
Book Review: *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas*

Susan Whitfield. *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas. Material Culture of the Silk Road*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xi, 339. ISBN: 9780520281783. \$29.95. paperback.

“This is a book about things on the Silk Road,” writes Susan Whitfield at the start of this engaging, well-researched and informative survey of one of the most famous exchange networks in world history that linked East Asia with Europe and North Africa. “Things or objects speak to us,” says the author, helping to “create a narrative.”

Telling history through material culture has become popular in recent years. *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas* provides an excellent example of why that is the case. Whitfield selects ten objects (or more accurately nine, plus an “unknown slave” who stands for the countless slaves whose lives were spent in one or more location along the Silk Roads) and uses each not only to talk about the individual artefact, manuscript, or text, but to set out investigations of much bigger topics too—such as maritime trade connections, literacy, the importance of the horse to Central Asia and China, or about the role of slavery, which after “marriage, family and religion” is arguably “the most ubiquitous social institution in human history.”

Whitfield’s approach of zooming in close to look at the production, use, and meaning of individual pieces, but setting them within wider contexts, is highly effective. It works so well because as the author is careful to point out, the material culture for the Silk Roads as a whole is patchy, varied, and often problematic. For one thing, most of the objects that were passed along these trading networks “have long disappeared,” whether “food, wine and medicines” that were consumed; “slaves, elephants and horses” that died; “textiles, wood and ivory” that has decayed; or “glass and pottery” that were broken.

There are also obvious limitations to what we can surmise or state with certainty about single pieces. A magnificent pair of jade ear-rings provide a case in point: set with chains and inlays that included mother-of-pearl, quartz, agate, and more, discovered in excavations of the Xigoupan tombs on the northeast edge of the Ordos in the 1970s. It is not clear where they were produced, for whom they were made, or how, when, or even if they were worn. Those are not the only problems, as Whitfield’s masterful exposition of the steppe context shows: working out how to understand nomadic, semi-nomadic, and pastoral society in the 2nd century B.C.E., when the owner of the ear-rings was buried, presents as many questions and answers about the written material—and about the archaeological evidence as well.

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Whitfield, a distinguished scholar who has spent decades looking at the peoples, cultures, and civilizations of the Silk Roads, is an outstanding guide, always informative, always careful and offering insights that are backed up with the latest research drawn from multiple languages. The reader is given regular reminders about the dangers of simplification and of generalization, and, in some cases, also told about more recent history of the selected items—for example, how a Byzantine silk ended up in Lyon, France, or how archaeologists led by Auriel Stein digging in Dandan-Uliq in the oasis kingdom of Khotan discovered a plaque showing two figures, both with haloes, astride a camel and a horse respectively.

The author writes with authority, explaining for example how the spread of Buddhism was closely related to the expansion of trade. Whitfield also has a fine turn of phrase. She writes of a hoard of coins from South Asia discovered in the ruins of a monastery in the highlands of Ethiopia, which reveals the depth of the connections linking regions and continents together almost 2,000 years ago. She uses a single piece as an exemplar: a coin issued by Wima Kadphises, ruler of the Kushan empire in the 3rd century, in Greek on one side, Prākṛit on the other, and including images of Indian and Kushan deities as well as Buddhist iconography. “Here we see in one coin a microcosm of Central Asian complexity, of the meeting and mixture of peoples, languages, gods and symbols. This is not an accidental or random mixture of cultures but the deliberate exploitation and adaptation by a ruler of certain symbols, languages and gods to send a message both to the peoples under his reign and to neighbouring and more distant cultures.” This is well put, and stands as a cipher for the theme of the book as a whole.

Although each of the ten chapters is distinct and does not cross-refer in any meaningful way, the structure of the book expands the horizons of how we can understand the Silk Roads and indeed Antiquity and Late Antiquity in more rounded and sophisticated ways—ones that accentuate connectivities and complexities. These are drawn out and accentuated by an impressive range of written sources, taken from poetry, official documents, or narrative histories that provide eye-witness or contemporary accounts.

There are of course objects and topics that are absent and which could have been included either in addition or in the place of those that were chosen, as Whitfield admits. The author does not define the “Silk Road,” and does not explain the use of the singular, which is curious given the origins of the term in the plural, and especially so given that the point of the book is precisely the multiplicity of connections, geographic, religious, cultural, commercial, and beyond. As is so often the case when it comes to the Silk Roads, there is an unspoken assumption that significance, importance, and value of the trade, travel, and exchange networks declines, collapses, or ends around c.1000. A conclusion that explains why this was the case (if indeed it was) would have been helpful.

Nevertheless, this is an impressive and comprehensive work, one that can easily be envisaged as a primer for a university course that introduces the principal themes of the Silk Roads. There is much here too, though, for more established scholars working in part or all of this field thanks to Whitfield’s research, which is up to date with the latest thinking on manumission of slaves, on the construction of Buddhist stupas, or the techniques of glass-making. Susan Whitfield has written a rather wonderful book;

it will serve as a gateway that will inspire future generations of scholars to follow in her footsteps. For that, as well as for many other reasons, she should be warmly thanked—and congratulated.

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