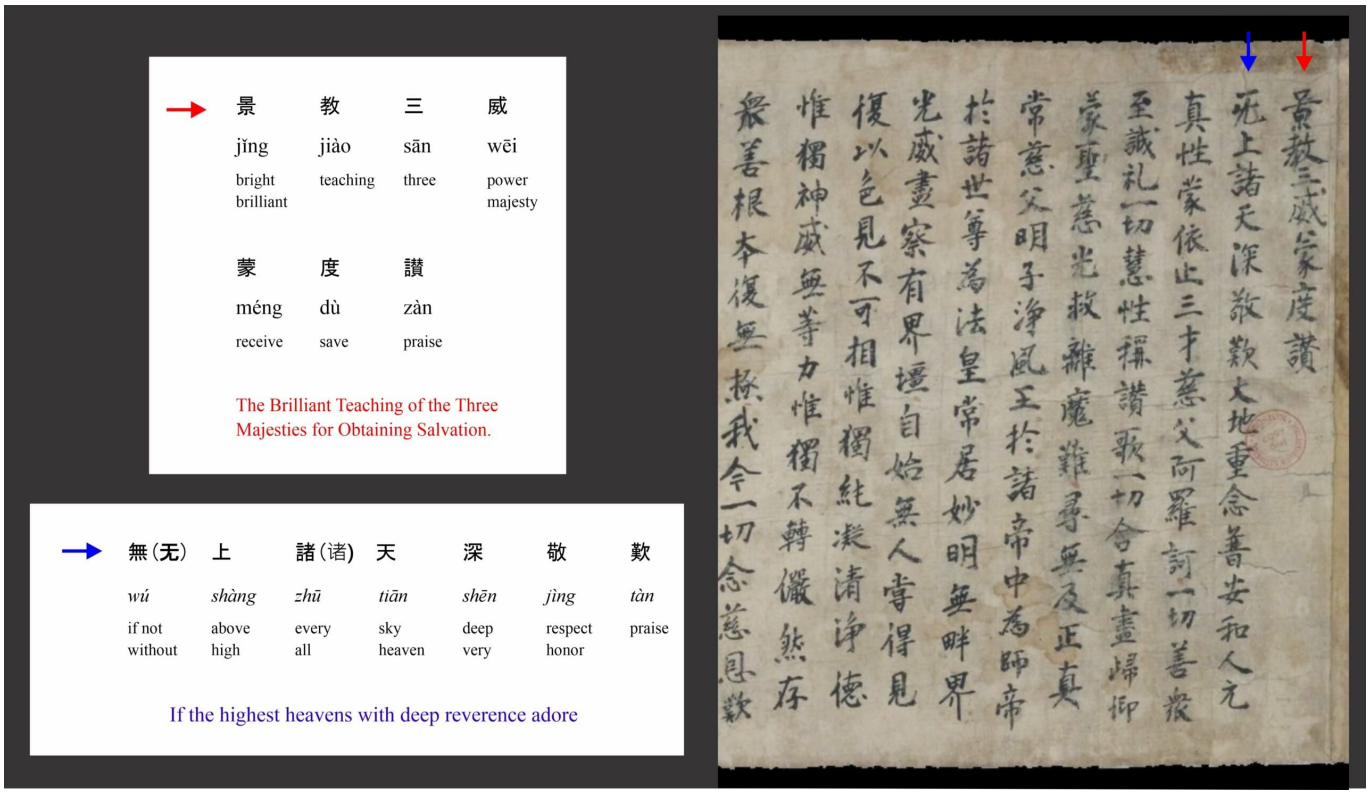
During the first 4 centuries of Christianity, the nature of Jesus as both God and Man was extensively discussed. One position was that Jesus was of two distinct natures – *dyophysite*; another was that his two aspects were conjoined as one – *miaphysite*; and yet another was that his Jesus became fully divine – *monophysite.* Though these old distinctions are almost impossible to understand in modern times, in the 5th Century CE they were matters of life and death. The Church of the East (also known as the Assyrian Church) distinguished itself as miaphysite, and became separate from the dyophysite Byzantine and Roman Churches in 451CE. These latter churches condemned as heretical the monophysite teachings of Nestorius, a theologian in the 5th Century. The Church of the East is often known as the "Nestorian Church," although its views on

the nature of Jesus actually differed from those of Nestorius (Brock, 1996). Although the Church of the East remained separate from the Western Churches for many centuries, it has now established communal relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

(i) The Dunhuang Glora

Among the manuscripts found in the Mogao caves was a Chinese Christian Hymn loosely based on the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the highest), also known as the Greater Doxology (words of praise), especially the version used in the Church of the East. The manuscript was probably written about 800 CE and provides clear evidence that missionaries of the Church of the East had travelled on the Silk Roads to China and were actively proselytizing there centuries before the Jesuits first arrived in the 15th Century CE (Moule, 1930, Teng Li, 2024).

The hymn has 11 verses each containing 4 lines of length 7 syllables, in keeping with Chinese poetic practice. The following illustration shows the beginning of the hymn together with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first line.



The following is a translation of the first three verses of the hymn (Moule, 1930, p 53; Henson, 2017, p 329)

> If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore,
> If the great earth earnestly ponders on general peace and harmony,
> If man's first true nature receives confidence and rest,
> It is due to Alohê the merciful Father of the universe.
>
> All the congregation of the good worship with complete sincerity;
> All enlightened natures praise and sing;
> All who have souls trust and look up to the utmost;
> Receiving holy merciful light to save from the devil.
>
> Hard to find, impossible to reach, upright, true, eternal,
> Merciful Father, shining Son, holy Spirit, King,
> Among all rulers you are Master Ruler,
> Among all the world-honoured you are spiritual Monarch

“Alohê” is a Chinese transcription of the Syriac name for God.

(ii) The *Jingjiao* Stele

In 781 CE a monument dedicated to the Christian faith (□□,*jingjiao*, luminous religion) was erected in Chang’an (Keevak,2008; McGrath, 2021). The limestone stele is almost 3 m high. At the top is a cross and a nine-character title. The following illustration shows the stele *in situ* (before it was moved to a museum), an enlargement of the title, and a character-by-character translation.

大	秦	景	教	流	行
dà	*qín*	*Jǐng*	*jiao*	*liú*	*xíng*
large	state	bright	teaching	spread	travel
Roman Empire		Christianity			

中	国	碑
zhōng	guó	bēi
middle China	kingdom	monument

Monument to the Propagation of the Luminous Religion of Rome in China

The stele summarizes the beliefs of the Christian Church in an inscription of about 1900 characters. This mentions that the Christian church was first established in China in 635 CE through the efforts of the monk Alopen. At the bottom of the stele is a much shorter inscription in Syriac.

After the end of the Tang dynasty 907 CE, Christianity almost disappeared (Teng Li, 2024). The *Jingjiao* Stele was buried, either for protection by the monks or as an act of desecration by those who reviled the foreign religion. It was unearthed during the 17th Century.

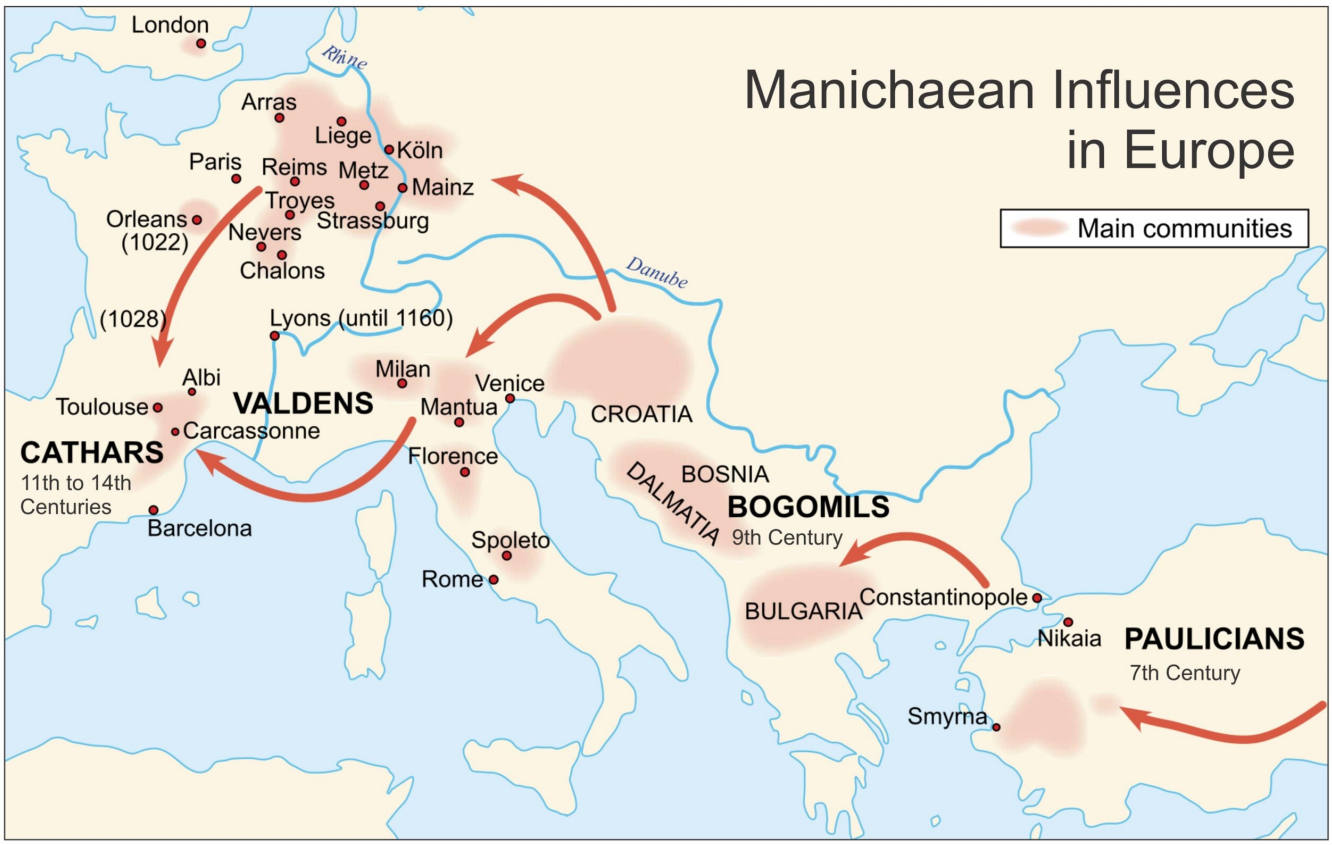
Nevertheless, the Church of the East continued to send missionaries along the Silk Roads and several centuries later, Christian Churches were built throughout the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271–1368) were tolerant of the different religions. The foreign religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism contributed as much to society as the homegrown Daoism and Confucianism.

Manichaeism

Mani (216-274 CE) was a Persian prophet who conceived the world as divided between the light and the dark. He taught that the human soul was imprisoned by birth into the material world, and that the suffering that this entailed would only cease at death, which released the soul from the body. If one died free from sin, one's soul would return to the realm of light. The dualistic religion that he founded – Manichaeism – flourished in the centuries after his death, spreading all the way to Spain in the west and China in the East.

(i) Spread to Europe

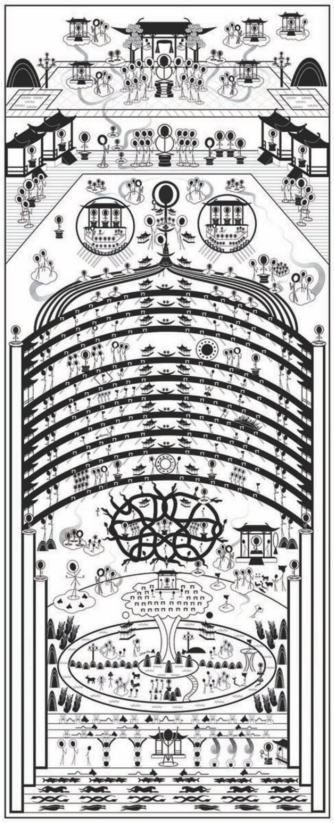
In Europe, Manichaeism declined after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. However, some isolated groups, such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the Cathars in Southeast France, continued to follow Mani's teachings:



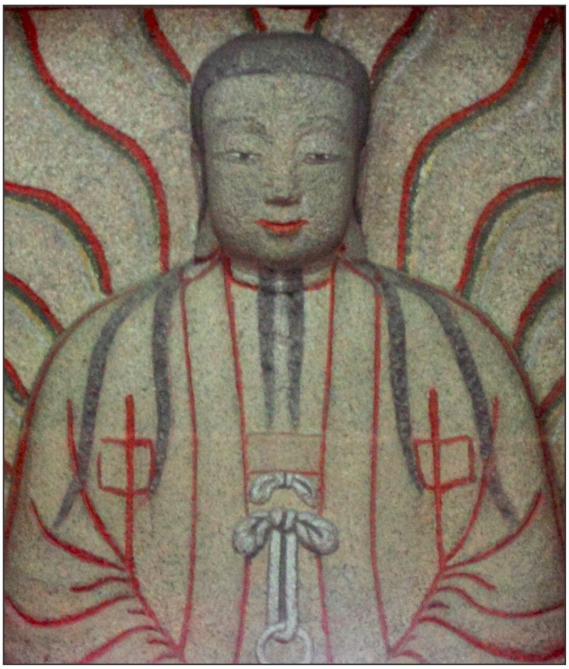
(ii) Spread to China

Manichaeism spread along the Silk Roads into China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). During the Uyghur Kahnate (744–840 CE) in what is now Northern China and Mongolia, Manichaeism was acknowledged as the state religion (Mackerras, 1990).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), a large silk painting (158 by 60 centimetres) was made to illustrate the Manichaean cosmology. This showed the realm of light at the top. In the center was a representation of the judgment that occurs at death: the decision whether the soul is released into the realm of light or sent back to the hell on earth. The following illustration shows the painting with some explanatory analysis (Gulaczi, 2015, pp 247-258), and enlargements showing a portrait of Mani (from the left side of the New Aeon level) and details of the tangled judgement process:



In Cao’an a small town on the west coast of China, a small temple built in 1339 CE was dedicated to Mani, the “Buddha of Light” (Lieu, 1998, pp 188-193). Over the years the temple became used for Buddhist practices. The following illustration shows the bas-relief portrait of Mani over the altar and the inscribed stone in the grounds of the temple.



The inscription reads

Purity (□□, *qīngjìng*), Light (□□, *guāngmíng*),

Power (□□, *dàlì*), Wisdom (□□, *zhìhuì*)

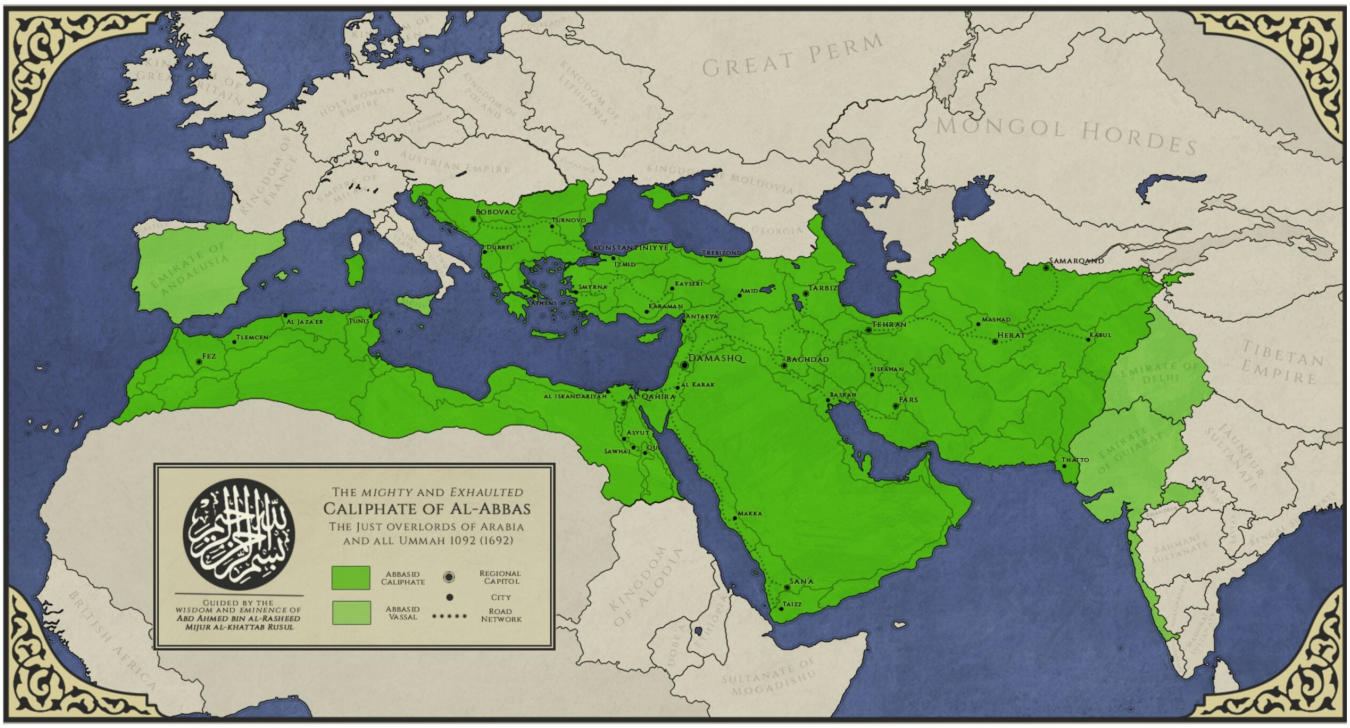
Supreme (□□, *wúshàng*), Ultimate Truth (□□, *zhìzhēn*)

Mani (□□, *móní*), the Buddha of Light (□□ *guāngfú*)

The first four are the attributes of the Manichaean Heavenly Father. Mani considered himself as a prophet in the line of Zoroaster, Buddha and Christ. As such he could be conceived as one of the manifestations of the divine – the Buddha of Light.

Islam

After its founding in Arabia in 622 CE, Islam quickly spread to adjacent regions. By the time of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), the community of the faithful (*Ummah*) extended all the way from Spain to the borders of China:



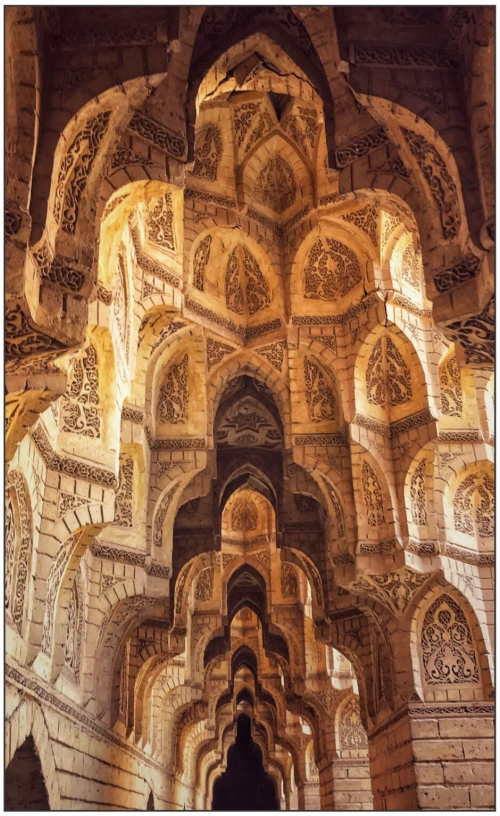
(i) Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid Caliphate with its capital in Baghdad oversaw a period of great prosperity and learning, that later became known as the Islamic Golden Age. At a time when Europe was going through the Dark Ages, Baghdad was a place where scholars studied and preserved the literature of the past and contributed to our knowledge such new ideas as algebra and trigonometry. Islamic physicians distinguished different diseases, and Islamic physicists mapped the heavens. Abassid architecture developed gorgeous arches and domes, stucco decoration with arabesque patterns, and walls covered with multicolored tiling.

The Abbasids made great use of the newly discovered paper (Schatzmiller, 2018). The technology of papermaking originated in China around the 1st Century CE and was brought to the Middle East through the Silk Roads. The first paper mill in Baghdad was built in 795 CE. Paper made it easy to provide inexpensive books for scholars to study. Knowledge became no

longer limited to the elites.

The following illustration shows on the left a painting of a scholars in a library during the Abbasid Caliphate taken from a 13th Century manuscript. This may represent the House of Wisdom, also known as the Grand Library of Baghdad, which was founded in the 8th Century CE. On the right is a photograph of a honeycomb archway (*muquarnas*) from the Abbasid Palace in Baghdad built in the 12th Century CE.

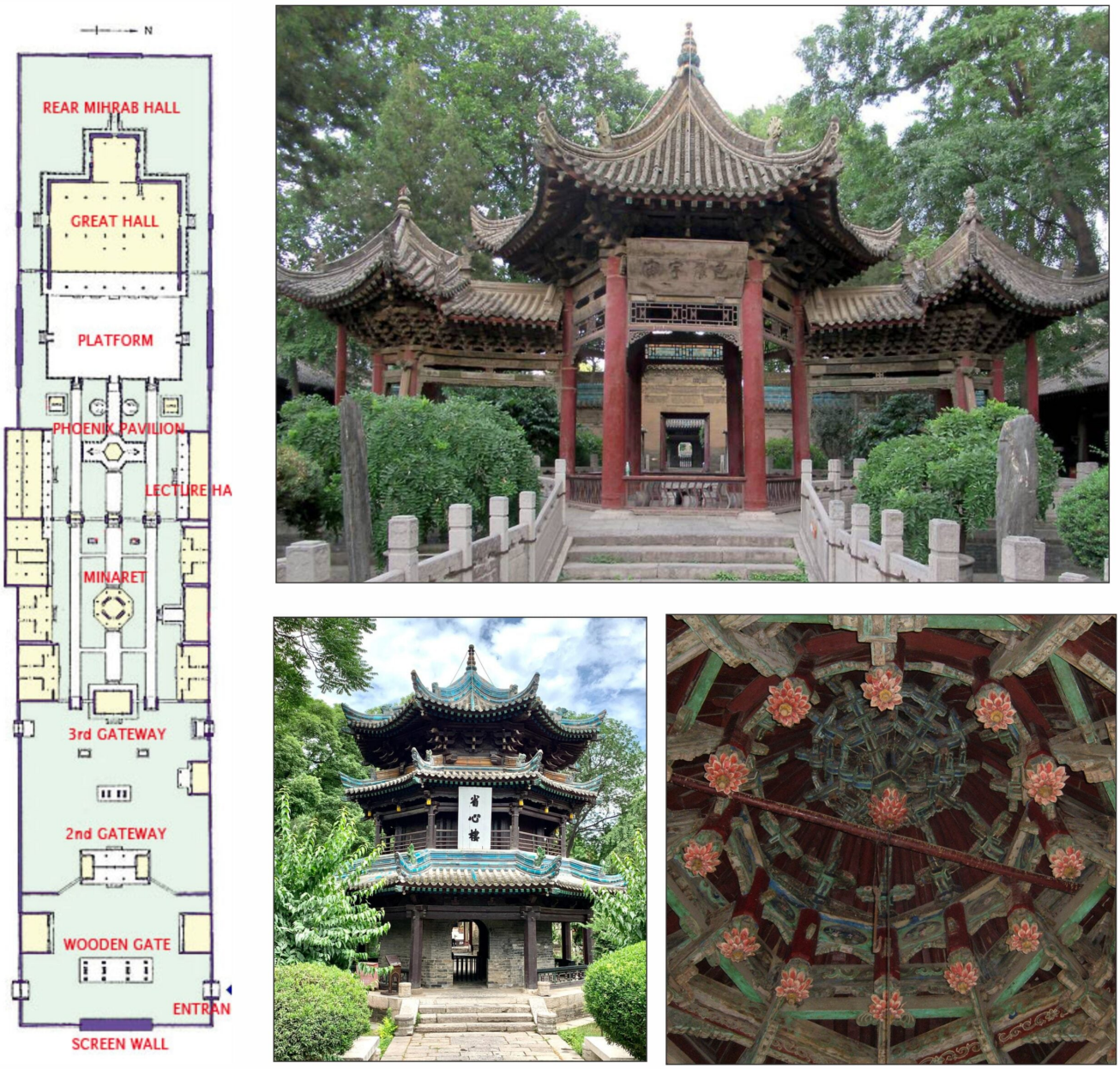


(ii) The Great Mosque in Xi'an

Islamic merchants came to China along the Silk Roads. By the 8th Century the Muslim population of Chang'an (Xi'an) was sufficient to warrant the building of a mosque in the form of a temple. The Great Mosque of Xi'an (□□□□□□,*Xī'ān Dà Qīngzhēnsì*) was first constructed in 742 CE, and rebuilt in its present form in 1384. Islam was referred to as □□□ (*Qīngzhēnjiào:* pure and true religion), and a mosque is

generally referred to as □□□ (*Qīngzhēnsì:* pure and true temple).

The following illustration shows a plan of the mosque together with photographs of the Phoenix Pavillion (□□, *fèng tíng*), the "Examining the heart tower" (□□□,*shěng xīn lóu*) which probably served as a minaret, and the ceiling of the Phoenix Pavilion:



Epilogue

For many centuries the Silk Roads were a conduit for goods to

travel between East and West. The East produced silk, paper, tea, and porcelain. The West gave gold, silver, glass, cotton, and leather. The regions along the Silk Roads provided horses, camels, rugs, lapis lazuli and jade.

As well the Silk Roads allowed different religions to travel to distant countries. Buddhism came to China. Islam spread to both the East and the West. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity also journeyed with the caravans. Travellers on the Silk Roads were missionaries as well as merchants (Foltz, 2010).

Some feeling for the people of the Silk Roads can be found in the poem *The Golden Road to Samarkand* by James Elroy Flecker (1814-1915), a British poet who briefly worked in the consular services in the Middle East before dying at a young age of tuberculosis. The conclusion to his play *Hassan*, published posthumously in 1922, is a conversation among the members of a caravan about to leave Baghdad for Samarkand:

> We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
> Always a little further: it may be
> Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow
> Across that angry or that glimmering sea.
>
> White on a throne or guarded in a cave
> There lives a prophet who can understand
> Why men were born: but surely we are brave,
> Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand
>
> …
>
> Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
> When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
> And softly through the silence beat the bells
> Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.
>
> We travel not for trafficking alone;
> By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:

> For lust of knowing what should not be known,
> We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

The following is a reading of these verses by Roger Helmer

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Flecker-Golden-Road-Helmer.mp3

And the musical introduction to the Japanese TV series on The Silk Roads by Kitaro:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Kitaro-Silk-Road-Theme.mp3

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Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE) is one of the most famous of the Roman Emperors. Some of his renown is related to the many representations of the Emperor that have persisted to the present day: the Aurelian Column documenting the Marcomannic Wars he waged on the Northern frontiers of the Empire; the bas-reliefs that were initially mounted on a triumphal arch in Rome, and later preserved when the arch was destroyed; and the equestrian statue that, from the Renaissance, was displayed in Rome's Piazza de Campidoglio on a pedestal designed by Michelangelo. Most of Marcus' fame, however, derives from the book that he wrote during the many years when he campaigned against the Germanic Tribes who threatened to cross the Danube and invade the Empire. This book, which has come to be known as the *Meditations*, presents a philosophy that derives from Greek Stoicism: to live each day as if it were one's last, to act in accord with nature, not to become upset by whatever happens, and to help others as best one can.

The Life of Marcus Aurelius

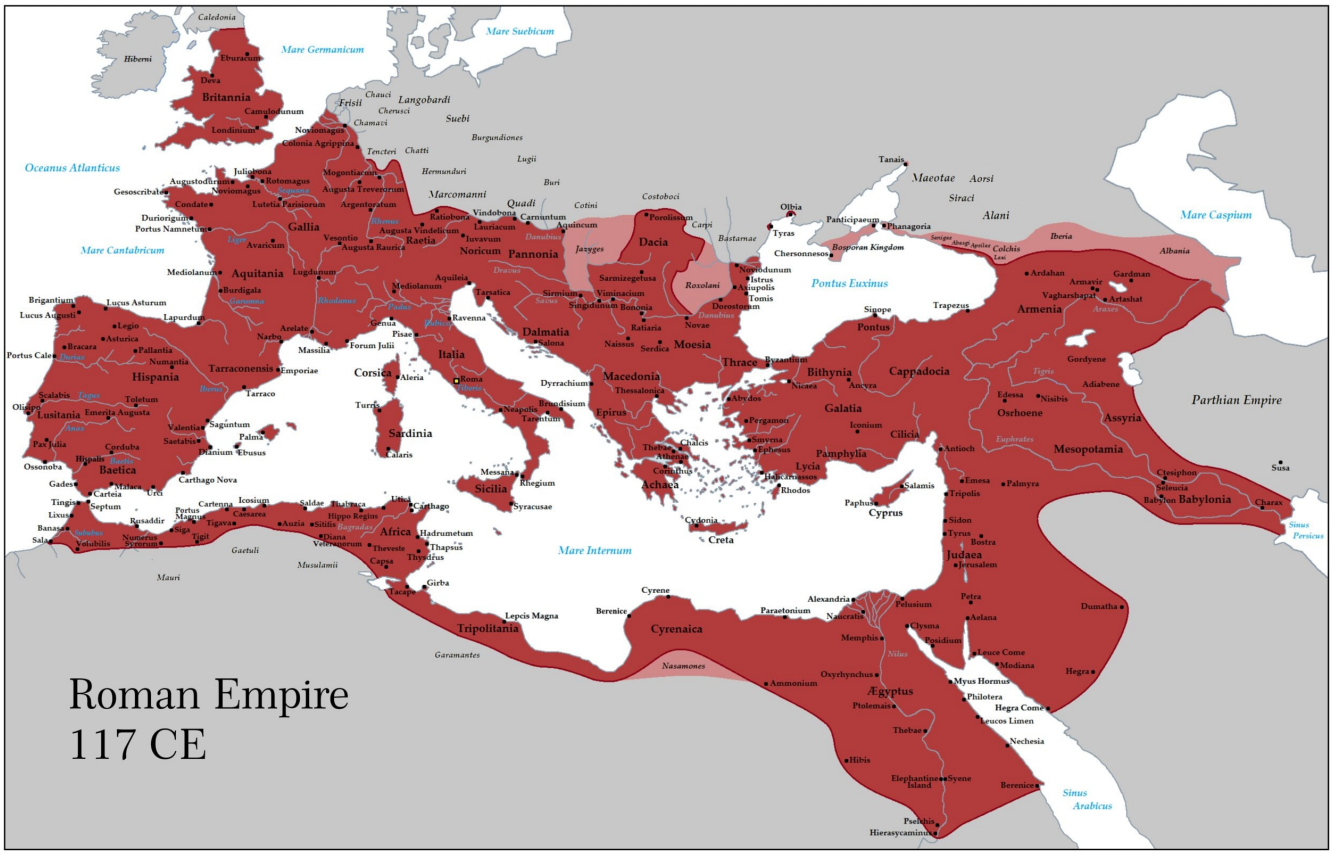
Marcus was born in 121CE, the son of Emperor Hadrian's nephew. After his father's death in 124 CE, Marcus was adopted by his grandfather Marcus Annius Verus.

Marcus was educated by a series of prominent tutors, whom he thanks in the first section of the *Meditations*. From Diognetus, he learned "about not getting carried away by empty enthusiasm;" from Rusticus "understanding the importance of correction and treatment of one's character;" from Apollonius "self-reliance and indisputable immunity to the dice-rolls of fortune;" from Sextus "the true meaning of living in accord with nature;" and from Fronto "understanding the nature of

despotic malice and hypocrisy.”

In 138 CE Marcus was adopted by his uncle, the Emperor Antoninus Pius, as his heir, and assumed the name Marcus Aurelius (“golden”) Antoninus. From his adoptive father, he learned “calmness and an unshakeable adherence to deliberately made decisions” (this and preceding quotations from the Waterfield translation, 2021). In 145 CE Marcus married Faustina, the daughter of Antoninus.

With the death of Antoninus Pius in 161 CE, Marcus became joint Emperor with Lucius Verus, whom Antoninus had also adopted. Together they assumed rule over the huge Roman Empire, which, since the days of the Emperor Trajan (53 -117 CE), extended from Portugal in the West to Syria in the East, and from Britain in the North to North Africa in the South:

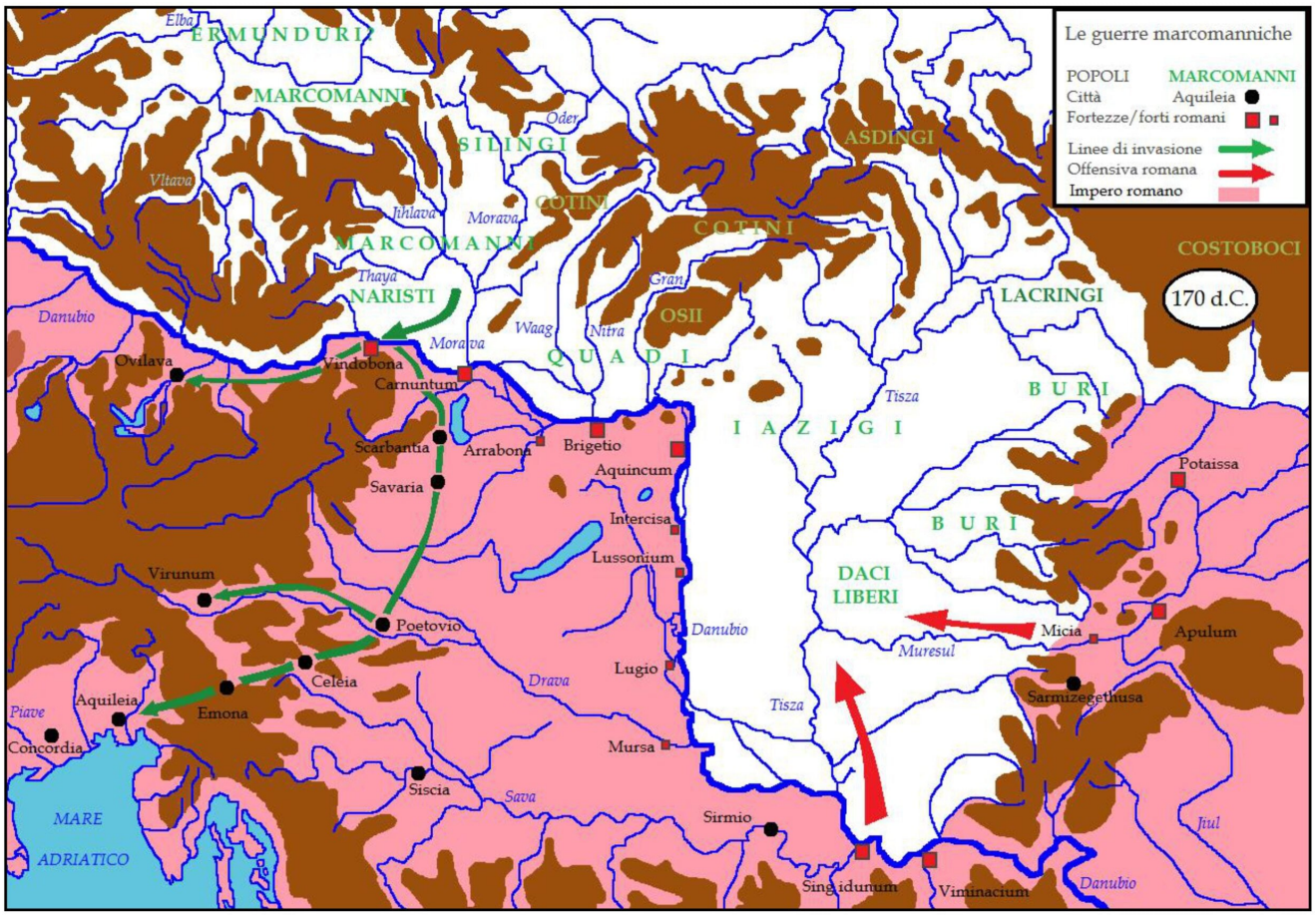


At the accession of Marcus and Lucius, the empire was in turmoil. Rebellions were breaking out in Britain, and the Germanic tribes were harassing the Empire’s frontier on the

Danube. Most importantly, the Parthian king, Vologases III, had invaded the Eastern province of Armenia, and threatened to enter Syria. Marcus dispatched generals to Britain and the Danube, and Lucius led an army against the Parthians. The Northern troubles were quickly subdued, and after some initial defeats, the Roman legions finally repulsed the Parthians and invaded Mesopotamia. By 165 CE the empire was once again secure. Lucius returned home to Roma, and Avidius Cassius, one of the most successful of the Roman generals in the East, was made governor of Syria.

However, soldiers returning from the Eastern wars brought with them the Antonine Plague which spread throughout the Roman Empire from165 to 180 CE, killing about 10% of the population. No one is absolutely sure of the nature of the disease. Most believe that it was a virulent strain of smallpox (*Variola*).

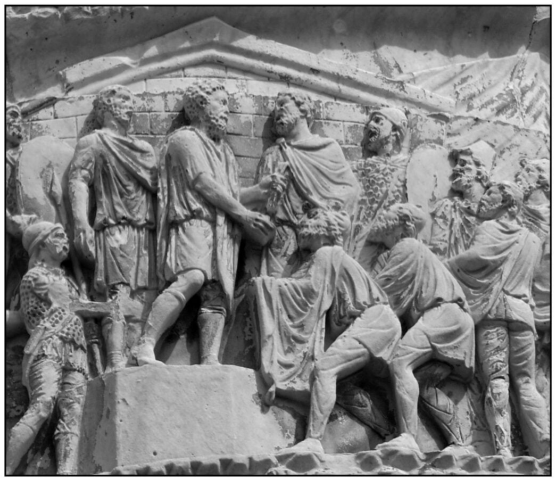
In 166 CE the Marcomanni (derived from proto-Germanic “men of the border”) crossed the Danube and invaded the province of Pannonia (present-day Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Hungary) – see map below. Marcus and Lucius led the Roman legions against the invaders, but the Marcomannic Wars dragged on until Marcus’ death. In 168 CE, Lucius Verus succumbed to the Antonine Plague on the way home from one of the Northern campaigns, leaving Marcus as sole Emperor.



In 175 CE Avidius Cassius, by then the Supreme Commander in the East, having been misinformed that Marcus Aurelius was near death, declared himself Emperor. Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Senate planned an expedition to the East to put down the usurper. However, there was no need. One of Cassius' centurions murdered him, and sent his head to Rome. Marcus refused to see it and had it properly buried.

For the last decade of his life, Marcus was primarily involved in the Marcomannic Wars. He spent little time in Rome, apparently preferring the rigor and solitude of the campaigns to the pleasures of the capital. Slowly, he brought peace to the Empire's Northern frontier. The Aurelian Column in Rome (planned in the late 170s and finally constructed just after Marcus' death) portrays various episodes from the wars (Beckmann 2011). The scenes illustrated below show (in counter-clockwise order from the lower left): the legions crossing the Danube River on a bridge of boats; the "Rain

Miracle” when the surrounded Roman soldiers, lacking food and water, were rescued by a tremendous downpour represented by the Rain God; the siege of a Barbarian fort using the *testudo* (turtle), wherein the Roman soldiers attacked under cover of their interlocked shields; and Marcus (at the center, perhaps with his son Commodus on the left and a Roman General on the right) accepting the surrender of two Barbarian chieftains, one of whom who offers the Emperor his mantle.



Marcus died in 180 CE in Sirmium, (presently Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia) a Roman settlement about 25 km south of the Danube. Sirmium was later to become a major capital in the Easter Empire, but at the time of Marcus’ death it was likely only a small fortified settlement. Marcus had been spitting up blood, and may have suffered from tuberculosis. It is also possible that he was another victim of the Antonine Plague. Some rumors suggested that his doctors had hastened his death in order to curry favor with his son and heir, Commodus, but there is no

clear evidence for this.

Many portrait busts were made of Marcus Aurelius (Boschung 2012a). Below are a selection of these busts with approximate dates. The upper busts are from the Capitoline Museum in Rome and Farnborough Hall in Warwickshire, UK; the lower busts are from the British Museum and from the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

The reign of Commodus, the son and successor of Marcus Aurelius, marked the end of the greatest years of the Roman Empire. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Gibbon describes the 84 years between the death of Domitian in 96 to the death of Marcus in 180 CE as the time when the Roman Empire truly flourished. The Emperors of this

time (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius – often considered the "Good Emperors," a term originating with Machiavelli) tempered their power with virtue. However, this could not last when all that stopped an Emperor from abusing his absolute power was his own sense of what was good:

> The labors of these monarchs were overpaid by the immense reward that inseparably waited on their success; by the honest pride of virtue, and by the exquisite delight of beholding the general happiness of which they were the authors. A just but melancholy reflection imbittered, however, the noblest of human enjoyments. They must often have recollected the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of single man. The fatal moment was perhaps approaching, when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power, which they had exerted for the benefit of their people. The ideal restraints of the senate and the laws might serve to display the virtues, but could never correct the vices, of the emperor. The military force was a blind and irresistible instrument of oppression; and the corruption of Roman manners would always supply flatterers eager to applaud, and ministers prepared to serve, the fear or the avarice, the lust or the cruelty, of their master. (Gibbon, 1776, Chapter III)

Commodus was just such a cruel master.

The Arch of Triumph

Towards the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a monumental arch was erected in Rome to commemorate his triumph over the Barbarians (Boschung, 2012b). No one is sure where the arch was constructed or when it was taken down. Of the eleven known bas-reliefs on the arch, eight were re-used on the Arch of Constantine which was built in 315 CE. Three other reliefs are now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. One of these (on the right) shows Marcus offering mercy to the conquered Barbarians. The other two (below) show Marcus in his triumphal chariot with a Nike of Victory on his shoulders, and Marcus making a sacrifice to the Gods in gratitude for his success.

The Equestrian Statue

The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius was likely cast at about the same time as the monumental arch (Stewart, 2012). The statue is made of gilded bronze, as befits the name “Aurelius.” Its survival through the late Roman years and medieval period has been attributed to its being mistakenly considered a representation of Constantine the Great (272-337 CE), the Emperor who made Christianity the religion of the Empire.

Joseph Brodsky provided a marvelous description of the statue in his Homage to Marcus Aurelius (1995):

> The Romans, superstitious like all Italians, maintain that when the bronze Marcus hits the ground, the end of the world will occur. Whatever the origin of this superstition, it stands to reason if one bears in mind that Marcus' motto was Equanimity. The word suggests balance, composure under pressure, evenness of mental disposition; literally: equation of the animus, i.e., keeping the soul—and thus the world—in check. Give this formula of the Stoic posture a possible mis-spelling and you'll get the monument's definition: Equinimity. The horseman tilts, though, somewhat, as if leaning toward his subjects, and his hand is stretched out in a gesture that is a cross between a greeting and a blessing. So much so that for a while some insisted that this was not Marcus Aurelius but Constantine, who converted Rome to Christianity. For that, however, the horseman's face is too serene, too free of zeal or ardor, too uninvolved. It is the face of detachment, not of love—and detachment is precisely what Christianity never could manage. No, this is no Constantine, and no Christian. The face is devoid of any sentiment; it is a postscript to passions, and the lowered corners of the mouth bespeak the lack of illusion. Had there been a smile, you could think perhaps of the Buddha; but the Stoics knew too much about physics to toy with the finality of human existence in any fashion. The face shines with the bronze's original gold, but the hair and the beard have oxidized and turned green, the way one turns gray. All thought aspires to the condition of metal; and the bronze denies you any entry, including interpretation or touch. What you've got here, then, is detachment per se. And out of this detachment the Emperor leans toward you slightly, extending his right hand either to greet you or to bless you—which is to say, acknowledge your presence. For where he is, there is no you, and vice versa. The left hand theoretically holds the reins, which

> are either missing now or were never there in the first place: a horse would obey this rider no matter what. Especially it it represented Nature. For he represents Reason.

Brodsky notes that the fact that Marcus Aurelius has been so long remembered on horseback plays counterpoint to what the Emperor wrote about the transience of life, and quotes his own translation of Book VII Chapter 23 of *The Meditations*.

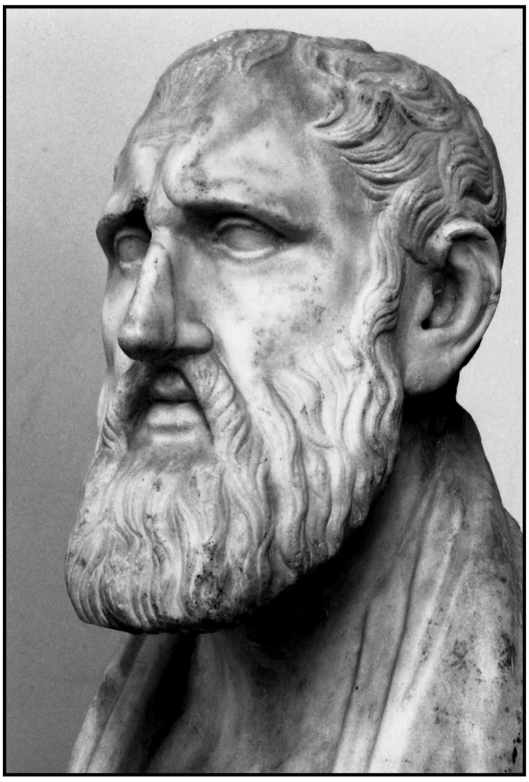
> The universal nature out of the universal substance, as if it were wax, now molds the figure of a horse, then melting this down uses the material for a tree, next for a man, next for something else; and each of these things subsists for a very short time. Yet it is no hard-ship for a box to be broken up, as it was none for it to be nailed together.

Stoicism

The success of Marcus Aurelius as an Emperor owed much to his Stoicism. Gibbon (1776, Chapter III) remarked

> At the age of twelve years he embraced the rigid system of the Stoics, which taught him to submit his body to his mind, his passions to his reason; to consider virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, all things external as things indifferent. His meditations, composed in the tumult of the camp, are still extant; and he even condescended to give lessons of philosophy, in a more public manner than was perhaps consistent with the modesty of sage, or the dignity of an emperor. But his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno. He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfections of others, just and beneficent to all mankind. … War he detested, as the disgrace and calamity of human nature; but when the necessity of a just defence called upon him to take up arms, he readily exposed his person to eight winter campaigns, on the frozen banks of the Danube, the severity of which was at last fatal to the

weakness of his constitution.



Any understanding of the Emperor's philosophy and writings will require at least some brief acquaintance with Stoicism, the philosophical system initially proposed by philosophers in Athens, most importantly by Zeno of Citium (344-262 BCE). The illustration on the right shows a Roman copy of an Hellenic portrait bust of Zeno, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

The name derives from the *Stoa poikile* (painted porch) on the Northern edge of the *Agora* (gathering place) in the center of Athens, where Zeno and his follows met to discuss philosophy. Stoicism was one of several schools of philosophy Hellenistic Athens. Epicureanism and Skepticism were others.

Stoicism was mainly concerned with three areas of knowledge: logic, physics and ethics. According to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (3rd Century CE, quoted in Inwood & Gerson, p 110)

> They compare philosophy to an animal, likening logic to the bones and sinews, ethics to the fleshier parts and physics to the soul. … Or to a productive field, of which logic is the wall surrounding it, ethics the fruit and physics is the land and trees.

a) logic

The Stoics, particularly Chrysippus of Soli (279-206 BCE made significant advances in formalizing our logic. Aristotle had given us term (or predicate) logic of the form

> All men are mortal
> Socrates is a man
> Therefore Socrates is mortal

The Stoics described the principles of propositional (or statement) logic of which the following syllogisms are examples

> If p then q
> Given p
> Not q
> Therefore q
> (modus ponens)
>
> If p then q
> Given
> Therefore Not p
> (modus tollens)

Term logic deals with what things are; propositional logic deals with how things are related. Term logic provides us with classifications and definitions; propositional logic gives us causes and their effects.

b) physics

Stoic studies of logic had shown how the parts of the world were closely connected, and how reason could organize events according to cause and effect. The Stoics then proposed that

the whole universe is pervaded by an intelligence, called *logos* (word, thought, discourse, reason), that arranges everything to ensure the maximum benefit for all its components. The idea of a universe directed toward the good by Providence (from *pro+videre* to foresee) clearly differentiated the Stoics from the Epicureans, who proposed a universe composed of atoms that interact without purpose.

The ideas of the Stoics were later taken up by the early Christians, who proposed that Christ was the physical representation of the *logos*. The Apostle Paul gave a sermon in Athens to an assembly of philosophers, many of them Stoics, relating the new religion to their ideas:

> God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
> Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;
> And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;
> That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:
> For in him we live, and move, and have our being (*Acts* 17: 24-28)

c) ethics

Ethics was the essence of stoicism. Philosophy should be considered as a way of life rather than a body of knowledge. Stoics proposed that we should act in "accord" with Nature – living our lives the way that the *logos* intended us to live, and thereby fulfilling our own human nature. Their goal was not the happiness sought by the Epicureans but the virtue attained by doing good. Nevertheless, virtue brings happiness

(or tranquility) through the knowledge that we are acting our part in the divine purpose of the universe.

The Stoics believed that things of themselves do not cause pain or happiness. These effects occur only if we allow our governing soul to be affected by them. The true stoic would not allow his or her inner self to be upset by pain or carried away by lust. Many have therefore concluded that the Stoic suppresses all emotion, but this is not true. As pointed out by Waterfield (2021, p lii) Stoics can experience three good feelings (*eupatheia*):

> Volition (the rational pursuit of something), caution (the rational avoidance of something) and joy (rational elation).

Acting in accord with Nature means that we must do what we can to benefit our fellows. Stoics were drawn to formal public service. In this they once again distinguished themselves from the Epicureans who eschewed politics.

d) Roman Stoicism

The Romans took to Greek philosophy with enthusiasm. Although the poets were more likely to side with the Epicureans and live only for the moment, those in government found more comfort in Stoicism. They followed the ethics of Stoicism but cared little for the physics. It mattered not whether the universe was purposeful or random, one must still aspire to virtue. Seneca the Younger (4 BCE – 65 CE) wrote

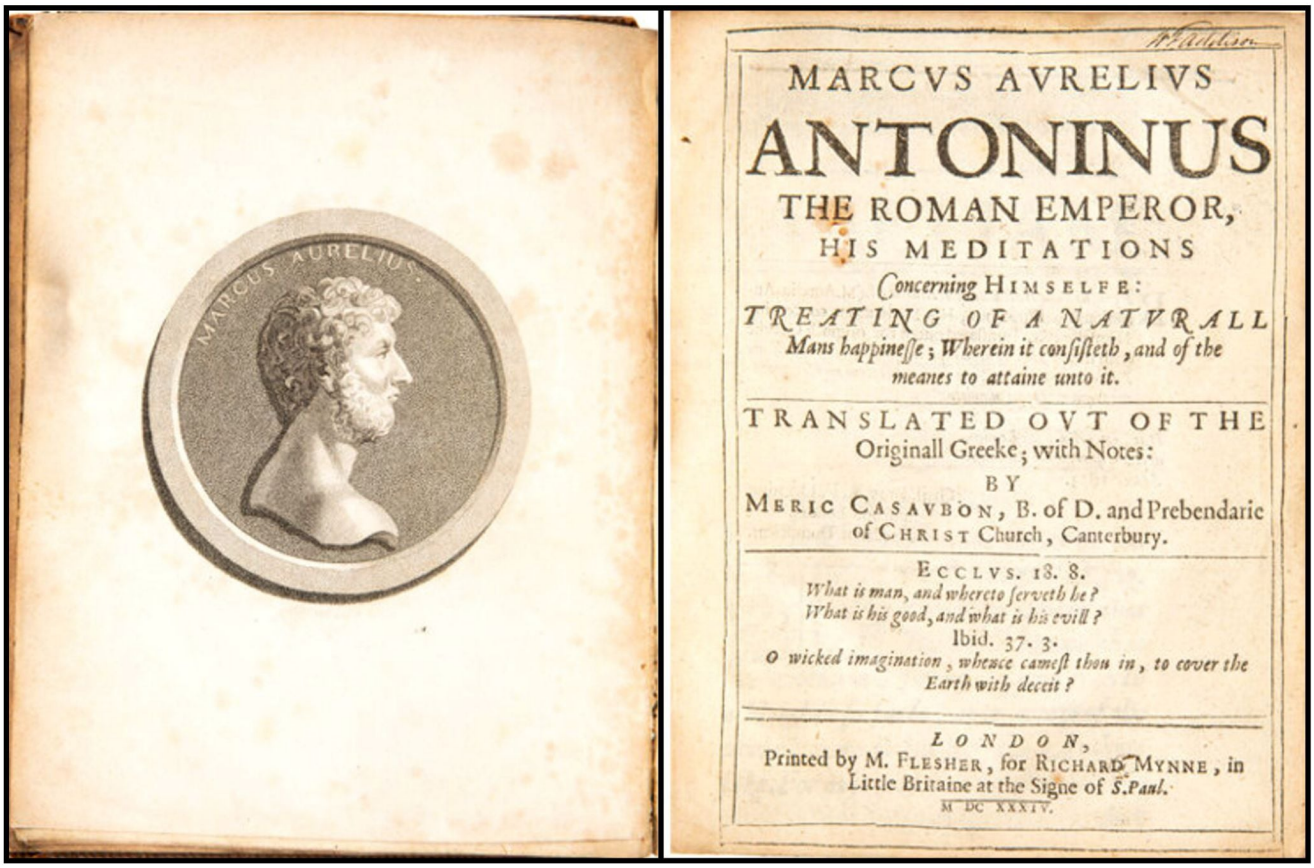
> Someone will say, "What use is philosophy to me if there is fate? What use is it if God is in charge? What use, if chance has the mastery? For what is certain cannot be changed, and against what is uncertain there is no way to prepare oneself. Either God has pre-empted my planning and decreed what I should do, or fortune has left nothing for my planning to achieve." No matter which is true, Lucilius, or even if they all are, we must still practice philosophy. Perhaps the inexorable law of fate constrains us; perhaps

> God, the universal arbiter, governs all events; perhaps it is chance that drives human affairs, and disrupts them: all the same, it is philosophy that must preserve us. Philosophy will urge us to give willing obedience to God, and but a grudging obedience to fortune. It will teach you to follow God; to cope with chance. (*Letters to Lucilius* 16: 4-5)

The *Meditations*

During the last years of his life, Marcus would retire by himself in his army tent near the Danube to contemplate and to write about what he was thinking. As befitting their philosophical nature, these thoughts were written in Greek, even though Marcus was not completely fluent in this language. After his death Marcus' notes were compiled by his secretaries into a book called Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν (*Ta Eis Heauton*, "Things to oneself"). Meric Casaubon entitled his translation of the book *Meditations* (1634), and this title has become widely accepted in English German uses *Selbstbetrachtungen*, self-examinations, and French uses the simple *Pensées*, thoughts. The illustration below shows the title page of Casaubon's translation. He uses as an epigraph a quotation from *Ecclesiasticus* 18:8

> What is man, and whereto serveth he? What is his good, and what is his evil?



In the first section (Book I) Marcus thanks those who helped him during his life. The next sections (Books II to XII) contain a variety of thoughts, questions, quotations, aphorisms, and longer discussions. Each of these sections is a combination of a diary of his thoughts and a “commonplace book” – a trove of ideas to be evaluated and remembered. The writing has no overall organizing principle, is very repetitious and occasionally contradicts itself. The ideas are easier to read intermittently and randomly rather than in sequence.

The book is not easy to translate. Marcus’ Greek “is not noted for its elegance; it can be crabbed and awkward” (Hard, 2011). His “writing is often concise, occasionally even to the point of being no more than notes and jottings” (Waterfield, 2021). The “expressions are often obscure and he uses awkward and unusual construction” (Staniforth 1964). As an example of the difficulties, we can look at the various translations of the famous first sentence of Book II Chapter11:

> Ὡς ἤδη δυνατοῦ ὄντος ἐξιέναι τοῦ βίου, οὕτως ἕκαστα ποιεῖν καὶ λέγειν καὶ διανοεῖσθαι.
>
> However/by now/mighty/truly/sum/any/life,/therefore/each/action/and/word/and/be minded.

Casaubon (1634): Whatsoever thou dost affect, whatsoever thou dost project, so do, and so project all, as one who, for aught thou knowest, may at this very present depart out of this life.

Long (1862): Since it is possible that you may depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly.

Haines (1916): Let thine every deed and word and thought be those of a man who can depart from life this moment.

Staniforth (1964): In all you do or say or think, recollect that at any time the power of withdrawal from life is in your own hands.

Hard (2011): Let your every action, word and thought be those of one who could depart from life at any moment.

Dewinetz (2019): You could die right now, so act like it.

Waterfield (2021): Everything you do and say and think should be predicated on the possibility of your imminent departure from life.

Other than this famous exhortation to live as if one were about to die, the following are some of the main ideas proposed in *The Meditations*:

(i) assent

The universe is proceeding as it must. The mind must live in accord with the universe, accepting its ends and not worrying

about its means.

> Always think of the universe as one living organism, with a single substance and a single soul: and observe how all things are submitted to the single perceptivity of this one whole, all are moved by its single impulse, and all play their part in the causation of every event that happens. Remark the intricacy of the skein, the complexity of the web. (IV: 40, Staniforth)

> There are thus two reasons why you should be contented with whatever happens to you. Firstly, that it was for you that it came about, and it was prescribed for you and stands in a special relationship to you as something that was woven into your destiny from the beginning …and secondly that, for the power which governs the whole that which comes to each of us individually contributes to its own well-being and perfection. (V: 48, Hard)

> We are all working together to one end, some with knowledge and design, and others without knowing what they do. (VI: 42, Long)

(ii) tranquility

The person has three parts – the body, the spirit and the mind (or ruling center). The impressions from the world affect the body and activate the spirit. Yet one must not let the mind be ruled by these reflex activations. One must keep oneself beyond the reach of the passions by retreating into the mind and acting only according to reason:

> Be like a headland: the waves beat against it continuously, but it stands fast and around it the boiling water dies down. (IV: 49, Waterfield)

> An intelligence free of passions is a mighty citadel, for man has no stronghold more secure to which he can retreat. (VIII: 48, Hard)

(iii) benevolence

One should help others as best one can.

> That which is not in the interests of the hive cannot be in the interests of the bee (VI: 53, Haines)
>
> Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them or bear with them. (VIII: 59, Long).
>
> Precisely because you personally are part of the whole that is the body politic, every one of your actions should contribute to a life the purpose of which is to improve society (IX: 23, Waterfield)
>
> First, never act without plan and purpose. Second, set your sights on no other goal but the common good. (XII: 20, Waterfield)

Epilogue

Throughout The Meditations, Marcus Aurelius insists that his own life was but a tiny moment in the life of the universe and that he would not be remembered beyond his death:

> Soon you will have forgotten the world, and soon the world will have forgotten you (VII;21, Staniforth).
>
> Keep all time and all being constantly before your mind, and see that, in terms of being, every individual thing is no more than a fig seed, and in terms of time no more than a twist of a drill (X: 17, Waterfield)

Despite these comments, Marcus Aurelius has been remembered and revered for almost two millennia. I shall complete the post with a longer quotation from *The Meditations* about the passage of time, and with a photograph of the one of his best-preserved portrait busts, now in the Musée Saint-Raymond in Toulouse.

A person’s lifetime is a moment, his existence a flowing

> stream, his perception dull, the entire fabric of his body readily subject to decay, his soul an aimless wanderer, his fortune erratic, his fame uncertain. In short: the body is nothing but a river; the soul is dream and delusion; life is war and a sojourn in a strange land; and oblivion is all there is to posthumous fame. What, then, can escort us safely on our way? Only one thing: philosophy. This consists in keeping the guardian spirit within us safe from assault and harm, never swayed by pleasure or pain, purposeful when it acts, free from dishonesty or dissemblance, and never dependent on action or inaction from anyone else. It also consists in accepting what happens, the lot one has been assigned, as coming from the same source as oneself, and in always awaiting death with a serene mind, understanding that it's no more than the disintegration of the elements of which every living creature is a compound. If there's nothing unusual in the elements themselves changing moment by moment one into another, why should the alteration and disintegration of them all be a cause for anxiety? It's in accord with nature, and nothing that's in accord with nature is bad. Book II:17 (Waterfield, 2021)

Translations of the *Meditations*

The original Greek is available at the Perseus Website.

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