

## The importance of the Silk Road for the Middle East by Arnold Hottinger

*The so-called "discoveries" made at the beginning of the early modern period in Europe were of course not discoveries for the non-European, Asian world, and particularly for the Middle East. In fact they were the beginning of a great disaster, whose consequences are still with us today. From antiquity, the caravan routes and maritime trade routes that linked the Far East with India, and India with the Middle East, had always been known. It was only that the Europeans did not know them, right down to the beginning of the early modern period. When one of them, the Venetian Marco Polo, travelled along the whole of that route, the ignorance of Europeans in the Mediterranean was so profound that they called Marco Polo's description of his journey "Il Milione". It seemed to them that he was drivelling on about unsubstantiated things and numbers, and constantly talking about millions.*

From antiquity there had been trading cities in the Middle East that lived and got rich on the transit trade that reached from China to the Mediterranean. Their traders naturally knew that there was an India to the east, beyond that an island empire where the spices came from, and even further east, China with its silk and porcelain. They also knew that trading ships left Basra at the mouth of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates to cross the eastern sea, and that their captains knew the ways and means of moving about on those oceans. The transit trade was the lifeline of the main trading cities of the East. In the Middle East, the narrow land bridge that joins the East with the West, the importance of that fertilising transit trade was particularly great. It was a region with many deserts and steppes, whose agricultural resources were limited. The transit trade produced larger profits than the meagre semi-desert agriculture of the peasants and bedouins. Depending on exactly where the routes passed through at any one time, trading cities flourished or fell into decay.

The two great ruined cities of antiquity, **Petra** and **Palmyra**, show this vividly. Petra lies on the southern edge of the great transit route that was called the Silk Road. It was a fortified refuge which the Nabataeans (originally an Arab tribe from northern Arabia) founded in a deep rocky gorge. There was also water there, although it is surrounded by desert. The Nabataeans succeeded in diverting through their fortress the transit routes that came from Arabia bringing goods to the Mediterranean. Their port on the Mediterranean was Gaza, now in one of the autonomous Palestinian areas. The Nabataeans stationed troops to protect the transit routes and ensured that the caravans made a stop in Petra and paid their dues. Between the 5th century BC and the 2nd century AD, Petra – the "city in the rock" – gradually grew so rich that it could afford to have gigantic tombs and grave temples for its kings hewn out of the sandstone rocks of its gorge, in the most modern style of those days, the Hellenistic style. Those monuments in the solid rock still stand today, and are one of the greatest surprises for any modern visitor.

In the year 106 AD, the Roman emperor Trajan conquered and destroyed Petra (as he also destroyed Jerusalem), because it had become too powerful for him. It lived on into the Byzantine era, but gradually decreased in importance in favour of Palmyra. Palmyra is an oasis deep in the interior of the Syrian desert. From early times it was a transit station for the caravans that went from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. They aimed for the gap in the coastal mountains of the eastern Mediterranean, which saved them the trouble of taking the difficult route through the coastal mountains and their passes. After the defeat of Petra, the Palmyrenes managed to

monopolise the transit traffic from the east to the Mediterranean. They, in their turn, deployed troops that secured the desert between the Euphrates and the city of Edessa (now Homs in Syria) and ensured that traffic now passed through Palmyra. Their archers were famous throughout the Roman Empire. The great stone inscription recording the dues to be paid for every kind of goods was found by archaeologists in the market place of ancient Palmyra, and is today in the Louvre. Through this trade, Palmyra became so rich by the 3rd century AD that it could afford to build gigantic temples: a triumphal arch for the visit of the Roman emperor Hadrian (in the year 129 AD), a road in the middle of the desert lined by pillars made of solid Aswan granite which must have been shipped all the way down the Nile – however hard it may be to visualise how it was done – and a city of the dead with artistically decorated subterranean tombs in which the sarcophagi of aristocrats were buried. All that was immense and solid enough to have lasted until today.

Palmyra was so rich and powerful that for a short time it even conquered and ruled its own empire in the Middle East. At the time of Queen Zenobia, who acted as regent for her young son, the trading city of Palmyra ruled all countries from Egypt to Asia Minor. But the ambition and power of Zenobia was a challenge to emperor Aurelianus. He came personally to the East, in order to inflict a crushing defeat on her troops near Edessa (Homs). She herself was captured, and, bound with golden chains, was forced to accompany the emperor's triumphal procession in Rome. Palmyra was deprived of its walls and plundered.

What happened to the two desert cities is especially clearly visible because they lived exclusively from the transit trade. When the trade dried up, they fell into ruins. There were many other transit-trade cities on the Silk Road that lay in fertile regions, and hence always remained important towns even when trade no longer passed through them. They simply became provincial capitals. But those ancient centres of population flourished and became great cities, cultural centres, metropolises, whenever trade fertilised them – it happened to Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo, Alexandria, Constantinople/Istanbul, Trebizond, the Persian trading towns such as Ray (near modern Teheran), Isfahan, Shiraz, central Asian cities such as Samarkand, even to infertile, hot islands like Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

For the culture of the Moslems, trade was an essential element. Their courts were centres of luxury and cultural splendour, but it was always the traders that enriched them. They created and spread a culture that encompassed the entire Islamic world. This culture arose through the mingling of the Persian and Byzantine traditions, with a superstructure of Islam; to this were added influences from India, Indonesia, China and Africa. The whole thing developed into a new synthesis with its own, unmistakable character. And for that highly-developed culture, with its flourishing cities, its mosques, palaces, markets, universities, scholars and writers, its craftsmen and of course its traders, who enriched and moved the whole mixture, the European discovery of the routes to India was something like a short-circuiting of the fertilising trade routes. That was the beginning of the end. With that, a slow but unstoppable process of decay began, a loss not only of material wealth and power, but a loss of mobility, inspiration, liveliness and joy of living, which had all been stimulated earlier by the movement of trade.

The decay was by no means sudden. In the first years after the Portuguese sailed round Africa (Vasco da Gama 1498; his second voyage 1502), it was hardly perceptible. In those days, ocean voyages were a risky and dangerous undertaking. The Europeans had first to build up their seaborne trade. They also had to agree among themselves as to which of them were to control or even monopolise that trade. That led to wars between the Portuguese and the Dutch, and later between the Dutch and the British. The French also took part in the race, and managed to hold their own in some areas. While these struggles were going on, Venice and Genoa continued to operate

the old routes from the eastern to the western Mediterranean which over the course of centuries had made them rich. But their trading area was actually only the last stage of the Silk Road. The main section of the road from China to Alexandria, Antioch or Constantinople, which since time immemorial had been in the hands of Asiatic peoples, was now, very slowly but steadily, being replaced by the sea route. The sea route initially ended in Lisbon, later in the Dutch maritime towns, and finally in London, where the riches of the world ended up too. Accordingly, it was first of all Lisbon that became the largest and richest city in Europe, shortly afterwards the Dutch trading cities, and finally London, until London surrendered its role to New York. Those cities became cities such as Europe had not known since the fall of the Roman Empire, but such as the East had repeatedly known, from Baghdad to Constantinople-Istanbul. The Middle Eastern trading cities were replaced by the emerging trading cities along the Atlantic coast of Europe. Just as the Renaissance grew out of the Mediterranean trade of the Italian trading and sailing cities, so what we call the modern period was to arise to a large extent as a result of the seaborne trade that gradually replaced the old routes of the Silk Road. Europe's gain was a loss for all the countries between China and the Mediterranean. That loss of wealth and creativity led in the 19th century to such a great gain in power for the Europeans that they even invaded Asia and Africa and occupied the countries there by force. That is what is called colonialism.

### The Homs (Edessa) Gap

The east coast of the Mediterranean is overshadowed by high mountain ranges: in the south the Lebanese mountains, which end still further south as outliers in the hills of Palestine, in the north the Alawite mountains (Jebel Alawi) – steep, precipitous rocky mountains which rise above the port of Lattakiye. Between these two coastal ranges is a gap which permits access to the coast from the interior of Syria. From antiquity, traffic passed through this gap to the sea, and armies used it too, again and again. That is why the Crusaders built one of their largest castles, Krak des Chevaliers, at the edge of the gap.

Not only goods and armies passed through here; the winds from the Mediterranean blow through this gap into the interior of Syria. They blow constantly from west to east, so strongly that all the trees throughout the area are crooked, leaning towards the east. Palmyra owes its water to those winds. Near Palmyra there is a steep mountain, which drives the winds upwards, so that they cool down and form clouds and rain. The rain falls on the desert mountains, collects, and flows out in several permanent springs in the middle of the Syrian desert. They are the source of the oasis of Palmyra, the city of palms.