

*The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, by Peter Frankopan (2015, Bloomsbury Paperbacks)

Many books claim to present “a new history” of their subjects, but *The Silk Roads* so changes one’s understanding of our human past that it truly deserves its subtitle. It centers world history mid-Asia, where trade routes went east to China and west to the Mediterranean, whereas the world history most of us learned in school centered on Athens, Rome, and western Europe.

It turns out that far from having resulted from the Crusades, or from the travels of Marco Polo, the silk roads had been well-established 2,500 years ago when northern Europe was a wilderness and Persian merchants traded silver from Egypt for ivory from India. Then and throughout the centuries, ideas, arts, and inventions traveled in both directions. It turns out that the Vikings were great slave-traders along a northeastern branch of the roads, and that Genghis Khan, far from being a simple savage raider on horseback, was an amazing strategist and organizer who created an efficient borderless empire. In fact, Frankopan argues that borders in the modern sense are relatively new in human history. He shows medieval Europe engaged in constant territorial wars while the great Asian empires lived in relative peace. He follows the accounts of Arab merchants throughout the Middle Ages, and ends his story with European colonization in Asia and the Asian disasters of our own time. The book is rich in fascinating detail.

Frankopan bases his narrative on an impressive range of written and archeological sources in many languages, spanning many centuries. Yet his writing is lively and accessible. He has little to say about subSaharan Africa or the Americas, but even a work of this scope must have its limits. Although a few reviewers have questioned some of its particulars, the book has been widely praised, and I warmly recommend it.