

# GURPS®

Fourth Edition

## *Hot Spots:*™

# THE SILK ROAD™



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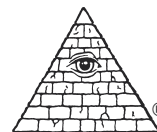
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Stock # 37-0662

Version 1.0 – May 2017



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*Who is willing to accept our commission to go to the Western  
Heaven to visit the Buddha and fetch the scriptures?*

*– Journey to the West, Chapter 12*

# INTRODUCTION

When archaeologists recently excavated fifth century A.D. tombs in southern Japan, they discovered a number of glass objects – dishes and layered gold-and-glass beads. They are of Mediterranean origin, predating the appearance of blown-glass manufacture in Asia. But those pieces of glass are not unique in the distance they traveled. Half a world away, in Helgo, Sweden, a sixth-century bronze Buddha figurine from northern India was found in a Viking burial, while in the treasury of the Basilica of St. Servatius in Maastricht, a piece of Chinese silk believed to date to the Tang dynasty lines a reliquary. How did these tiny but precious artifacts make their way across thousands of miles from where they were made, across countless physical and cultural barriers?

The answer lies in a storied collection of trade routes. As early as the second century B.C., nations on either end of the Eurasian land mass traded with one another. They traded

indirectly, with goods making a long series of relays over mountains, through deserts, and passing between countless hands across several different civilizations on their way to their final destination. The paths these goods followed have come to be called the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was a transcontinental highway, supporting traffic in both goods and ideas. It encompassed, at various times, the furthest northeastern extent of classical Greek civilization, the easternmost extent of the Islamic caliphate, and the westernmost extent of Chinese authority. It provided a crossroads for the Old World, where people and goods of every conceivable origin and character might sit side by side.

For all that, the Silk Road wasn't a paved road, a well-blazed trail, or even a single path. It was a collection of shifting routes connecting important landmarks: desert oases, camps for travelers, mountain passes, narrow stretches of easily traveled land bracketed by more forbidding terrain, and religious monuments providing points of reference and places to stay along the trail. The position of those landmarks and conditions between them imposed a certain logic on the journey, but there were still many dividing and recombining paths one could follow, should any route be blocked.

This supplement deals with the traditional Central Asian core of the Silk Road, a desert area in modern western China just north of Tibet, and its important adjacent territories. This region links most major Old World civilizations either directly or a step or two removed. Though trade along the route began at the end of the second century B.C., and it continued to carry some traffic at least into the 14th century A.D., this volume focuses on the period from the second century A.D. (when the Silk Road acquired an existence separate from the direct Chinese control which initiated that phase of its use) to the 10th century (when the collapse of the Tang dynasty marked the beginning of a long decline). This period encompasses a sort of golden age of the Silk Road, when it saw its greatest dominance of East-West trade, most active cultural exchanges, and greatest possibilities for adventure.

## ABOUT GURPS

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Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

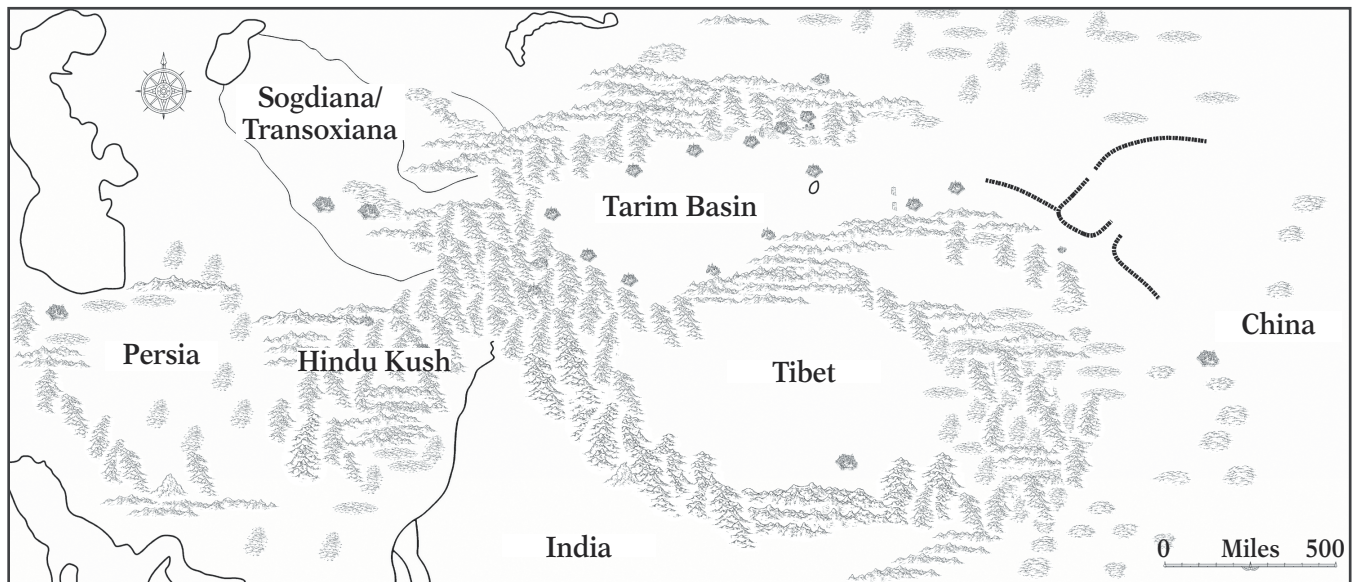
## RECOMMENDED WORKS

While this work stands essentially alone, it covers territories touching on those discussed in **GURPS Arabian Nights**, **GURPS China**, **GURPS Crusades**, and **GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.** A number of crossovers with other works are discussed in Chapter 6.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby received degrees in anthropology and archaeology before becoming a computer programmer. He currently works for an international healthcare corporation and has been known to return from the East bearing a cargo of silk and spices. He lives with his wife who is a goddess of mercy, a son who is full of filial piety, and several dogs who get lost easily.





## MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA, OVERVIEW

For a larger, detailed set of maps of this area and of the Tarim Basin, see pp. 10-15.

# CLIMATE AND LAND USE

The vast majority of the Silk Road, from Kabul in Afghanistan to Dunhuang at China's classical western border, sees extremes of temperature through the course of the year, with hot summers and cold winters. Average summer highs are over 90°F along most of the route and over 100°F in parts of the Tarim Basin. Average winter lows range from 19°F in Kabul to -10°F in Kashgar, a city at the western end of the Tarim Basin. Extremes of temperature through the course of the day are common in desert areas, with a difference in daytime highs and nighttime lows of 40°F or more being unremarkable.

In addition to extremes of temperature, the route is very dry. Kabul and Samarkand average about an inch of precipitation per month, while Kashgar and Dunhuang are lucky to get an inch of rain per *year*. Ironically, though, flash flooding can be an issue on some parts of the Silk Road, notably in the Tarim Basin. The high mountain elevations get much more precipitation than the desert floor, and the rocky, vegetation-poor soil does little to hold moisture. Runoff down their slopes during the rainy early spring can send large quantities of water to the lower elevations in a very short period.

Though much of the Silk Road is desert, it's not all desert of the same qualities. The Taklamakan is one of the largest sand deserts in the world and contains among the tallest sand dunes found anywhere, up to 1,700' high. Adjacent regions, however, may be gravel desert or dotted with scrubby vegetation. Many areas on the eastern approaches to the Taklamakan are cluttered with *yardangs*. These are hills and other rocky outcrops carved into bizarre shapes by weathering resulting from millennia of blowing sand and dust. Small variations in microclimate and hardness of rock can result in towers, horizontal ridges and deep grooves, and other variations in shape. Such shapes may be suggestive of other objects (giants, animals, cities, etc.), acquire local names, and become landmarks.

They are generally longer in the direction of prevailing winds than they are wide.

One other peculiar phenomenon of the Taklamakan is its "singing sands." In certain spots around the desert, notably around Dunhuang, the downhill flow of sand caused by the wind or people moving along the ridge of a dune produces a sort of droning hum. This can become quite loud at times, passing 100 decibels. A local might compare the sound to deep horns, groaning, or throat singing (p. 37), but to the modern ear, it might sound more like the drone of an airplane or other large engine. One could be forgiven for suspecting a supernatural presence.

Where it can be found, vegetation is largely tough and low growing, with small, water-conserving leaves; even grasses are sparse in many areas. Many plants in the Afghan regions are spiny or filled with pungent essential oils. Although this makes them unpleasant to travel through, they have culinary and medicinal uses. Plants in the Tarim Basin can tolerate a great deal of salt. Among the most common are tamarisk trees (an evergreen, not to be confused with the fruit-producing tamarind). These trees are used for lumber, fuel, and thatching. However, areas immediately around rivers have a larger quantity of more diverse greenery, and moderate altitudes, particularly on the western side, may have large stands of trees, notably poplar (which can grow very deep root systems and is therefore relatively drought-resistant) and willow.

Despite the lack of rainfall, many places along the main routes see significant amounts of agriculture. Water is captured during the brief rainy seasons and directed into natural and artificial aquifers. Deep wells allow farmers to irrigate enough fields to support significant towns and cities along the route. Many locations are also notable producers of fruits and nuts. Away from the main routes, the land can be quite desolate.

## UIGHURS

The Uighurs started out as the ruling coalition of one of the countless steppe empires of North Asia. They were a

### *The Face of Mourning*

The Uighurs have a tradition of slashing their faces when someone close to them, such as a spouse or immediate family member, dies. Both men and women practice this. When adventurers meet Uighurs with facial scars, it doesn't necessarily mean that they've seen combat, but simply that they've lost loved ones.

political rather than a cultural entity; indeed, the name means something like "union." However, they were driven out of the steppes by the Kyrgyz, yet another nomadic confederacy, during the mid-ninth century and migrated to the Tarim Basin, where they overran the remaining Tocharians, settled Sogdians, governing Chinese, and anybody else who happened to be there. They settled around the existing towns and intermarried with the natives, largely imposing their Turkic language on the region. In time, this combination became its own ethnicity, and the Uighurs became a people rather than a diverse, defeated alliance.

## RELIGIONS

Unlike many regions of the medieval world, the Silk Road has no dominant religion. Individual regimes might hold their preferred faith up as the standard, but no one religion consistently overshadows the others.

It was officially suppressed in 845 and, while it survived on the fringes of Chinese society and eventually revived, Buddhism did not recover quickly.

## BUDDHISM

Buddhism was the first profoundly influential religion along the Silk Road. Buddhism posits reincarnation, but holds that an endless succession of lives isn't necessarily a good thing. A central tenet of Buddhism is that life is suffering, and that suffering is caused by desire and attachment to material things. If one can reach a true and profound understanding of this and free oneself from desire, one becomes enlightened and is freed from a long and unhappy cycle of death and rebirth. Committed Buddhist practice, therefore, is often an exercise in meditation and asceticism to eliminate desire and achieve enlightenment.

The particular form of Buddhism which spread north from India and across the Silk Road has some aspects which make it well-suited to expanding beyond its native territory. It is inherently a missionary faith, encouraging adherents to lead others to enlightenment as well searching for it on their own. Moreover, it holds that the prayer, meditation, and self-denial of a Buddhist monk are not the only routes to long-term spiritual fulfillment. Certain other acts of virtue can reward the provider with a pleasant afterlife between incarnations. In the days before widespread Christianity and Islam promised paradise, this was quite an innovation, and one which became very attractive. The virtuous acts in question include supporting Buddhist congregations and their monasteries. This led in turn to the construction of Buddhist cave shrines (see p. 40) and other monuments along the Silk Road, providing the trade routes with an infrastructure which would outlast any given political regime.

Buddhism was eventually crowded out of the western end of the Silk Road by Islam, but survived in various forms in India, Tibet, and contested areas of the Tarim Basin. It did well in China, but nevertheless faced problems. Some of its doctrines clashed with essentially Confucian state ideology, and it was never entirely trusted by the imperial government and many Chinese scholars because of its foreign origin.

*Incalculable is the merit of the Bodhisattva who practices charity without any attachment to appearances.*

– *Diamond Sutra, Chapter 4*

## CHRISTIANITY

The predominant form of Christianity to spread east along the Silk Road is often called Nestorian Christianity, though the Nestorians don't call themselves that. They just regard themselves as Christians. Nestorianism arose in the fifth century A.D. and split with Orthodox Christianity over a doctrinal dispute. Nestorians maintain that Christ had separate rather than united human and divine natures (see **GURPS Hot Spots: Constantinople, 527-1204 A.D.**, p. 21, for more on early Christianity, the Eastern Church, and Christological controversies). Since they faced persecution in the strictly Orthodox Byzantine Empire, many Nestorians migrated east to Persia where they joined a Christian community already estranged from Rome and Constantinople. Like other sects, the Nestorians sent out missionaries, who traveled from Persia into India and, by the seventh century, China.

Christianity met with at best modest success on the Silk Road. Congregations grew large enough that at least five bishoprics were established across India and China. A few chieftains and minor kings converted over the years, and others at least recognized the religion and kept priests on hand along with other religious advisers. However, it was a minority religion nearly everywhere it could be found. It eventually declined in many places, to the point where Christianity was all but extinct in China by the time Renaissance-era Catholic missionaries arrived, going the long way around via sea routes. Any Westerners who encounter native Christians in Asia might be initially delighted to meet co-religionists, but then unpleasantly surprised by numerous doctrinal differences.

# MUSIC

Music was and is a popular recreation in Central Asia. Important instruments include a variety of wooden flutes, the ocarina, the mouth harp, and a number of fiddles and lutes, most with only two or three strings. Reed instruments can be found, particularly at the eastern and western approaches, though they're less important in traditional music in the highlands. Small drums are used in a supporting role in ensembles, but brass instruments are extremely rare.

There is, of course, plenty of singing, usually solo or choruses singing in unison. One distinctive trait of the native music of the region is the peculiar technique of throat singing. Practitioners can create resonances in the mouth and throat, simultaneously creating two harmonizing notes. Though primarily found in Mongolia and Siberia, this weirdly growling style of singing is practiced along the Silk Road and beyond into Tibet and Pakistan.

Where there is music, there is frequently dance. Dance styles of the Tarim Basin appear to be

related to classical Indian dance, with an emphasis on hand gestures and hip movement. However, styles from elsewhere are incorporated, such as twirling Sogdian dances. Dancers and musicians from the Western Regions are extremely popular in China. Social dancing is usually segregated by sex in public places, but need not be so in private venues.

## *New Technique: Throat Singing*

Hard

*Default:* Singing-4.

*Prerequisite:* Singing; cannot exceed Singing skill.

There are actually a variety of throat singing styles used across the globe, but one technique may be used to represent them all (unless campaign needs dictate otherwise). This technique lets you not just create the growling overtones of throat singing, but control them in ways suitable to the music being sung.

# RECREATIONS

With its small towns and mixed populations, most places along the Silk Road lack the grand civic processions and public spectacles enjoyed in major cities. However, the people could always amuse themselves. In addition to universal recreations like drinking and dancing, with so many cultures mixing, there's frequently something new to do for a good time. For example, sports resembling polo are common across Central Asia, as are board games like chess, though there are many variants. Ancestors of backgammon and dominoes are also played in various places.

Traditional Uighur games include a sort of cross between tennis and soccer where players attempt to bat a stick into a scoring area while an opposing team tries to catch it, and a brutal relative of tag where one player whips the other players with a scarf or belt while the others try to take it from him while not being hit. Mongolians play a variety of games with *shagai*, sheep's anklebones which are used as multipurpose

gaming pieces. For example, they can be used as projectiles and targets in shooting games, counters for gambling, or a bit like four-sided dice. Each face represents a different animal: camel, goat, horse, and sheep. Different games involve capturing other players' dice, achieving specific totals and combinations of rolls, and so on. The steppe nomads play a surprising number of what we would recognize as board games, but they do so by sketching out the board on the ground.

The Chinese may have brought kites with them, though the high winds and dust storms of the Taklamakan would have been challenging. While the earliest were made of silk, much cheaper paper kites were developed during the Tang dynasty. It seems likely that *weiqi* (go) was played as well. The earliest surviving book on the game, dating to the sixth century, was found in Dunhuang. Very late in the period in question here, some might enjoy the novel meditative spectacle of a tea ceremony, just coming into vogue in the ninth century.

# FOOD

Given the many cultural influences, Silk Road cuisine is quite varied, though cooking has to adapt itself to the ingredients available in the region. If comparing the food of the Silk Road to modern cuisines, it probably most closely resembles the food of Afghanistan with a significant Chinese influence.

Wheat and barley are the most common grains. Wheat is used in many forms: wrappings for a variety of filled dumplings essentially identical to modern potstickers, wontons, and spring rolls; flatbreads cooked on griddles or stuck to the side of clay ovens (indistinguishable from various types of Indian

roti) and which might be stuffed or flavored; noodles which might be fried or served in soups; and durable biscuits resembling hardtack. (Archaeologists excavating one Taklamakan site found pork and chive dumplings – a recipe still popular today – dating to the early Middle Ages but preserved by the dry desert climate.) Millet, usually served as porridge, is a lesser grain along most of the Silk Road despite widespread use in China. Rice is a relatively uncommon crop along the Silk Road as well as in northern China until after the Tang dynasty, and both was and still is considered relatively luxurious on the western end of the route.



William of Rubruk, a Flemish missionary, was surprised to meet a French couple and an Englishman in the Mongol capital. It's certainly possible that they were exceptionally adventurous individuals who happened to fall into the orbit of an aggressively expansive empire which had a strong interest in bringing the whole world under its rule. They therefore might have naturally gravitated to the capital despite the immense distance because conditions of the moment particularly favored long-distance travel. However, it does indicate that the Silk Road and similar East-West routes could have swept people across the continent without being noted in written sources.

Even less-well-documented suggestions exist of earlier direct contact between East and West. Genetic evidence from a second-century graveyard in southern Italy indicates an individual of East Asian ancestry, if not necessarily origin. And there are hints of other long-range travels – the possible “Titus” who painted Buddhist

murals in Niya, suggesting that a few Western artisans made their way along the Silk Road, as well as the very remote possibility of Roman troops ending up as Chinese prisoners. Ultimately what this means for players is that characters from just about anywhere in the Old World, no matter how unlikely they might be, are at least possible travelers along the Silk Road and are even plausible with an appropriate backstory.

*Lýipeya makes a complaint here now that soldiers of Saca carried off two cows of his . . . this dispute must be carefully investigated by you in person and a decision made according to law.*

– Undated official wedge-tablet letter

## THE WORLD AT YOUR DOORSTEP

Most of this has been a discussion of characters from all over the world making long journeys across many political and cultural borders, staying in motion on trips back and forth across the silk routes, but it doesn't have to be that way. A Silk Road campaign can be set in one place, and involve people with little direct experience of the world beyond what they see at home. In that case, all of that diversity simply comes to them.

For example, it's worth keeping in mind that warriors don't just have to fight on behalf of expanding empires and caravan masters; they can go into business for themselves. Though a band of adventurers probably can't challenge the might of the Chinese Empire or fast-moving united barbarian hordes, there were many smaller conflicts. Notably, the oasis towns of the Taklamakan periodically waged small wars against one another. As long as the conflicts stayed short and any new rulers confirmed their loyalty to distant masters, hegemonic powers like the Chinese would likely regard such conflicts as a local matter and continue to give their routine orders to whoever was left standing when the dust had settled. Suitably skilled warriors could stage a palace coup or raise a small army to wrest control of a town away from its current rulers, perhaps even building their own petty kingdom in time. Likewise, wealthy merchants

can bankroll small armies and palace coups to put themselves in charge. Here are some other relatively stationary roles characters can take on:

- Local officials working within the system, vying for control of their petty kingdom.
- Soldiers guarding their post or policing their city.
- Holy people translating texts and tending local religious communities.
- Merchants supplying travelers, possibly brokering trades of valuable goods.
- Translators, moneychangers, and others providing services mainly to visitors.
- Local guides, leading travelers on short, well-known routes between points along the way.
- Operators of caravanserais; while such people likely have associations in nearby towns, they're somewhat isolated from them on a day-to-day basis.

And while all of that is going on, Silk Road traffic will still flow past them. For example, a sedentary silk broker still has to deal with troops in Chinese employ unloading their pay and Sogdian merchants or Indian pilgrims buying it up for resale elsewhere, while a group of bandits might steal from a dazzling cross-section of travelers.

## GURPS CROSSOVERS

The Silk Road can be a setting for a number of campaigns taking advantage of other *GURPS* books, or ideas from it can be inserted elsewhere.

### BANESTORM

The conditions which led to the creation of the Silk Road in our history were political, technological, and geographical, and those circumstances have no exact duplicate on

Yrth. However, similar conditions might be created. If Yrth's Muslim countries are relatively hostile to Araterre and Megalos (thereby keeping shipping to a minimum), Megalos is attempting to blockade shipping to Caithness, or anybody is upset with Sahud, certain hazardous overland trade routes become viable. Caravan routes might develop hugging al-Haz's western mountains and the margin between the Great Desert and the Great Forest to connect Zarak and Caithness with Ytarria's southern coast and the nations beyond.

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[A road from Turfan] had been made by Sen Tsin-yuh, the Woo-ke Deputy Protector, to shorten the distance by a half, and evade the dangers of the white dragon mound.

– The Book of Han



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*I had ample opportunities to familiarize myself with all the manifold contents of this remarkable refuse-heap during the three laborious days which its clearing cost me.*

– Sir Marc Aurel Stein, **Ancient Khotan: Detailed Report of Archaeological Explorations in Chinese Turkestan**

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