“It may well have been along the Silk Road that some of the first ‘world music’ jam sessions took place.”

— Theodore Levin





The National Transportation Safety Board

Travel Advisory:

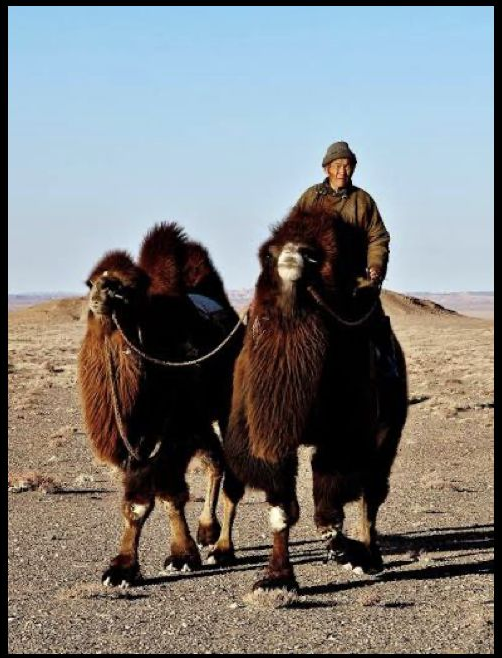
THE SILK ROADS ARE NOT FOR SISSIES.

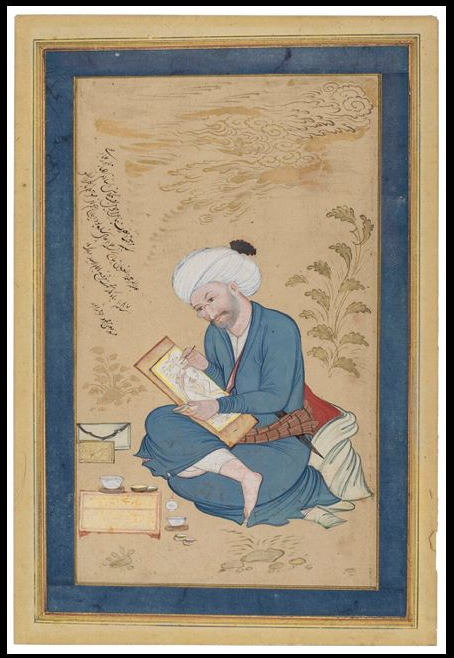
To negotiate them successfully, end-to-end, one must be a master of geography, topography, climatology, meteorology, economics, political science, anthropology, archaeology, metallurgy, linguistics, Eurasian languages (at a minimum, Chinese, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Persian, Arabic, Sogdian, Sanskrit, Old Uyghur, and Tibetan), numismatics, calligraphy, biology, animal husbandry, graphic arts, icononography, musicology, gastronomy, medicine (pharmacology and epidemiology), intellectual history, religion, agronomy, cartography, literature (all genres), technology, architecture, and historiography.

Since these roads leave no physical marks, the use of drone imaging, GPS navigation (depending on Elon's moods), and satellite photography is required.

No one should set out, alone or in a caravan of less than 1,000 camels, without taking a six-week course in the subject, with perfect attendance.

Herders in Silk, Imams Quoting Aristotle: Medieval Cosmopolitanism in Central Asia





A Prosimetric Epic in Six Books,

Translated from Old Tocharian

by W.T.F. Hammond,

Dilettante Emeritus, MSC Institute for Idle Curiosity

Heartland of the Silk Roads



Central Asia from Alexander the Great to the Fall of Constantinople

“Longing on a large scale is what makes history.” — Don DeLillo (2001)

“What drives history is the human ambition to alter one’s condition to match one’s hopes.” — J. R. and W. T. MacNeill.” (2003)

“History is just one damned oasis after another.” — your presenter (2026)

What is history?

“History is a field of study that tries to improve our understanding of the past and how it affects our present. Historians […] ask questions about the past and write books or articles using evidence they find. The main job of a historian is to interpret the past for people in the present. That’s one of the reasons history is valuable—it can help you understand the present and prepare for the future.”

— John Green

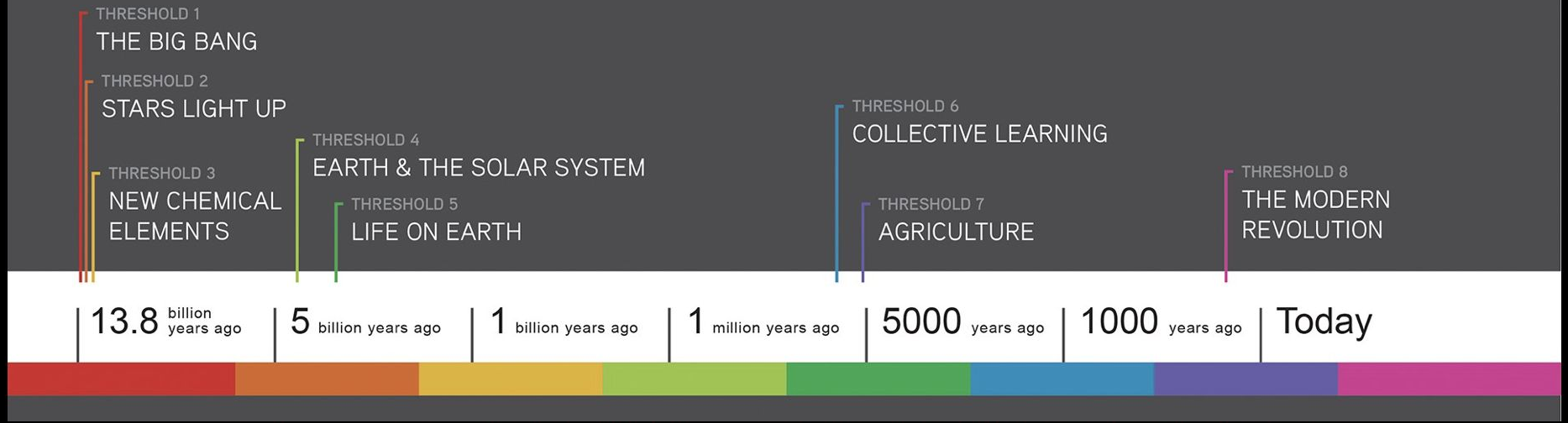
Thresholds of Increasing Complexity

Ingredients + **Goldilocks Conditions** = **New Complexity**

Materials or things that came together

The "just-right" conditions

How the ingredients came together under the right conditions to create something new and more intricate than existed before



https://www.oerproject.com/Big-History/Unit-1/Welcome-to-Big-History#guid23d1546e-867e-4931-88b3-5fb918ad9929

How did the Silk Road increase **complexity**?

"Christopher Columbus's voyages wouldn't have been possible without **sailing technology** that arrived in Europe along the Silk Road.

"Silk Road trade helped ideas and technologies spread so effectively that they changed the world. A good example from the ancient period is **papermaking.** Paper let people write down ideas and do calculations, which helped them spread and save ideas. Paper moved from China to Central Asia and later to Europe along the Silk Road. **Religions**, with their new ideas, also traveled. Christianity, which began in the Mediterranean world, reached the area just west of China by the seventh century CE.

"In the medieval period, other technologies spread and changed the world. **Gunpowder** was developed first in China, but it reached the Islamic world and Europe in the fourteenth century, leading to a military revolution and helping to create bigger and more powerful empires. Chinese-style **plows** helped European peasants grow more food. Islamic and Greek ideas about **medicine** reached India and China traveling the opposite direction along those same routes.

"By 1500, the Silk Road routes had helped Eurasian societies accumulate vast amounts of knowledge, which they applied to important projects. For example, the ships that left Spain and reached the Americas in 1492 combined sail technology from the Indian Ocean, Chinese **compasses** and gunpowder, and European hulls. **The ideas that spread along the Silk Road transformed the world far from those routes and the impacts continue to unfold in the present**."

https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/HTML-Articles/BHP/Unit5/Silk-Routes

Christopher Columbus kept an annotated copy of *The Travels of Marco Polo* with him on his first voyage to the Western Hemisphere; hence, ‘the Indies.’



https://thearmenite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/columbus-taino.jpg

What haunts me about central Asia during the silk road florescence?

Connecting my imagination to Earth's largest land mass (Eurasia — 55 million square kilometers) and largest population (currently 5 billion people) during a crucial era in world history (late classical — early modern) … and to all aspects of human activity under these rubrics. Quixotic and doomed from the start, but irresistable.



I hope you will join me on this intellectual journey!

ALL OF US ARE SEEKERS, pilgrims in search of enlightenment: knowledge, spiritual growth, new people and a wider world.

Carrying palm fronds and beggar's bowls, we are walking to ancient sites where miraculous events have occurred, regardless of our religious or secular identities.

On our way, we find comfort and companionship here at the College, before moving on to the next stage of our journeys. **Let's swap our stories and drink the wine of shared experience!**





Quick show of hands, please:

How many of you studied the silk road trade routes in high school, college, or graduate school?

(I never did, until I taught high school world history in the late 1990s and early 2000s — and even then, my excellent textbooks devoted only four or five pages to the subject.

Now I am obsessed….)

Why do *you* want to study them now?



https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silk-Road-trade-route

A Quick Survey as We Set Out: **K - W - L** in Three Columns

What do you **know** about the silk roads?	What do you **want** to know about them?	What have you **learned** about them?

Please sketch the answers to **K** and **W** this week;

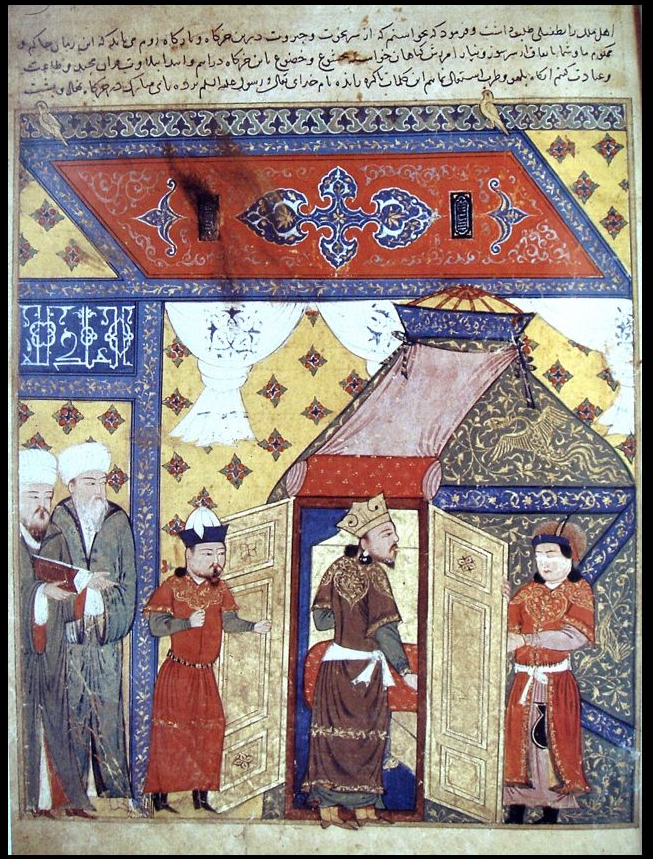
it will be very helpful for me to read your **L** responses after the last class.

The Romantic Road:

“Kubla Khan” by S. T. Coleridge



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kublai_Khan#/media/File:Kublai_giving_support_to_the_Venetians.JPG



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kublai_Khan#/media/File:GhazanConversionToIslam.JPG

https://poets.org/poem/kubla-khan

Thus, Coleridge's fragment of a vision within an opium-induced (?) dream —

[Quick write]: What is your vision of the silk roads?

Photos of silk-road cities today:

https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2024/oct/26/exploring-the-silk-roads-10-stunning-sites-in-10-countries-from-turkey-to-china

As the golden mist attenuates and the notes of the zither fade…

this major buzz-kill:

(You will want to drop the course, although your tuition is not refundible.)

"The Silk Road was one of the least traveled routes in human history and possibly not worth studying — if tonnage carried, traffic, or the number of travelers at any time were the sole measures of a given route's importance."

(She loves to be provocative but follows with):

"Yet the Silk Road changed history, largely because the people who managed to traverse all or part [of it] planted their cultures like seeds of exotic species carried to distant lands."

Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road* (2017), p. 435

Excellent introductions to major historical topics: **John Green's *Crash Courses***



https://mainepublic.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bd6cdec3-f6eb-4d50-b93a-4748e6881c81/the-silk-road-and-ancient-trade-crash-course-world-history-9/

Any comments or questions for Mr. Green?

(I googled him to find out if he has a Ph.D. degree; he doesn't. As I typed in my search question, the top FAQ was, "Does John Green have OCD?" The answer, unsurprisingly, is "yes," and he has advocated for those with the disorder. He has a B.A. in English and Religious Studies.)

He's no lightweight: "From 2010 to 2013, John and [his brother] Hank launched several online video projects, including VidCon, an annual conference for the online video community, and Crash Course (2011–present), a wide-ranging educational channel. Green's 2012 novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and the 2014 film adaptation were massive commercial and critical successes, leading to several other film and television adaptations of his work. He was included in Time magazine's 2014 list of the 100 most influential people in the world."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Green

Did I Miss Anything?

Nothing. When we realized you weren't here
we sat with our hands folded on our desks
in silence, for the full two hours

Everything. I gave an exam worth
40 percent of the grade for this term
and assigned some reading due today
on which I'm about to hand out a quiz
worth 50 percent

Nothing. None of the content of this course
has value or meaning
Take as many days off as you like:
any activities we undertake as a class
I assure you will not matter either to you or me
and are without purpose

Everything. A few minutes after we began last time
a shaft of light suddenly descended and an angel
or other heavenly being appeared
and revealed to us what each woman or man must do
to attain divine wisdom in this life and
the hereafter
This is the last time the class will meet
before we disperse to bring the good news to all people on earth.

Nothing. When you are not present
how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom
is a microcosm of human experience
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder
This is not the only place such an opportunity has been gathered

but it was one place

And you weren't here

— Tom Wayman

https://www.tomwayman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WAYMAN-READING_DidIMissAnything.mp3