

# THE SILK ROADS

*A New History of the World*

PETER FRANKOPAN

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We halted in the country of a tribe of Türks ... we saw a group who worship snakes, a group who worship fish, and a group who worship cranes.

Ibn Faḍlān's *Voyage to the Volga Bulgars*

I, Prester John, am the lord of lords, and I surpass all the kings of the entire world in wealth, virtue and power ... Milk and honey flow freely in our lands; poison can do no harm, nor do any noisy frogs croak. There are no scorpions, no serpents creeping in the grass.

Purported letter of Prester John to Rome and Constantinople,  
twelfth century

He has a very large palace, entirely roofed with fine gold.

Christopher Columbus' research notes on the  
Great Khan of the East, late fifteenth century

If we do not make relatively small sacrifices, and alter our policy, in Persia now, we shall both endanger our friendship with Russia and find in a comparatively near future ... a situation where our very existence as an Empire will be at stake.

Sir George Clerk to Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary,  
21 July 1914

The president would win even if we sat around doing nothing.

Chief of Staff to Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan,  
shortly before 2005 elections



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## P R E F A C E

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.’<sup>1</sup> 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 Balāsāghūn, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> But neither offers the best vantage point to view the world's 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 centre – as 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

This region is where the world's 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: 'Seidenstraßen' – the Silk Roads.<sup>8</sup>

These pathways serve as the world's 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 'orientalism' – the strident and overwhelmingly negative view of the east as undeveloped and inferior to the west, and therefore unworthy of serious study.<sup>9</sup> 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 Bābur, 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 Bābur 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!'<sup>10</sup>

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 Nishāpūrī, 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'.<sup>11</sup>

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'.<sup>12</sup> 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-Khwārizmī – giants 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 Oxfords 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.'<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 zones – the 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 meaning – the centre of the world – was 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



# The Creation of the Silk Road

From the beginning of time, the centre of Asia was where empires were made. The alluvial lowlands of Mesopotamia, fed by the Tigris and Euphrates, provided the basis for civilisation itself – for it was in this region that the first towns and cities took shape. Systematised agriculture developed in Mesopotamia and across the whole of the ‘Fertile Crescent’, a band of highly productive land with access to plentiful water, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean coast. It was here that some of the first recorded laws were disseminated nearly 4,000 years ago by Hammurabi, King of Babylon, who detailed his subjects’ obligations and set out fierce punishments for their transgressions.<sup>1</sup>

Although many kingdoms and empires sprang up from this crucible, the greatest of all was that of the Persians. Expanding quickly in the sixth century BC from a homeland in what is now southern Iran, the Persians came to dominate their neighbours, reaching the shores of the Aegean, conquering Egypt and expanding eastwards as far as the Himalayas. Their success owed much to their openness, to judge from the Greek historian Herodotus. ‘The Persians are greatly inclined to adopt foreign customs,’ he wrote: the Persians were prepared to abandon their own style of dress when they concluded that the fashions of a defeated foe were superior, leading them to borrow styles from the Medes as well as from the Egyptians.<sup>2</sup>

The willingness to adopt new ideas and practices was an important factor in enabling the Persians to build an administrative system that

allowed the smooth running of an empire which incorporated many different peoples. A highly educated bureaucracy oversaw the efficient administration of the day-to-day life of the empire, recording everything from payments made to workers serving the royal household, to validating the quality and quantity of goods bought and sold in market places; they also took charge of the maintenance and repair of a road system criss-crossing the empire that was the envy of the ancient world.<sup>3</sup>

A road network that linked the coast of Asia Minor with Babylon, Susa and Persepolis enabled a distance of more than 1,600 miles to be covered in the course of a week, an achievement viewed with wonder by Herodotus, who noted that neither snow, rain, heat nor darkness could slow the speedy transmission of messages.<sup>4</sup> Investment in agriculture and the development of pioneering irrigation techniques to improve crop yields helped nurture the growth of cities by enabling increasingly large populations to be supported from surrounding fields – not only in the rich agricultural lands to either side of the Tigris and Euphrates, but also in valleys served by the mighty Oxus and Iaxartes rivers (now known as the Amy Darya and Syr Darya), as well as in the Nile delta after its capture by Persian armies in 525 BC. The Persian Empire was a land of plenty that connected the Mediterranean with the heart of Asia.

Persia presented itself as a beacon of stability and fairness, as a trilingual inscription hewn into a cliff face at Behistun demonstrates. Written in Persian, Elamite and Akkadian, it records how Darius the Great, one of Persia's most famous rulers, put down revolts and uprisings, drove back invasions from abroad and wronged neither the poor nor the powerful. Keep the country secure, the inscription commands, and look after the people righteously, for justice is the bedrock of the kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Tolerance of minorities was legendary, with one Persian ruler referred to as the 'Messiah', and the one whom the 'Lord, the God of Heaven' had blessed, as the result of his policies that included the release of the Jews from their Babylonian exile.<sup>6</sup>

Trade flourished in ancient Persia, providing revenues that allowed rulers to fund military expeditions targeting locations that brought yet more resources into the empire. It also enabled them to indulge notoriously extravagant tastes. Spectacular buildings were erected in the huge cities of Babylon, Persepolis, Pasargadae and Susa, where King Darius built a magnificent palace using the highest-quality



ebony and silver from Egypt and cedar from Lebanon, fine gold from Bactria, lapis and cinnabar from Sogdiana, turquoise from Khwarezm and ivory from India.<sup>7</sup> The Persians were famous for their love of pleasure and, according to Herodotus, only had to hear of a new luxury to yearn to indulge it.<sup>8</sup>

Underpinning the commercial commonwealth was an aggressive military that helped extend the frontiers, but was also needed to defend them. Persia faced persistent problems from the north, a world dominated by nomads who lived with their livestock on semi-arid grassland belts, known as steppes, stretching from the Black Sea across Central Asia as far as Mongolia. These nomads were famed for their ferocity – they were said to drink the blood of their enemies and make clothes of their scalps, and in some cases to eat the flesh of their own fathers. Interaction with the nomads was complex though, for despite stock descriptions of them as chaotic and unpredictable, they were important partners in the supply of animals, and especially fine horses. But the nomads could be the cause of disaster, such as when Cyrus the Great, the architect of the Persian Empire in the 6th century BC, was killed trying to subjugate the Scythians; his head was then carried around in a skin filled with blood, said one writer, so that the thirst for power that had inspired him could now be quenched.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, this was a rare setback that did not stall Persia's expansion. Greek commanders looked east with a combination of fear and respect, seeking to learn from the Persians' tactics on the battlefield and to adopt their technology. Authors like Aeschylus used successes against the Persians as a way of celebrating military prowess and of demonstrating the favour of the gods, commemorating heroic resistance to the attempted invasions of Greece in epic plays and literature.<sup>10</sup>

'I have come to Greece,' says Dionysus in the opening lines of the *Bacchae*, from the 'fabulously wealthy East', a place where Persia's plains are bathed in sunshine, where Bactria's towns are protected by walls, and where beautifully constructed towers look out over coastal regions. Asia and the East were the lands that Dionysus 'set dancing' with the divine mysteries long before those of the Greeks.<sup>11</sup>

None was a keener student of such works than Alexander of Macedon. When he took the throne in 336 BC following the assassination of his

father, the brilliant King Philip, there was no question about which direction the young general would head in his search for glory. Not for a moment did he look to Europe, which offered nothing at all: no cities, no culture, no prestige, no reward. For Alexander, as for all ancient Greeks, culture, ideas and opportunities – as well as threats – came from the east. It was no surprise that his gaze fell on the greatest power of antiquity: Persia.

After dislodging the Persian governors of Egypt in a lightning strike in 331 BC, Alexander set off for an all-out assault on the empire's heartlands. The decisive confrontation took place later in 331 on the dusty plains of Gaugamela, near the modern town of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, where he inflicted a spectacular defeat on the vastly superior Persian army under the command of Darius III – perhaps because he was fully refreshed after a good night's sleep: according to Plutarch, Alexander insisted on resting before engaging the enemy, sleeping so deeply that his concerned commanders had to shake him awake. Dressing in his favoured outfit, he put on a fine helmet, so polished that 'it was as bright as the most refined silver', grasped a trusted sword in his right hand and led his troops to a crushing victory that opened the gates of an empire.<sup>12</sup>

Tutored by Aristotle, Alexander had been brought up with high hopes resting on his shoulders. He did not disappoint. After the Persian armies had been shattered at Gaugamela, Alexander advanced east. One city after another surrendered to him as he took over the territories controlled by his defeated rivals. Places of legendary size, wealth and beauty fell before the young hero. Babylon surrendered, its inhabitants covering the road leading to the great city with flowers and garlands, while silver altars heaped with frankincense and perfumes were placed on either side. Cages with lions and leopards were brought to be presented as gifts.<sup>13</sup> Before long, all the points along the Royal Road that linked the major cities of Persia and the communication network that connected the coast of Asia Minor with Central Asia had been taken by Alexander and his men.

Although some modern scholars have dismissed him as a 'drunken juvenile thug', Alexander appears to have had a surprisingly delicate touch when it came to dealing with newly conquered territories and peoples.<sup>14</sup> He was often emollient when it came to local religious beliefs and practices, showing tolerance and also respect: for example, he was reportedly upset by the way the tomb of Cyrus the Great

had been desecrated, and not only restored it but punished those who had defiled the shrine.<sup>15</sup> Alexander ensured that Darius III was given a funeral befitting his rank and buried alongside other Persian rulers after his body had been found dumped in a wagon following his murder by one of his own lieutenants.<sup>16</sup>

Alexander was also able to draw more and more territory under his sway because he was willing to rely on local elites. 'If we wish not just to pass through Asia but to hold it,' he is purported to have said, 'we must show clemency to these people; it is their loyalty which will make our empire stable and permanent.'<sup>17</sup> Local officials and old elites were left in place to administer towns and territories that were conquered. Alexander himself took to adopting traditional titles and wearing Persian clothing to underline his acceptance of local customs. He was keen to portray himself not so much as an invading conqueror, but as the latest heir of an ancient realm – despite howls of derision from those who told all who would listen that he had brought misery and soaked the land with blood.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to remember that much of our information about Alexander's campaigns, successes and policies derives from later historians, whose accounts are often highly idealised and breathless with enthusiasm in the coverage of the young general's exploits.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, even if we need to be cautious about the way the collapse of Persia is covered in the sources, the speed with which Alexander kept extending the frontiers further east tells its own story. He was an energetic founder of new cities, usually named after himself, that are now more often known by other names, such as Herat (Alexandria in Aria), Kandahar (Alexandria in Arachosia) and Bagram (Alexandria ad Caucasum). The construction of these staging posts – and the reinforcement of others further north, stretching to the Fergana valley – were new points running along the spine of Asia.

New cities with powerful defences, as well as standalone strongholds and forts, were primarily built to defend against the threat posed by tribes of the steppes who were adept at launching devastating attacks on rural communities. Alexander's programme of fortification was designed to protect new areas that had only recently been conquered. Similar concerns met with similar responses further east at precisely this time. The Chinese had already developed a concept of *huaxia*, representing the civilised world, set against the

challenges of the peoples from the steppes. An intensive building programme expanded a network of fortifications into what became known as the Great Wall of China, and were driven by the same principle as that adopted by Alexander: expansion without defence was useless.<sup>20</sup>

Back in the fourth century BC, Alexander himself continued to campaign relentlessly, circling back through the Hindu Kush and marching down the Indus valley, again founding new strongholds with garrisons – although by now meeting with regular cries of protest from his weary and homesick men. From a military perspective, his achievements by the time he died at the age of thirty-two in Babylon in 323 BC, in circumstances that remain shrouded in mystery, were nothing short of sensational.<sup>21</sup> The speed and extent of his conquests were staggering. What was no less impressive – though much more often ignored – is the scale of the legacy he left behind, and how the influences of ancient Greece blended with those of Persia, India, Central Asia and eventually China too.

Although Alexander's sudden death was followed by a period of turbulence and infighting between his senior commanders, a leader soon emerged for the eastern half of the new territories: an officer born in northern Macedonia named Seleucus who had taken part in all the king's major expeditions. Within a few years of his patron's death, he found himself governor of lands that stretched from the Tigris to the Indus river; the territories were so large that they resembled not a kingdom but an empire in its own right. He founded a dynasty, known as the Seleucids, that was to rule for nearly three centuries.<sup>22</sup> Alexander's victories are often and easily dismissed as a brilliant series of short-term gains, his legacy widely thought of as ephemeral and temporary. But these were no transitory achievements; they were the start of a new chapter for the region lying between the Mediterranean and the Himalayas.

The decades that followed Alexander's death saw a gradual and unmistakable programme of Hellenisation, as ideas, themes and symbols from ancient Greece were introduced to the east. The descendants of his generals remembered their Greek roots and actively emphasised them, for example on the coinage struck in the mints of the major towns that were located in strategically important points along the trade routes or in agriculturally vibrant centres. The form of these coins became standardised: an image of the current

ruler on the obverse with ringlets held by a diadem, and invariably looking to the right as Alexander had done, with an image of Apollo on the reverse, identified by Greek letters.<sup>23</sup>

The Greek language could be heard – and seen – all over Central Asia and the Indus valley. At Ai Khanoum in northern Afghanistan – a new city founded by Seleucus – maxims from Delphi were carved on to a monument, including:

- As a child, be well-behaved.
- As a youth, be self-controlled.
- As an adult, be just.
- As an elder, be wise.
- As one dying, be without pain.<sup>24</sup>

Greek was in daily use by officials more than a century after Alexander's death, as tax receipts and documents relating to soldiers' pay from Bactria from around 200 BC show.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the language penetrated deep into the Indian subcontinent. Some of the edicts issued by Maurayan ruler Ashoka, the greatest of the early Indian rulers, were made with parallel Greek translations, evidently for the benefit of the local population.<sup>26</sup>

The vibrancy of the cultural exchange as Europe and Asia collided was astonishing. Statues of the Buddha started to appear only after the cult of Apollo became established in the Gundhara valley and western India. Buddhists felt threatened by the success of new religious practices and began to create their own visual images. Indeed, there is a correlation not only in the date of the earliest statues of the Buddha, but also in their appearance and design: it seems that it was Apollo that provided the template, such was the impact of Greek influences. Hitherto, Buddhists had actively refrained from visual representations; competition now forced them to react, to borrow and to innovate.<sup>27</sup>

Stone altars adorned with Greek inscriptions, the images of Apollo and exquisite miniature ivories depicting Alexander from what is now southern Tajikistan reveal just how far influences from the west penetrated.<sup>28</sup> So too did the impressions of the cultural superiority brought from the Mediterranean. The Greeks in Asia were widely credited in India, for example, for their skill in the sciences: 'they are barbarians', says the text known as the *Gārgī Samhitā*, 'yet the

science of astronomy originated with them and for this they must be revered like gods'.<sup>29</sup>

According to Plutarch, Alexander made sure that Greek theology was taught as far away as India, with the result that the gods of Olympus were revered across Asia. Young men in Persia and beyond were brought up reading Homer and 'chanting the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides', while the Greek language was studied in the Indus valley.<sup>30</sup> This may be why it is possible that borrowings can be detected across great works of literature. It has been suggested, for instance, that the *Rāmāyana*, the Sanskrit epic poem, owes a debt to the *Iliad* and to the *Odyssey*, with the theme of the abduction of Lady Sita by Rāvaṇa a direct echo of the elopement of Helen with Paris of Troy. Influences and inspiration flowed in the other direction too, with some scholars arguing that the *Aeneid* was in turn influenced by Indian texts such as the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>31</sup> Ideas, themes and stories coursed through the highways, spread by travellers, merchants and pilgrims: Alexander's conquests paved the way for the broadening of the minds of the populations of the lands he captured, as well as those on the periphery and beyond who came into contact with new ideas, new images and new concepts.

Even cultures on the wild steppes were influenced, as is clear from the exquisite funerary objects buried alongside high-ranking figures found in the Tilya Tepe graves in northern Afghanistan which show artistic influences being drawn from Greece – as well as from Siberia, India and beyond. Luxury objects were traded into the nomad world, in return for livestock and horses, and on occasion as tribute paid in return for peace.<sup>32</sup>

The linking up of the steppes into an interlocking and interconnecting world was accelerated by the growing ambitions of China. Under the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), waves of expansion had pushed frontiers ever further, eventually reaching a province then called Xiyu (or 'western regions'), but today known as Xinjiang ('new frontierland'). This lay beyond the Gansu corridor, a route 600 miles long linking the Chinese interior with the oasis city of Dunhuang, a crossroads on the edge of the Taklamakan desert. At this point, there was a choice of a northern or a southern route, both of which could be treacherous, which converged at Kashgar, itself set at the junction point of the Himalayas, the Pamir mountains, the Tien Shan range and the Hindu Kush.<sup>33</sup>

This expansion of China's horizons linked Asia together. These networks had hitherto been blocked by the Yuezhi and above all the Xiongnu, nomadic tribes who like the Scythians in Central Asia were a source of constant concern but were also important trading partners for livestock: Han authors wrote in the second century BC of tens of thousands of head of cattle being bought from the peoples of the steppes.<sup>34</sup> But it was Chinese demand for horses that was all but insatiable, fuelled by the need to keep an effective military force on standby to maintain internal order within China, and to be able to respond to attacks and raids by the Xiongnu or other tribes. Horses from the western region of Xinjiang were highly prized, and could make fortunes for tribal chieftains. On one occasion, a Yuezhi leader traded horses for a large consignment of goods that he then sold on to others, making ten times his investment.<sup>35</sup>

The most famous and valuable mounts were bred in the Fergana valley to the far side of the spectacular Pamir mountain range that straddles what is now eastern Tajikistan and north-eastern Afghanistan. Much admired for their strength, they are described by Chinese writers as being sired by dragons and are referred to as *hanxue ma* or 'sweating blood' – the result of their distinctive red perspiration that was caused either by a local parasite or by the horses' having unusually thin skin and therefore being prone to blood vessels bursting during exertion. Some particularly fine specimens became celebrities in their own right, the subject of poems, sculpture and pictures, frequently referred to as *tianma* – heavenly or celestial horses.<sup>36</sup> Some were even taken with their owner to the next life: one emperor was buried alongside eighty of his favoured steeds – their burial place guarded by statues of two stallions and a terracotta warrior.<sup>37</sup>

Relations with the Xiongnu, who held sway across the steppes of Mongolia and across the grasslands to China's north, were not always easy. Contemporary historians wrote of the tribe as barbaric, willing to eat raw meat and drink blood; truly, said one writer, they are a people who 'have been abandoned by heaven'.<sup>38</sup> The Chinese proved willing to pay tribute rather than risk attacks on their cities. Envoys were regularly dispatched to visit the nomads (who were trained from infancy to hunt rats and birds and then foxes and hares), where the Emperor would politely ask after the health of the supreme leader.<sup>39</sup> A formal system of tribute developed whereby the nomads

were given luxury gifts including rice, wine and textiles in return for peace. The most important item that was given was silk, a fabric that was treasured by the nomads for its texture and its lightness as a lining for bedding and clothing. It was also a symbol of political and social power: being swathed in voluminous quantities of precious silk was an important way that the *chanyu* (the tribes' supreme leader) emphasised his own status and rewarded those around him.<sup>40</sup>

The sums paid in return for peace were substantial. In 1 BC, for example, the Xiongnu were given 30,000 rolls of silk and a similar amount of raw material, as well as 370 items of clothing.<sup>41</sup> Some officials liked to believe that the tribe's love of luxury would prove its undoing. 'Now [you have] this fondness for Chinese things,' one envoy brashly told a tribal leader. Xiongnu customs were changing, he said. China, he predicted confidently, 'will in the end succeed in winning over the whole Xiongnu nation'.<sup>42</sup>

This was wishful thinking. In fact, the diplomacy that maintained peace and good relations took a toll both financially and politically: paying tribute was expensive and a sign of political weakness. So in due course the Han rulers of China resolved to deal with the Xiongnu once and for all. First, a concerted effort was made to take control of the agriculturally rich western regions of Xiyu; the nomads were driven back as the Chinese took control of the Gansu corridor in a decade-long series of campaigns that ended in 119 BC. To the west lay the Pamir mountains and, beyond them, a new world. China had opened a door leading on to a trans-continental network; it was the moment of the birth of the Silk Roads.

The expansion of China saw a surge of interest in what lay beyond. Officials were commissioned to investigate and write reports about the regions beyond the mountains. One such account survives as the *Shi Ji* (Historical Records), written by Sima Qian, son of the imperial court's Grand Historian (*Taishi*), who continued to work on this account even after he had been disgraced and castrated for daring to defend an impetuous young general who had led troops to defeat.<sup>43</sup> He carefully set out what he had been able to discover about the histories, economies and armies of the peoples in the Indus valley, Persia and Central Asia. The kingdoms of Central Asia were weak, he noted, because of pressure from nomads displaced by Chinese forces who had turned their attention elsewhere. The inhabitants of these kingdoms were 'poor in the use of arms', he wrote, 'but clever



at commerce', with flourishing markets in the capital Bactra, 'where all sorts of goods are bought and sold'.<sup>44</sup>

Trade between China and the world beyond developed slowly. Negotiating the routes along the edge of the Gobi desert was not easy, especially beyond the Jade Gate, the frontier post past which caravans of traders travelled on their way west. Passing from one oasis to another across treacherous terrain was difficult whether their route took them through the Taklamakan desert or through the passes of the Tian Shan mountains or through the Pamirs. Extremes of temperature had to be negotiated – one reason why the Bactrian camel was so valued. Hardy enough to brave the harsh conditions of the desert, these animals have advance knowledge of deadly sandstorms, one writer observed, and 'immediately stand snarling together' – a sign for the traders and caravan leaders to 'cover their noses and mouths by wrapping them in felt'. The camel was clearly a fallible weathervane, however; sources talk of passing large numbers of dead animals and skeletons along the routes.<sup>45</sup> In such tough circumstances, rewards had to be high for the risks to be worth taking. Although bamboo and cloth made in Sichuan could be found for sale thousands of miles away in the markets of Bactria, it was primarily rare and high-value goods that were transported over long distances.<sup>46</sup>

Chief among these was the trade in silk. Silk performed a number of important roles in the ancient world apart from its value to nomadic tribes. Under the Han dynasty, silk was used alongside coins and grain to pay troops. It was in some ways the most reliable currency: producing money in sufficient quantities was a problem, as was the fact that not all of China was fully monetised; this presented a particular difficulty when it came to military pay since theatres of action were often in remote regions, where coins were all but useless. Grain, meanwhile, went rotten after a time. As a result, bolts of raw silk were used regularly as currency, either as pay or, as in the case of one Buddhist monastery in Central Asia, as a fine for monks who broke the foundation's rules.<sup>47</sup> Silk became an international currency as well as a luxury product.

The Chinese also regulated trade by creating a formal framework for controlling merchants who came from outside territories. A remarkable collection of 35,000 texts from the garrison town of Xuanquan, not far from Dunhuang, paints a vivid picture of the everyday goings-on in a town set at the neck of the Gansu corridor.

From these texts, written on bamboo and wooden tablets, we learn that visitors passing into China had to stick to designated routes, were issued with written passes and were regularly counted by officials to ensure that all who entered the country also eventually made their way home. Like a modern hotel guest folio, records were kept for each visitor, noting how much they spent on food, what their place of origin was, their title and in which direction they were headed.<sup>48</sup>

These measures are to be understood not as a form of suspicious surveillance, but rather as a means of being able to note accurately who was entering and leaving China, as well as what they were doing there, and above all to record the value of the goods that were bought and sold for customs purposes. The sophistication of the techniques and their early implementation reveal how the imperial courts at the capital in Chang'an (modern Xi'an) and from the first century AD at Luoyang dealt with a world that seemed to be shrinking before their eyes.<sup>49</sup> We think of globalisation as a uniquely modern phenomenon; yet 2,000 years ago too, it was a fact of life, one that presented opportunities, created problems and prompted technological advance.

As it happened, developments many thousands of miles away served to stimulate demand for luxury items – and the ability to pay for them. In Persia, the descendants of Seleucus were deposed around 247 BC by one Arsaces, a man whose background is obscure. His descendants, known as the Arsacids, consolidated their hold on power and then set about extending it, skilfully expropriating history to fuse Greek and Persian ideas into an increasingly coherent and robust new identity. The result was a time of stability and prosperity.<sup>50</sup>

But it was what was happening in the Mediterranean that provided the greatest stimulus of all. A small town in an unpromising location halfway up the west coast of Italy had slowly managed to turn itself from a provincial backwater into a regional power. Taking over one coastal city-state after another, Rome came to dominate the western Mediterranean. By the middle of the first century BC, its ambitions were expanding dramatically. And attention was focused firmly on the east.

Rome had evolved into an intensely competitive state, one that glorified the military and acclaimed violence and killing. Gladiatorial games were the bedrock of public entertainment, a place where mastery over foreign peoples and over nature was brutally celebrated.

Triumphal arches all over the city provided daily reminders of military victories to its bustling population. Militarism, fearlessness and the love of glory were carefully cultivated as the key characteristics of an ambitious city whose reach was stretching forever further.<sup>51</sup>

The backbone of Roman power was the army, honed and conditioned to demanding standards. Soldiers were expected to be able to march more than twenty miles in five hours, hauling at least fifty pounds of equipment with them at the same time. Marriage was not only frowned on but specifically prohibited in order to keep recruits bonded to each other. Corps of highly trained, fit and intense young men who had been brought up confident in their ability and assured of their destiny were the rock on which Rome was built.<sup>52</sup>

The conquest of Gaul (broadly the area of modern France, the Low Countries and part of western Germany) in 52 BC brought substantial spoils, enough to cause a correction in the price of gold in the Roman Empire.<sup>53</sup> But there were only so many other places to take on in Europe – and few of them looked promising. What made empires great were large numbers of cities, producing taxable revenues; what made them culturally spectacular were artisans and craftsmen who developed new ideas when wealthy patrons competed with each other for their services and rewarded them for their skills. It was unlikely that places like Britain would provide lucrative additions to Rome's territories: as slate letters sent home by soldiers stationed in Britain attest, this province was a byword for grim and fruitless isolation.<sup>54</sup>

But Rome's transition into an empire had little to do with Europe or with establishing control across a continent that was poorly supplied with the kind of resources and cities that were honeypots of consumers and taxpayers. What propelled Rome into a new era was its reorientation towards the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Rome's success and its glory stemmed from its seizure of Egypt in the first instance, and then from setting its anchor in the east – in Asia.

Ruled for nearly 300 years by descendants of Ptolemy, one of Alexander the Great's bodyguards, Egypt had built fabulous wealth based on the Nile, whose floodwaters produced prodigious harvests of grain. These were not only sufficient to support the local population, but provided a handsome surplus that enabled Alexandria, at the mouth of the river, to develop into the largest city in the world according to one contemporary author, who estimated the population in the first century BC to number around 300,000.<sup>55</sup> Grain

shipments were carefully monitored, with captains having to take a royal oath each time they filled their barges, at which point they would be issued with a receipt by a representative of the royal scribe. Only then would grain be released for loading.<sup>56</sup>

Rome had long cast a greedy eye over Egypt. It seized its chance when Queen Cleopatra became embroiled in a messy struggle for political mastery after the assassination of Julius Caesar. After fatefully throwing in her lot with Mark Antony at the battle of Actium in 30 BC, the Egyptian ruler was soon faced with a Roman army led by Octavius, a master of political cunning, bearing down on Alexandria. Following a series of defensive decisions that combined profound negligence with gross incompetence, Cleopatra committed suicide, either as the result of a poisonous snakebite or perhaps by a self-administered toxin. Egypt fell like a ripe fruit.<sup>57</sup> Octavius had left Rome as a general; he returned as its supreme ruler, with a new title shortly to be bestowed by a grateful Senate: Augustus. Rome had become an empire.

The capture of Egypt transformed Rome's fortunes. Now that it controlled the vast harvests of the Nile valley, the price of grain tumbled, providing a major boost to household spending power. Interest rates plummeted, falling from around 12 to 4 per cent; this in turn quickly fuelled the familiar boom that accompanies a flood of cheap capital: a surge in property prices.<sup>58</sup> Disposable income increased so sharply that Augustus was able to raise the financial threshold for qualification for membership of the Senate by 40 per cent.<sup>59</sup> As Augustus himself was fond of boasting, he found Rome a city built in brick, but left it in marble.<sup>60</sup>

This surging wealth was the result of Rome's ruthless expropriation of Egypt's tax revenues and of its enormous resources. Teams of tax inspectors fanned out across Egypt to impose a new poll tax, payable by all men aged between sixteen and sixty. Exemptions were granted only in a few special cases – for example to priests, who were able to avoid having to pay, but only after their names had been recorded carefully in temple registries.<sup>61</sup> This was part of a system that one scholar has termed 'ancient apartheid'; its aim was to maximise the flow of money back to Rome.<sup>62</sup>

The process of appropriating revenues was repeated elsewhere as the tentacles of Roman economic and military expansion extended further. Not long after the annexation of Egypt, assessors were sent

to Judaea to conduct a census, once again so as to ensure that taxes could be calculated accurately. Assuming the same model was used as had been employed in Egypt, which required all births and deaths to be recorded as well as the names of all adult males, the arrival in the world of Jesus Christ would have been registered by an official whose interest lay less in who the infant and his parents were, and more in what the birth represented by way of additional manpower and a future taxpayer for the empire.<sup>63</sup>

Rome's eyes were opened by the world it encountered in the east. Asia had already acquired a reputation for lazy luxury and fine living. It was indescribably wealthy, wrote Cicero, its harvests the stuff of legend, the variety of its produce incredible, and the size of its herds and flocks simply amazing. Its exports were colossal.<sup>64</sup> Such was Asia's wealth that Romans opined that its inhabitants could afford to dedicate themselves to idle pleasure. Little wonder that it was in the east that Roman soldiers came of age, wrote the poet Sallust: this was where Roman soldiers learnt how to make love, to be drunk, to enjoy statues, pictures and art. This was hardly a good thing, at least as far as Sallust was concerned. Asia may have been 'voluptuous and indulging', but 'its pleasures soon softened the warlike spirits of the soldiers'.<sup>65</sup> Presented in this way, the east was the antithesis of everything that stern, martial Rome stood for.

Augustus himself made a concerted effort to understand what lay beyond the new frontiers in the east. Expeditionary forces were dispatched to the kingdom of Axum in modern Ethiopia and to the Sabbaean kingdom of Yemen, while the Gulf of Aqaba was being explored even as Roman rule in Egypt was still being cemented.<sup>66</sup> Then, in 1 BC, Augustus ordered a detailed survey to be conducted of both sides of the Persian Gulf to report on trade in this region and to record how the sea lanes linked with the Red Sea. He also oversaw the investigation of the land routes heading deep into Central Asia through Persia. A text known as the *Stathmoi Parthikoi* ('Parthian Stations') was produced around this time; it recorded distances between key points in the east, and carefully set out the most important locations from the Euphrates up to Alexandropolis, modern Kandahar in Afghanistan, in the east.<sup>67</sup>

The horizons of traders expanded substantially. According to the historian Strabo, within a few years of the occupation of Egypt, 120 Roman boats were sailing for India each year from the port of Myos

Hormos on the Red Sea. Commercial exchange with India did not open up so much as explode – as is clear from an extraordinarily rich archaeological record from the subcontinent. Roman amphorae, lamps, mirrors and statues of gods have been recovered from a wide range of sites, including Pattanam, Kolhapur and Coimbatore.<sup>68</sup> So abundant are the coin finds dating to the reign of Augustus and his successors from the west coast of India and the Laccadive islands that some historians have argued that local rulers in the east used Roman gold and silver coins for their own currency, or melted these metals down to reuse them.<sup>69</sup>

Tamil literature from the period tells a similar story, recording the arrival of Roman traders with excitement. One poem talks of ‘cool and fragrant wine’ being brought in ‘good ships’ by the Romans, while another is rhapsodic: ‘The beautiful large ships . . . come, bringing gold, splashing the white foam on the waters of the Periyar [river], and then return laden with pepper. Here the music of the surging sea never ceases, and the great king presents to visitors the rare products of sea and mountain.’<sup>70</sup> Another source provides a lyrical account of the European traders who settled in India: ‘The sun shone over the open terraces, over the warehouses near the harbour and over the turrets with windows like eyes of deer. In different places . . . the onlooker’s attention was caught by the sight of the abodes of [the westerners], whose prosperity never waned.’<sup>71</sup> The *Stathmoi Parthikoi* reveals what goods the Romans wanted from western India, noting where merchants could acquire valuable minerals, such as tin, copper and lead, as well as topaz, and where ivory, precious gemstones and spices were readily available.<sup>72</sup>

Trade with ports in India was not, however, limited to products that originated in the subcontinent. As excavations at the Red Sea port of Berenike in Egypt have shown, an array of goods from as far afield as Vietnam and Java found their way towards the Mediterranean.<sup>73</sup> Ports on both the western and eastern coasts of India served as emporia for goods brought from all over eastern and south-eastern Asia ready to be shipped west.<sup>74</sup> Then there were the goods and produce of the Red Sea, a vibrant commercial zone in its own right as well as linking the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean and beyond.<sup>75</sup>

Rome’s well-heeled citizens were by now able to indulge the most exotic and extravagant of tastes. Well-connected commentators complained that spending bordered on the obscene and bemoaned

the voguish displays of excess.<sup>76</sup> This is captured perfectly in Petronius' *Satyricon*, whose most famous scene is the dinner party of Trimalchio, a former slave who had gained his freedom and amassed a fortune. The satire is acidic in its portrayal of the tastes of the new super-rich. Trimalchio wanted only the best that money could buy: pheasant brought in specially from the eastern coast of the Black Sea; guinea fowl from Africa; rare and expensive fish; plumed peacock, and much more besides, presented in excess. The grotesque theatre of presenting dish after dish – live birds sewn inside a whole pig that flew out the moment the ham was carved, or silver toothpicks being given to the guests – was a remorseless parody of the vulgarity and excess of Rome's new wealth. One of the major booms of antiquity produced one of the great literary expressions of bitter jealousy towards the nouveaux riches.<sup>77</sup>

New wealth brought Rome and its inhabitants into contact with new worlds and new tastes. The poet Martial typifies the internationalism and expanded knowledge of this period in a poem mourning a young slave girl, comparing her to an untouched lily, to polished Indian ivory, to a Red Sea pearl, with hair finer than Spanish wool or blonde locks from the Rhine.<sup>78</sup> Where couples wanting to conceive beautiful children would previously have had sex surrounded by erotic images, 'now', reported one horrified Jewish writer, 'they bring Israelite slaves and tie them to the foot of the bed' for inspiration, and because they could afford to.<sup>79</sup> Not all were impressed by the new tastes: the Tiber had been overwhelmed by the waters of the Orontes, the river that flows through Syria and southern Turkey, complained Juvenal in his *Satires* later – in other words, Asian decadence had destroyed old-fashioned Roman virtues; 'clear off', he wrote, 'if you take a shine to a fancy prostitute wearing barbarian headgear'.<sup>80</sup>

For some conservative observers, it was the appearance of one commodity in particular that appalled: Chinese silk.<sup>81</sup> The increasing volume of this fabric available in the Mediterranean caused consternation among traditionalists. Seneca for one was horrified by the popularity of the thin flowing material, declaring that silk garments could barely be called clothing given they hid neither the curves nor the decency of the ladies of Rome. The very foundation of marital relations was being undermined, he said, as men found they could see

through the light fabric that clung to the female form and left little to the imagination. For Seneca, silk was simply a cipher for exoticism and eroticism. A woman could not honestly say she was not naked when she was wearing silk.<sup>82</sup> Others felt the same, for repeated efforts were made to prohibit men from wearing the fabric, including edicts passed by law. Some put it simply: it was disgraceful, two leading citizens agreed, that Roman men should think it acceptable to sport silken clothing from the east.<sup>83</sup>

Others, though, were concerned about the prevalence of silk for different reasons. Writing in the second half of the first century AD, Pliny the Elder resented the high cost of the luxury material simply to 'enable the Roman lady to shimmer in public'.<sup>84</sup> The inflated prices were a scandal, he moaned, a hundred times the real cost.<sup>85</sup> Huge amounts of money were being spent annually, he continued, on luxuries 'for us and our women' from Asia, with as much as 100 million sesterces per year being pumped out of the Roman economy and into trade markets beyond the frontier.<sup>86</sup>

This astonishing sum represented nearly half the annual mint output of the empire, and more than 10 per cent of its annual budget. But, remarkably, it does not appear to have been wildly exaggerated. A recently discovered papyrus contract recording the terms of a shipment of goods between Muziris in India and a Roman port on the Red Sea is testimony to how regular large-volume business had become by the second century AD. It sets out a series of mutual obligations, explaining clearly at what point the goods were to be considered in the hands of the owner or the shipper and outlining the sanctions if payment was not effected on the specific date.<sup>87</sup> Long-distance business required rigour and sophistication.

Roman merchants did not only pay with coins, however. They also traded finely worked glass, silver and gold, as well as coral and topaz from the Red Sea and frankincense from Arabia in exchange for textiles, spices and dyes like indigo.<sup>88</sup> Whatever form it took, the outflow of capital on this scale had far-reaching consequences. One was a strengthening of local economies along the trade routes. Villages turned into towns and towns turned into cities as business flourished and communication and commercial networks extended and became ever more connected. Increasingly impressive architectural monuments were erected in places like Palmyra, on the edge of the Syrian desert, which did well as a trading centre linking east



with west. Not for nothing has Palmyra been called the Venice of the sands.<sup>89</sup> Cities on the north–south axis likewise were transformed, with the most dazzling example at Petra, which became one of the wonders of antiquity thanks to its position on the route between the cities of Arabia and the Mediterranean. Then there were fairs that drew in traders from hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away at convenient crossroad points. Every September at Batnae near the Euphrates ‘the town [was] filled with rich merchants as great crowds gather for the fair to buy and sell things sent from India and China, as well as all manner of other things which are also brought there by land and sea’.<sup>90</sup>

Such was Rome’s spending power that it even determined the design of coinage deep in eastern Asia. After being pushed from the Tarim basin by the Chinese, Yuezhi nomads had managed to secure a dominant position for themselves to the east of Persia, taking over domains that had been ruled by the descendants of Alexander’s generals. In time, a thriving empire was born, named after one of the leading groupings within the tribe – the Guishang, or the Kushan – which took to minting large quantities of coins modelled on those of Rome.<sup>91</sup>

Roman currency poured into Kushan territory through ports in northern India, like Barbaricum and above all Barygaza, where the approach and anchorage were so treacherous that pilots were sent out to guide ships into port. Negotiating the approach to both ports was extremely dangerous for those who were inexperienced or were unfamiliar with the currents.<sup>92</sup> Once on land, traders could find pepper and spices as well as ivory and textiles, including both finished silks and silk yarn. It was an emporium that gathered goods from all over India, Central Asia and China – and delivered extraordinary wealth to the Kushan, who controlled the oasis towns and caravan routes that linked them.<sup>93</sup>

The dominant position that the Kushan were able to establish meant that, although goods were imported and exported from the Mediterranean into China in growing quantities, the Chinese themselves played little role in trade with Rome via the Indian Ocean. Only when the great general Ban Chao led a series of expeditions that took troops as far as the Caspian Sea at the end of the first century AD was an envoy dispatched to bring back more information about the ‘tall and regularly featured’ population of the powerful empire in the

west. Da Qin – or the Great Qin – as the Roman Empire was called, was reported to possess abundant supplies of gold, silver and fine jewels: it was a source of many marvellous and rare objects.<sup>94</sup>

China's dealings with Persia became regular and intensive. Embassies were sent several times a year, notes one Chinese source, with at least ten missions heading for Persia, and even in quieter periods some five or six being dispatched west.<sup>95</sup> Diplomatic envoys typically accompanied large caravans bringing goods for trading, which then returned home with products that were sought after at home – including Red Sea pearls, jade, lapis lazuli and consumables such as onions, cucumbers, coriander, pomegranates, pistachios and apricots.<sup>96</sup> Highly desirable frankincense and myrrh, which in fact came from Yemen and Ethiopia, were known in China as Po-ssu – that is, Persian goods.<sup>97</sup> As we know from one later source, the peaches of Samarkand were considered immensely valuable: 'as large as goose eggs' and with a famously rich colour to them, they were known in China as the 'Golden Peaches'.<sup>98</sup>

Just as the Chinese had few direct dealings with Rome, the Mediterranean region's knowledge of the world beyond the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean was limited, with a single Roman embassy attested as reaching the Emperor Huan around 166 AD. Rome's interest in and knowledge of the Far East was fleeting; its eyes were fixed firmly on Persia.<sup>99</sup> This was not just a rival and a competitor but a possible target in its own right. Even as control was still being established over Egypt, authors like Virgil and Propertius were talking excitedly of Roman influence being expanded. In a poem written to eulogise Augustus and his achievements, Horace wrote not of Roman domination of the Mediterranean, but of mastery of the entire world – including conquering the Indians and the Chinese.<sup>100</sup> Doing so involved moving against Persia, and this became a common preoccupation of a succession of rulers. Grandiose plans were developed to push the empire's frontier as far as the mountain pass known as the Caspian Gates deep inside Persian territory: Rome needed to control the heart of the world.<sup>101</sup>

In fact, efforts were made to turn these dreams into reality. In 113 the Emperor Trajan led an enormous expedition east in person. Advancing rapidly through the Caucasus before swinging south to follow the course of the Euphrates, he conquered Nisibis and Batnae, and minted coins which proclaimed that Mesopotamia had

been 'subjected to the power of the people of Rome'. With resistance melting away, the Emperor pressed on, splitting his forces into two. The great cities of the Persian Empire were taken in quick succession, with Adenystrae, Babylon, Seleucia and Ctesiphon falling into Roman hands after a brilliant campaign that lasted a matter of months. Coins were immediately issued, struck with the uncompromising legend 'PERSIA CAPTA' – Persia has been conquered.<sup>102</sup> Trajan then marched down to Charax, modern Basra, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, arriving just as a merchant vessel set sail for India. He looked at the boat wistfully: if only he had been as young as Alexander the Great, he mused, he would have crossed to the Indus.<sup>103</sup>

With blueprints drawn up to establish new provinces of Assyria and Babylonia, Rome seemed poised to start a new chapter, one where the expansion of its frontiers would take it up to the Indus valley and as far as the gateway to China. But Trajan's success proved short-lived: a fierce fightback was already under way in the cities of Mesopotamia before the Emperor suffered a cerebral oedema that killed him, while a revolt began in Judaea and spread quickly, requiring urgent attention. Nevertheless, successive rulers kept their focus firmly pinned on Persia: it was here that military expenditure was concentrated, and where the frontier, and what lay beyond, was reported with intense interest in Rome.

In sharp contrast with the empire's European provinces, emperors campaigned regularly in Asia – although not always successfully. In 260 AD, for example, the Emperor Valerian was humiliated after being taken prisoner and held in 'the abject form of slavery': used as a human footstool for the Persian ruler 'by bending his back to raise the king as he was about to mount his horse', his body was eventually flayed 'and his skin, stripped from the flesh, was dyed with vermilion, and placed in the temple of the gods of the barbarians, that the remembrance of a victory so signal might be perpetuated and that this spectacle might always be exhibited for our ambassadors'.<sup>104</sup> He was stuffed so all could see the folly and shame of Rome.

Ironically, it was precisely the growth and ambition of Rome that helped galvanise Persia itself. For one thing, the latter benefited greatly from the long-distance traffic between east and west, which also served to effect a shift in Persia's political and economic centre of gravity away from the north. Previously, the priority had been to be located close to the steppes in order to negotiate with the nomad

tribes for livestock and horses, and to supervise the diplomatic contacts necessary to avoid unwelcome attention and demands from the fearsome peoples on the steppes. This was why oasis towns like Nisa, Abivard and Dara had become important, home to magnificent royal palaces.<sup>105</sup>

With central coffers boosted from tax and transit fees drawn from growing local and long-distance trade, major infrastructure projects were now embarked on. These included the transformation of Ctesiphon on the eastern bank of the Tigris in central Mesopotamia into a worthy new capital city, and also heavy investment in ports such as Characene on the Gulf to handle increasing volumes of maritime traffic, not all of which was destined for Rome: a thriving trade had built up in glazed pottery from Persia heading to both India and Sri Lanka during the first and second centuries.<sup>106</sup>

But the most significant effect of Rome's military attention was that it prompted a political revolution. Faced with intense pressure from its neighbour, Persia underwent a major transformation. A new ruling dynasty, the Sasanians, emerged around 220 AD, offering a strident new vision, one which required the removal of authority from provincial governors, who had become independent in all but name, and the concentration of power at the centre. A series of administrative reforms saw a tightening of control over almost every aspect of the state: accountability was prioritised, with Persian officials issued with seals to record their decisions, to allow responsibility to be tracked and to ensure the accurate reporting of information. Many thousands of seals have survived to show just how far this reorganisation went.<sup>107</sup>

Merchants and markets found themselves being regulated, with one source recording how producers and traders – many arranged into guilds – were allocated specific areas in bazaars. This made it easier for inspectors to ensure that quality and quantity standards were met, and above all to collect tax duties efficiently.<sup>108</sup> The focus on the urban environment, the location for most commercial exchange, extended to improving water-supply systems which in some cases were extended for several miles to increase available resources and provide scope for further urban growth. Countless new towns were founded, with a later Persian text that draws on contemporary material attesting to a boom in urban development throughout Central Asia, the Iranian plateau, Mesopotamia and the Near East.<sup>109</sup>

Large-scale irrigation programmes in Khuzistan and Iraq were undertaken as part of a deliberate attempt to boost agricultural production, which must also have had the effect of bringing down food prices.<sup>110</sup> Archaeological finds show that packages were inspected prior to export, while textual material attests to copies of contracts being stamped and stored at registry offices.<sup>111</sup> The incorporation of towns and territories that had been subject to the Kushan for the best part of two centuries back into Persia proper also allowed for an intensification of trade with the east.<sup>112</sup>

As Persia soared, so Rome began to teeter. The Sasanians were not the only problem, for by 300 AD the full length of the empire's eastern border that ran from the North Sea to the Black, from the Caucasus through to the southern tip of Yemen, was under pressure. The empire had been built on expansion and was protected by a well-drilled military. As territorial growth tailed off – the result of reaching the natural boundaries of the Rhine and Danube and the Taurus and Anti-Taurus ranges in eastern Asia Minor – Rome became a classic victim of its own success: it was now itself a target for those living beyond its borders.

Desperate steps were taken to try to correct a worrying imbalance between dwindling tax revenues and the burgeoning costs of defending the frontiers – to inevitable outcry. One commentator lamented that the Emperor Diocletian, who tried to deal with the fiscal deficit aggressively, created problems rather than solving them, and 'in his greed and anxiety, he turned the whole world upside down'.<sup>113</sup> A root-and-branch review of the empire's assets was conducted, the prelude to the overhaul of the tax system. Officials were dispatched to all corners, with assessors turning up unannounced to count every single vine and every single fruit tree with the aim of raising imperial revenues.<sup>114</sup> An empire-wide edict was issued setting the prices for staple goods as well as for luxury imports like sesame seed, cumin, horseradish, cinnamon. A fragment of this order recently discovered in Bodrum shows how far the state was trying to reach: no fewer than twenty-six types of footwear from gilded women's sandals to 'purple low-rise Babylonian-style' shoes had price ceilings set on them by Rome's tax inspectors.<sup>115</sup>

In the event, the strain of trying to re-establish the empire wore Diocletian out, and he retired to the coast of Croatia, to turn his attention to matters that were more enjoyable than affairs of state. 'I wish

you would come to Salona,' he wrote to one of his former colleagues, 'and see the cabbages I have planted myself'; they were so impressive, he went on, that 'one could never be tempted by the prospect of power ever again'.<sup>116</sup> Where Augustus had portrayed himself as a soldier in a famous and magnificent statue found at the Prima Porta on the outskirts of Rome, Diocletian preferred to present himself as a farmer. This summed up how Rome's ambitions had changed over the course of 300 years, from contemplating expansion to India to contemplating the cultivation of prize-winning vegetables.

As the Romans looked on nervously, a mighty storm cloud was gathering. It was the Emperor Constantine who took action. The son of one of the leading men in the empire, he was ambitious and capable, with a knack for finding himself in the right place at the right time. He had a vision of what was needed for Rome that was as clear as it was startling. The empire needed strong leadership – that much was obvious to everyone. But he had a more radical plan than simply concentrating power in his own hands: to build a new city, a new pearl on the string linking the Mediterranean with the east. The location he chose, fittingly, was the point where Europe and Asia meet.

There had long been rumours of rulers of Rome contemplating moving the seat of imperial power. According to one Roman author, Julius Caesar considered making either Alexandria or the site of ancient Troy in Asia Minor the capital as they were better located to govern where Rome's interests lay.<sup>117</sup> At the start of the fourth century, this finally happened, with a magnificent city established at the crossroads of Europe and Asia that was a statement of where the empire's focus was fixed.

A splendid new metropolis was built on the site of the old town of Byzantium, on the banks of the Bosphorus, which in time came not only to rival Rome but to surpass it. Huge palaces were built, as was a Hippodrome for chariot racing. In the centre of the city an enormous column was set up, carved from a single massive porphyry block, with a statue of the Emperor on the top looking down. The new city was called New Rome, although it quickly came to be known as the city of its founder Constantine – Constantinople. Parallel institutions were set up to mirror those of the mother city, including a senate, whose members were sneered at by some as nouveaux

riches – the sons of coppersmiths, bath attendants, sausage-makers and the like.<sup>118</sup>

Constantinople was to become the largest and most important city in the Mediterranean, far eclipsing its peers in size, influence and importance. Although many modern scholars strongly repudiate the idea that Constantine intended the city to be a new imperial capital, the lavish resources spent on its construction tell their own story.<sup>119</sup> Constantinople was situated in a commanding position for other sensitive routes, not least maritime traffic in and out of the Black Sea, and also as a listening point for developments to the east and also the north – in the Balkans and towards the plains of Pannonia, where trouble was brewing.

For the vast majority of the population in antiquity, horizons were decidedly local – with trade and interaction between people being carried out over short distances. Nevertheless, the webs of communities wove into each other to create a world that was complex, where tastes and ideas were shaped by products, artistic principles and influences thousands of miles apart.

Two millennia ago, silks made by hand in China were being worn by the rich and powerful in Carthage and other cities in the Mediterranean, while pottery manufactured in southern France could be found in England and in the Persian Gulf. Spices and condiments grown in India were being used in the kitchens of Xinjiang, as they were in those of Rome. Buildings in northern Afghanistan carried inscriptions in Greek, while horses from Central Asia were being ridden proudly thousands of miles away to the east.

We can imagine the life of a gold coin two millennia ago, struck perhaps in a provincial mint and used by a young soldier as part of his pay to buy goods on the northern frontier in England and finding its way back to Rome in the coffers of an imperial official sent to collect taxes, before passing into the hands of a trader heading east, and then being used to pay for produce bought from traders who had come to sell their provisions at Barygaza. There it was admired and presented to leaders in the Hindu Kush, who marvelled at its design, shape and size and then gave it over to be copied by an engraver – himself perhaps from Rome, perhaps from Persia, or from India or China, or perhaps even someone local who had been taught the skills of striking. This was a world that was connected, complex and hungry for exchange.

It is easy to mould the past into a shape that we find convenient and accessible. But the ancient world was much more sophisticated and interlinked than we sometimes like to think. Seeing Rome as the progenitor of western Europe overlooks the fact that it consistently looked to and in many ways was shaped by influences from the east. The world of antiquity was very much a precursor of the world as we see it today – vibrant, competitive, efficient and energetic. A belt of towns formed a chain spanning Asia. The west had begun to look east, and the east had begun to look west. Together with increasing traffic connecting India with the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, the ancient Silk Roads of antiquity were coursing with life.

Rome's eyes had been fixed on Asia from the moment it transformed itself from a republic into an empire. And so too, it turned out, had its soul. For Constantine – and the Roman Empire – had found God; and the new faith was from the east too. Surprisingly, it came not from Persia or from India, but from an unpromising province where three centuries earlier Pontius Pilate had found infamy as governor. Christianity was about to fan out in all directions.