

CLASSIFICATION OF WRITTEN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES ON THE HISTORY OF THE GREAT SILK ROAD AND THE DEGREE OF THEIR SCIENTIFIC STUDY

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Abstract: The Great Silk Road occupies a significant place in the history of world civilization as a transcontinental trade and cultural communication system that connected the East and West for many centuries. The study of its history relies heavily on written, archaeological, visual, ethnographic, and narrative sources, which together allow scholars to reconstruct the historical realities of intercultural interaction, economic exchange, and urban development. This article examines the classification of sources related to the Great Silk Road and analyzes the degree of their scientific investigation in modern historiography. Special attention is devoted to Chinese chronicles, Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts, travelers' accounts, archaeological discoveries, and the contributions of Western and Eastern scholars to Silk Road studies. The research applies historical-comparative, source-critical, and interdisciplinary approaches to evaluate the methodological foundations of Silk Road historiography. The study demonstrates that the integration of written and material evidence has considerably expanded the possibilities for reconstructing the historical processes associated with the Great Silk Road. Furthermore, the article highlights the growing importance of museum studies, digital humanities, and visual analysis in contemporary Silk Road scholarship.

Key words: Great Silk Road; historiography; source studies; Dunhuang manuscripts; Turfan manuscripts; archaeology; historical sources; Silk Road cities; Ferdinand von Richthofen; travelers' accounts.

Introduction. The Great Silk Road represents one of the most influential historical phenomena in the development of human civilization, leaving a lasting impact on the political, economic, and cultural histories of numerous states and societies. The reconstruction of historical reality concerning the Silk Road requires a careful reliance on historical memory and diverse source materials. In this regard, source studies have emerged as an independent field within historical science, possessing its own methodological principles for identifying, classifying, and analyzing historical sources.

Research on the cities formed along the Great Silk Road is primarily based on archaeological discoveries and monuments of material culture. Through historical-comparative analysis, scholars determine the origins, stages of development, and territorial locations of urban centers. Source-critical approaches further contribute to revealing the unique characteristics and historical significance of these cities. Modern historiography increasingly emphasizes the distinction between historical sources and historical literature. This methodological issue has become particularly important in Silk Road studies, where scientific collections and accumulated scholarly analyses themselves have acquired the status of independent historical sources. Consequently, the classification of sources according to both form and content plays a central role in historical interpretation.

Sources related to the Great Silk Road vary significantly in terms of informational value and preservation. Over time, some materials lose part of their informational capacity, making source criticism essential for reliable interpretation. Traditionally, Silk Road sources are divided into material, written, oral, and ethnographic categories. Contemporary research also actively

employs visual materials such as urban plans, maps of trade routes, locations of historical monuments, and works of visual art.

Narrative sources occupy a particularly important position in Silk Road historiography. These include chronicles, religious texts, royal decrees, memoirs of travelers and ambassadors, merchants' recollections, diaries, biographies, and economic-statistical materials. In the modern era, mass media and digital content are increasingly regarded as valuable historical sources as well. Semantic approaches within source studies allow scholars to group materials according to similarities in meaning and historical context. Current historiography demonstrates a strong integrative tendency in which written and material sources are studied together through the combined methodologies of source studies and museum studies. Such interdisciplinary approaches significantly broaden the possibilities for comprehensive historical analysis.

Literature review and methodology. This study employs a combination of historical-comparative, historiographical, source-critical, and interdisciplinary methodologies. The historical-comparative method was applied to examine the evolution of Silk Road cities, trade systems, and intercultural exchanges across different chronological periods. Source criticism was used to classify and evaluate written, archaeological, visual, and narrative sources according to their origin, content, reliability, and historical significance. The research further incorporates historiographical analysis to assess the degree of scientific investigation carried out by Eastern and Western scholars. Comparative textual analysis was applied to Chinese chronicles such as *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Hou Hanshu*, as well as to medieval travel accounts and manuscript collections discovered in Dunhuang and Turfan. An interdisciplinary approach combining archaeology, geography, art history, museum studies, and manuscript studies was also utilized. This method enabled the integration of written evidence with material culture, visual representations, and cartographic materials in order to reconstruct the historical processes associated with the Great Silk Road.

Results and discussion. Historical sources concerning the Great Silk Road can be classified into several major categories:

- ✦ Material and archaeological sources;
- ✦ Written sources;
- ✦ Oral and ethnographic materials;
- ✦ Visual and artistic sources;
- ✦ Narrative and documentary materials.

Initial written sources provide general information regarding the formation and development of the trade route. Manuscripts discovered in different regions illuminate the dynamics of trade, religion, and cultural exchange, while travelers' accounts describe the socio-economic and cultural life of Silk Road cities. One of the earliest written accounts concerning the Great Silk Road is found in the *Shiji* ("Records of the Grand Historian") compiled by the ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian. Unlike continuous chronological narratives, this work presents historical events through descriptions of rulers, political figures, and significant events. The text contains valuable information regarding diplomatic missions from eastern regions to the West, especially the activities of Zhang Qian, whose expeditions contributed significantly to the establishment of interregional trade and cultural relations.

Additional important Chinese historical works include Ban Gu's *Hanshu* ("Book of Han") and Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* ("Book of the Later Han"). These texts provide detailed descriptions of early commercial relations, political interactions, and economic connections between China and western territories. Modern Chinese scholarship has continued the systematic study of these sources. Research conducted by Yu Yutian applies comparative analysis to both Eastern and Western historical materials, thereby deepening scholarly understanding of the earliest stages of Silk Road development. The scientific study of early Silk Road sources in Western historiography became closely associated with the work of sinologists. Burton Dewitt Watson, an American scholar, produced a significant English translation and analysis of Sima Qian's

Records of the Grand Historian in 1961. British diplomat and sinologist Porter Wilkinson also contributed through the translation and analysis of Fan Ye's History of the Later Han. The publication of R. Fendell's Sources of the Silk Road by the University of Washington Press in 2005 further emphasized the scientific importance of manuscript sources in Silk Road studies. The author evaluated written monuments discovered in ancient urban territories from the perspective of source criticism and demonstrated their significance for reconstructing historical processes.

The Dunhuang manuscripts represent one of the most important source complexes for the study of the Great Silk Road. These manuscripts were discovered in the Mogao caves near Dunhuang in Gansu Province and include religious, scientific, medical, and secular texts written in multiple languages. Most manuscripts date from the late fourth century to the early eleventh century and were preserved within the so-called "Library Cave." The cave was discovered in 1900 by the monk Wang Yuanlu. Subsequently, major portions of the manuscripts were studied and transported to Europe by Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot. Today, major collections of Dunhuang manuscripts are preserved in the British Library and the National Library of France. The manuscripts can be classified into several categories:

- ✦ Religious texts, especially Buddhist writings;
- ✦ Administrative and legal documents;
- ✦ Medical treatises and literary works;
- ✦ Artistic and iconographic materials;
- ✦ Commercial contracts and diplomatic correspondence.

These materials provide extensive information concerning trade networks, diplomatic relations, religious exchanges, and cultural interaction along the Great Silk Road. Dunhuang mural paintings also constitute highly valuable visual sources. Early cataloging efforts by Arthur Waley in 1931 and subsequent analyses by Eichi Matsumoto, Jao Tsung-i, and Roderick Whitfield significantly expanded the scientific study of these visual materials. The Mogao cave complex, consisting of 492 cave temples, preserves murals and sculptures representing a millennium of Buddhist artistic traditions.

The Turfan manuscript collections are another major source category. These texts were written in Sogdian, Chinese, Tibetan, Khotanese, and Bactrian languages and reflect the multicultural environment of the Silk Road. The Turfan region functioned as a crucial crossroads where multiple civilizations interacted. Consequently, the manuscripts reveal not only trade relations but also religious and cultural exchanges. In 1912, the "Eastern Commission" was established within the Berlin Academy of Sciences to coordinate research on the Turfan Collection, which contained more than 30,000 manuscript fragments.

Important collections are currently preserved in the British Library, Berlin State Library, Penn Museum, and Tokyo National Museum. German scholars such as Friedrich Müller and Emil Sieg made major contributions to cataloging and analyzing these materials, particularly texts written in Sogdian and Uyghur languages. Travel narratives constitute an essential source category for reconstructing the history of Silk Road cities. Medieval travelers including Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, John of Montecorvino, Odoric of Pordenone, Giovanni de Marignolli, Johann Schiltberger, and Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo documented valuable observations concerning urban life, trade relations, and cultural practices.

Marco Polo described cities such as Kashgar and Samarkand in considerable detail, emphasizing their geographical locations, architecture, and cultural diversity. Similarly, Ibn Battuta provided extensive accounts of Samarkand and Constantinople, highlighting their cultural and architectural significance. Important medieval Muslim scholars including al-Khwarizmi, Jayhani, Narshakhi, al-Biruni, Mahmud al-Kashgari, Tahir Marwazi, al-Sam'ani, Muhammad Awfi, Najib Bakhran, Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi also contributed substantial geographical, economic, and cultural information regarding Silk Road cities. Modern Silk Road historiography increasingly interprets the Great Silk Road as a complex

communication system rather than a single trade route. The historical evolution of the Silk Road can be divided into several chronological stages:

1. The ancient stage (2nd century BCE – 1st century CE), during which the earliest stable trade routes emerged;
2. The medieval and early modern stage (4th–18th centuries), characterized by the peak expansion of trade and cultural interaction;
3. The modern stage (19th–21st centuries), marked by the rediscovery and scientific reconstruction of Silk Road heritage.

Western historiography played a decisive role in developing systematic Silk Road studies. Ferdinand von Richthofen's expeditions between 1868 and 1872 and his multi-volume work published between 1877 and 1912 introduced the term "Seidenstrassen" ("Silk Roads") into scientific literature. Richthofen emphasized the importance of silk as a principal export commodity linking East and West. Karl Ritter similarly identified the Fergana Valley as a strategically significant region within Silk Road networks. Later scholars such as Li Bozhong and Tansen Sen reconsidered the concept of the Silk Road through comparative historical and cartographic analysis, emphasizing its multidimensional and interconnected character.

The expeditions of Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin, and Paul Pelliot significantly expanded scholarly knowledge regarding Silk Road geography, archaeology, and manuscript traditions. Aurel Stein reconstructed ancient desert routes and clarified their economic and strategic functions. Sven Hedin's expeditions between 1893 and 1935 produced important geographical, cartographic, and archaeological data concerning Central Asia, Tibet, and the Pamir region. Paul Pelliot's expeditions between 1906 and 1909 resulted in the discovery and scientific analysis of multilingual manuscripts in Dunhuang and Xinjiang. His linguistic expertise enabled the translation and interpretation of Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit texts that illuminated Buddhist history and Silk Road cultural exchange.

The analysis demonstrates that the historiography of the Great Silk Road has evolved from isolated textual interpretation toward an integrated interdisciplinary field combining archaeology, manuscript studies, geography, art history, and digital humanities. Written and archaeological sources complement one another and enable scholars to reconstruct complex historical processes involving trade, diplomacy, religion, migration, and urbanization. The Dunhuang and Turfan manuscript collections represent especially important milestones in Silk Road studies because they preserve direct evidence of multicultural interaction. Their multilingual and multi-religious content reveals the cosmopolitan nature of Silk Road societies and illustrates how trade routes functioned simultaneously as channels of economic exchange and cultural transmission.

Travel narratives also remain indispensable despite certain subjective limitations. Their eyewitness descriptions of cities, markets, caravanserais, architecture, and local customs provide valuable socio-economic and ethnographic information unavailable in official chronicles. Modern historiography increasingly recognizes the Great Silk Road not merely as a commercial network but as a multidimensional system of civilizational interaction. New approaches involving digital preservation, cartographic reconstruction, museum studies, and visual analysis continue to expand scholarly understanding of Silk Road history.

Conclusion. The Great Silk Road constitutes one of the most significant historical systems of intercultural communication in world history. Its study relies upon a diverse and complex body of sources including written documents, archaeological discoveries, visual materials, manuscript collections, and travelers' narratives. The classification and scientific investigation of these materials demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary methodologies in reconstructing historical reality. Chinese chronicles, Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts, medieval travel accounts, and archaeological expeditions collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of Silk Road civilization. Modern scholarship increasingly emphasizes the integration of written and material evidence, thereby broadening the methodological and analytical possibilities of Silk Road historiography. Consequently, the study of Silk Road sources not only deepens

understanding of historical trade systems but also contributes to broader discussions concerning cultural interaction, globalization, and the historical foundations of Eurasian connectivity.

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