

## THE FORMATION OF THE SILK ROAD BEFORE THE MONGOL EMPIRE

### MOĞOL İMPARATORLUĞU ÖNCESİ İPEKYOLU'NUN OLUŞUMU

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**Geliş Tarihi:**  
15.05.2022

**Kabul Tarihi:**  
14.09.2022

**Yayın Tarihi:**  
30.09.2022

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

Göçebeler  
İpek Yolu  
Kültürel Değiş tokuş  
Medeniyetler

#### Keywords

Nomads  
Silk Road  
Cultural Exchange  
Civilizations

Bu çalışma en erken dönemlerden Moğol imparatorluğunun dağılmasına kadar geçen süreçte ipek yolu üzerinde kültürel, teknolojik ve ekonomik değiş tokuşu ve ipekyolu güzergahında yaşayan göçbelerin bu yolun gelişiminde oynadıkları rollerini ele almaktadır. Göçebe toplumların rollerinin uzun süredir ya göz ardı edilmeleri ya da basmakalıp önyargıların kurbanları olmaları nedeniyle yeni bir bakış açısı ile yaklaşılması önemlidir. Bu bakımdan Merkezi Avrasya bozkırının merkeze oturtup çevresindeki yerleşik bölgeleri çevreye koyarak bu çalışma ipek yolunun oluşumuna bozkır-merkezli bir bakış açısı ile yaklaşmaktadır. Aslında bozkır imparatorlukları olmadan muhtemelen bir ipek yolu da olmazdı ve göçbelerin koruması ve izni olmadan bir Çinli, İranlı ya da Avrupalı da Avrasya'nın değişik noktalarını birbirine bağlayan ve Macaristan'dan Mançurya'ya uzanan bozkırlardan geçen bu zorlu yolculuğa da kalkışamazdı. Bu nedenle tarihi İpekyolu kavramının oluşumuna yalnızca tüccarlar ve ticaretin varış noktaları açısından değil bu ticareti mümkün kılan ve bu sırada kültür ve medeniyetlerin kaynaşmasına da yardımcı olan araçlar açısından da bakmadan konu tam olarak anlaşılabilir.

#### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the cultural, technological and economic exchanges along the silk road from the early times to the dissolution of the Mongol Empire and the role of the nomadic peoples inhabiting along the silk road for the development of it. Since the role of the nomadic peoples have long been either disregarded or have been a victim of stereotypes and prejudices, it is important to examine their role within a new perspective. In this respect, by putting the Central Eurasian steppe area to the centre, and the sedentary areas around it to the peripheries, this paper approaches the formation of the silk roads in a steppe-centered manner. In fact, without the nomadic empires, there would probably be no silk road, since without their protection and permission, no Chinese, Persian or European could take up the arduous journey between different points of Eurasia all of which were connected via the Central Eurasian steppe stretching from Hungary to Manchuria.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.30783/neysosbilen.1117051>

**Atf/Cite as:** Atik, K. (2022). The Formation Of The Silk Road Before The Mongol Empire. *Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi SBE Dergisi*, 12(3),1727-1734.

## Introduction

This paper is the full version of a presentation in the conference “The Cultural-Civilizational Capabilities of Iran in the Formation and the Revival of the Silk Road Interactions and its Future Outlook” on the 15th of November 2016 whose abstract was printed in the conference abstracts book. Pastoral nomads have been known to roam the steppes of Eurasia since very early times. While livestock animals such as sheep, goat, cow and yak were domesticated very early in the human history, the domestication of horse and camel as transport animals was a decisive element in the formation of nomadic political entities. Although we tend to imagine Altaic peoples such as the Turks or Mongols as typical horse riding nomads, archeological evidence suggests that horse was domesticated first as a livestock and then as a transport animal in the western parts of the Eurasian steppe (Larson & Burger, 2013, p. 202). But nevertheless, at some point in history horse riding became a common distinctive feature of the steppe warriors. At the early stages, horses were used as livestock and later on for driving carts and war chariots. But it was riding the horse itself and shooting arrows at the same time that gave a distinct advantage over their enemies to the Eurasian nomads in warfare. Although the details of such technical developments are lost to us due to lack of archeological and documentary evidence, we know very well that once the nomads began to build empires of their own organized initially around loosely organized tribal confederations, they became both a threat and a partner to their sedentary neighbors on the peripheries of the Eurasian steppe. While a series of nomadic states and dynasties ruled over the steppe and sometimes their sedentary neighbors, Iran and China also emerged as permanent political entities on their eastern and western flanks as economically and culturally centers of civilization and power. India could also be counted as a center of civilization and great economic wealth, but since it lacked political unity after the death of Asoka, Indian states isolated themselves from the Central Asian political scene unless they were not visited or invaded. As it so happened throughout its history. In this respect, it is no wonder that at around the same time the Chinese, Indian and Iranian sources began to talk of strangers roaming on their borders and causing trouble. Today we do not know the certain identities of the peoples called as Rong, Yi and Di by the Chinese in their earliest historical records. But we can date back the earliest of the nomadic political entities who began to challenge their sedentary neighbors on a geographically large scale such as the Scythians. The Scythians are thought to be an originally Iranian language speaking group. They were spread over a large area stretching from the Black sea to Central Asia. They were a large confederation which did not merely include the Iranian speaking peoples. To their west and south they had relations with the Greeks, Persians, and to their east with the Turkic peoples and the Chinese. However, although the military and the political affairs and organizations of the nomads on the steppe have so far been widely observed both by the contemporaries and the modern scholars, their being carriers of culture and civilization has long been ignored. Beginning from the Scythians, the nomads began to dominate the silk road politically and militarily. As a result, they also became intermediaries between the eastern and western end points of the silk road, especially between China and Iran. This paper, therefore, examines the relation of the nomads to the transfer of cultural items between China and Iran rather than the military and the political affairs.

## Main Argument

A trade route, or rather a trade network consisting of different routes connected to each other which we today call as the silk road existed for a very long time. Silk was not the main item traded, and not necessarily the most important or expensive item. The term silk road was actually coined by a German explorer Ferdinand Richthofen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Waugh, 2007, p. 4). But a regular trade route that began from China and went west through the Gansu corridor to the oases of the Tarim and from there into Transoxiana and Iran began to emerge at around the Han times, another route diverged from central Asia to the North and towards the Pontic steppe and Europe. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, archeological evidence suggests that there was already a flow of goods from China to West and vice versa. In a Scythian tomb excavated in Germany, Chinese silk has been discovered which is a testimony to the role of the Scythians in connecting the eastern and the western parts of the silk road (Christopoulos, 2012, p. 31). Recently a body belonging to a Chinese man was found in a Roman site in Britain as well, suggesting that people also travelled from China all the way to the peripheries of Europe (Leach et al., 2009). In this respect, it is hard to talk about a coherent road that emerged at a certain time and passed through a certain route. There were many roads that could change according to the times.

Which goods flowed between the ends of these routes, by whom and for whom are the subject of this paper. Silk was probably not the most important thing that was traded as mentioned before. Beginning from the domestication of certain animals such as horse, but more importantly the camel, the flow of goods on long distances became possible along the Asian continent. The Sakas or the Sogdians as they are called were the descendants of the Scythians and they used their specialization in pastoralism for becoming dominant players on the silk road, especially during the Tang dynasty. Although most historians agree that what we can call as a silk road began to emerge during the Han Dynasty at around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, two eras were vital in the formation of the silk road as a coherent quasi-global trade network. The first era for the blooming of trade for this route was during the time of the Tang Dynasty in China, the Türk Qaghanate<sup>1</sup> on the steppe and the Sassanid Empire in Iran. One of the reasons for the trade boom was that, neither the Han Dynasty in China, nor the Huns on the steppe had enough capacity to protect traders before. But the Tang and the Türk Qaghanate were strong enough to provide protection for the merchants, while the Tang had the economic power, the Türk Qaghanate had the military to guard the traders on the way. On the other end of the route, the Sassanids also profited from this trade. Contrary to the general view by the Chinese and Turkish historians, there was a network of alliances and cooperation throughout the silk road between seemingly enemy entities. The Sogdians became an important element within the Türk Qaghanate as bureaucrats and merchants to such an extent that, some historians call the Türk Qaghanate as a Turco-Sogdian enterprise (Vaissière, 2018, p. 335). But the root of this loyalty was more economic than political or sentimental. The Sogdian homeland, which is around modern day Tajikistan was a poor region and the Sogdians needed trade. As a people belonging to the East Iranian branch of the Iranian people, they were linguistically and culturally related to the Sassanids, but their Saka or Scythian background also put them in a position culturally close to the Turkic peoples of the steppe. Therefore, the existence of a Türk Qaghanate through the silk road was beneficial for them. The Türks on the other hand needed Sogdian know-how and cultural elements for their statecraft. For the Tang on the other hand, foreign merchants and embassies that came to China were not only a source of income for the court, but also a source of legitimacy. The founders of the Tang came from the Tabgach, or as they are called in Chinese, the Tuoba ethnic group on the paternal side and Turkic on the maternal lineage (Skaff, 2012, p. 54). As ethnic foreigners in China, the Tang rulers felt themselves insecure after they have just overthrown another Tabgach dynasty the Sui. The Sui in return had overthrown other foreigners. As a result, the Tang rulers felt insecure and in order to win the support of the ethnic Chinese majority, they needed to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the Chinese. Receiving visitors from around the world who came to see the wonders of the Tang China was a great way of achieving this. As a result, the silk road bloomed under the mutual protection of Türk Qaghans and Chinese Emperors.

Despite the political role, the goods and ideas that flowed from the silk road had great effect on the cultures of the countries located on the road. For instance, Buddhism, Manicheism and Christianity were promoted in China by the Sogdian and Uighur merchants in China (Peng, 2011, p. 74). Although prominent figures such as Xuanzang<sup>2</sup> are thought to be responsible for the diffusion of Buddhism in China, it should be remembered that when Xuanzang traveled through the silk road, he witnessed the nomads on the roads to be Buddhists. In terms of mass conversions and diffusion of religion, nomads were more instrumental both by bringing the religion and protecting its houses of worship within the silk road (Xuanzang, 2000; Xuanzang et al., 1996).

During the Tang dynasty, we also begin to see Iranian musical instruments, dances and clothes in the Tang murals and literature (Abramson, 2008, p. 90). Although embassy missions from Iran also brought such samples, the popular dissemination of Iranian music was mainly through the taverns which was as much frequented by the Chinese as the nomads and merchants. As a result of taverns catering to nomadic and foreign clients as well

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<sup>1</sup> The name Türk has been used for referring to the political entity called as the Türk Qaghanate rather than the ethnonym that roughly corresponds to the Turkic peoples sharing a common linguistic and cultural heritage.

<sup>2</sup> Xuanzang (Chinese: 玄奘 602-664) was a Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to India as a pilgrim to India and he not only studied and taught in India, but also brought various books and sutras with him. But he is today best remembered for his work translated into English under the title of *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (Xuanzang et al., 1996). This work is one of the most detailed Works which depict the central Asian cities as well as the nomads and the Türk Qaghanate in the West. During that period before the advent of Islam. For a reprint of his original work see: (Xuanzang, 2000).

as Chinese clients alike, Iranian and Central Asian music and dance became popular in the Tang capital of Chang'an. It is no wonder that the Chinese music began to change during the Tang era and instruments of Iranian origin arrived in China during this time. Alongside the silk road, it was not only the merchants who travelled. Musicians, dancers and other sorts of entertainers travelled to and fro on the silk road between the countries. While the Arabic merchants were travelling through a marine silk road to the southern coast of China, the Persians, Sogdians and even Romans were travelling to China through central Asia under the protection of the Türk Qaghans who needed the trade revenues for the maintenance of his state bureaucracy made up of the Sogdians and Chinese (Barfield, 1992, p. 67). Music in the Chinese palace was actually a formal affair and the Confucian worldview dictated that appropriate music should be used in the palace and the ceremonies (Dong, 2010, p. 107). As a result of the popularity of central Asian and Iranian music not only in the merchant quarters, but also in the palace, the Confucian statesmen began to complain about the negative effects of the "barbarian" music in the palace and the demoralizing influence of these new "barbarian" dances which lacked Confucian decorum and moral modes (Abramson, 2008, p. 98).

Alongside music and musicians, there also arrived the western style clothing from central Asia and Iran to China. But Chinese silk and clothes also became popular in central Asian cities, steppe, and Iran on the western end of the silk road during the Tang dynasty. As an example, the Chinese style costume of a Türk princess who went to the Byzantine court became popular for a long time in the Byzantine empire under the name of Chihekion named after the Princess Chichek (Aksoy, 2016, p. 11). As a Turkic princess, Chichek not only brought Turkic and steppe customs and culture to the Byzantine palace, she also brought Chinese cultural assets which she had learnt in the Türk royal house as a result of the close relations with China. While the Chinese princesses who had been married of the Turkic or other nomadic nobles were responsible for bringing the elite Chinese culture into the steppe, the same was valid for the Turkic nobility and the nomadic nobility who had been either married or serving in the palaces of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, and they were constantly not only bringing their own cultural baggage to these courts, but also carrying cultural assets between the eastern and western ends of the silk road. Princess Chichek was one historically attested well-known examples, but archeological finds might demonstrate further lesser known examples. We know from the Chinese sources for instance that, Tang Taizong's son and heir apparent Li Chengqian not only wore Turkic style clothing and ate steppe food, he also had himself built a Turkic style Yurt and dwelled in it within the palace grounds. And it seems he was not alone in this, since we again hear the Confucian elite complaining about the Chinese aristocracy, wearing, eating and living like "barbarians" (Skaff, 2004, p. 47). Although silk had long been imported by the Romans and the Persians, it was mostly in the form of raw silk which was then tailored according to Roman tastes or Iranian tastes. By this time, another Central Asian invention also became popular in Iran, China and the Byzantine Empire. The introduction of the trousers by the nomads changed the way men wear clothes forever up to this day. While the Chinese, Iranian and Greek men wore tunics, skirts or togas in ancient times, the nomads needed trousers in order to be able to ride horses more comfortably. The Iranians adopted trousers before the Chinese but the Chinese court circles adopted trousers as a result of influence from the nomads. Certain women's fashion also flowed from Iran to China through the merchants and nomads on the silk road during this era. It was especially during the Sassanid era that the steppe culture in terms of men's wear entered Iran as well as silk. Although there were wars fought between the Sassanid Empire and the Türks, there was also a tremendous amount of cultural exchange in all areas of daily life and culture. While some of the Turkic tribes would also serve the Chinese and the Sassanid Empire as mercenaries and brought their culture to these courts, the Iranian origin Sogdian merchants served the Türk Qaghanate and in times of turmoil and war, many Chinese also did not hesitate to flee to the Türks to provide their services in return for safety and employment. As a result, the Türk Qaghanate stood at the crossroads of a trade and cultural networks. When the Sassanid Empire fell to the Arab invasions, one of the Sassanid princes, Firoz escaped to China and he brought with him his followers to the Tang capital. The Turks were already acquainted with the Iranian culture thanks to their close encounters with the Sogdians and the Sassanid Empire, but for China this was a novelty. During the Tang dynasty, it is no coincidence that with the presence of Iranian, Sogdian, and Turkic political figures and merchants in the Tang capital, the Chinese taste in clothing, hair style, and cloth patterns and designs begin to change and resemble more to the Iranian and Turkic models.

Food was another important cultural element that began to diffuse along the silk road on a larger scale after the Tang dynasty came to power in China. The Tabgach rulers being nomads themselves, had a liking for kimis,

ayran, yoghurt and other dairy products. As a result, drinking kimis and ayran were more popular among the northern elite while drinking tea was considered to be effeminate. Tea on the other hand came to be a popular drink in the colder steppe area. Actually, contrary to the general belief, the silk road did not necessarily always flow from east to west. There was also another route where horses, livestock and western goods arriving via Iran and Central Asia to the modern-day Mongolian steppe, then the center of the Türk power flowed south to China in exchange for Chinese silk, tea, books, ceramics and other Chinese products. This route has been named as horse and tea route due to the fact that the horses and tea were the most valued products by the parties in this trade. It is not known whether tea was sold also to the western countries such as Iran and the East Roman Empire and beyond or not, but especially during the Uighur Qaghanate that followed the collapse of the Eastern Türk Qaghanate, the Mongolian steppe became an important trade center. But despite tea's being a limited drink in Asia during the Tang dynasty, the spices from India, Iran and West Asia also began to flow into China in large quantities during the Tang dynasty. As shall be seen later on, the nomads continued to patronize trade on the steppe area until the dissolution of the Mongol Empire during the fourteenth century, which also coincided with the European explorations. However, today most of the spices that are used both in Eastern and Western cuisines are a mixture of different geographical areas. While it was certainly the European maritime traders of the early modern and modern eras that made the use of these "exotic" spices more common, most of these spices such as cassia, pepper, garlic and other seasonings and spices were already known in the east and west for a long time. The second boom for the flow of foods and drinks between the east and the west coincides with the rise of the Mongols and what is termed as *pax Mongolica*. Contrary to the general belief that the Mongols and other nomadic peoples only had a taste for meat and dairy products, the nomadic elite had very sophisticated culinary tastes. This is especially attested in the royal banquets of the Mongol Khans (Allsen, 2004, p. 128). This stereotype that the nomadic people only liked meat and dairy products probably stem from the fact that, for the ordinary people with the lower economic means. While meat was an expensive food for the sedentary people who lived on agricultural goods and staple grains such as rice and wheat, meat was abundant and cheaper for the nomadic peoples and milk and the dairy products were even cheaper. Yet, their reach to agricultural products were limited and they had to limit their diet to the dairy products, meat and simple vegetables that could be grown on the steppe as well, such as onion and garlic. But the Mongolian banquets which are recorded in the Chinese and Persian sources draw a different picture. In Iran for instance, in the banquet following the coronation of Hülegü, food was brought from China, eastern Mediterranean, Iran, India, Central Asia and of course there was also qimis and meat, but the variety of food from different parts of the Mongol Empire suggests that the Mongols did not necessarily limit themselves to steppe culinary tastes, but it was a necessary that the geography caused. In contrast to the Mongol courts in China and Iran for instance, Carpini who travelled to Mongolia from a northerly route through the Qipchaq steppe narrates a different story about the Mongol tastes. Unlike their cousins in Iran and China who seems to like different cuisines, the Mongols in Russia and the Qipchaq steppe seem to continue their steppe habits of eating and drinking. This was most probably due to lack of agriculture on the Qipchaq steppe and the relative distance of this steppe from the silk road that passes from further south. Thus, this comparison of the banquets in the Qipchaq steppe and Iran does demonstrate the fact that, as long as the nomads ruled over vast areas connecting the nomadic and sedentary areas together, they brought different cuisines together. It is no wonder that Spaghetti noodles are attributed in popular culture to Marco Polo's travels to China and bringing Chinese noodles to Italy. This could only be possible during the time of a strong nomadic Empire that unites the edges of the silk road and makes it possible for all kinds of travelers to travel on the Eurasian steppe that separates the different sedentary civilization centers of Eurasia.

The flow of such popular products as food and drinks, clothes as well as art, and ideas, religions actually flourished during times when there was a strong political entity in the steppe that not only protected and patronized the merchants, and the flow of people such as religious missionaries, but the presence of a single nomadic Empire on the whole steppe decreased the expenses for the merchants by lifting the barriers and the customs. Once you would enter the Mongol Empire or the Türk Qaghanate, you would be able to travel all the way to China from Iran or vice versa as long as there was political stability in these empires. This can be easily contrasted with two travels of two Chinese pilgrims to India. Xuanzang, who travelled to India through Central Asia was welcome by the Western Türk Qaghan and he could stay in the inns protected and patronized by the

Qaghan and run by either the Buddhist monasteries or by the merchants. Fa Xian<sup>3</sup> who travelled to India through a land route but returned to China through the sea route had difficulties resulting from the storms and pirates alike and most people seem to favor the land route over the sea route in times of political stability in the Mongolian steppe and Central Asia. Xuanzang's reception in the Qaghan's palace demonstrates us that the nomadic rulers were not mere barbarians content with looting and receiving tribute or taxes from the sedentary population, to the opposite, they were also trying to receive cultural assets from their neighbors and sedentary subjects alike. It has often been pointed out by historians that one of the greatest skills of the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe has been their ability to adapt themselves to their new environments, but even a greater skill seems to be that of carrying these cultural traits that they have adapted to the new lands that they arrive in or conquer and give new energy to the local cultures. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in sedentary civilization centers on the silk road such as China, Iran, Anatolia and even India, the times of cultural, political and artistic flourishing of a cosmopolitan nature bringing together elements from different cultures that would otherwise not be possible happen to be under the rule of such nomadic dynasties such as the Seljukids and Mongols in Iran, the so-called "alien" dynasties in China the primary example of which is the Mongol Yuan dynasty, or in times of unity and a stable political situation on the Eurasian steppe. Therefore, it is no wonder that with the dissolution of the Mongolian Empire and the wars between the post-Jinggisid khanates of Mongolian and Turkic origin in central Asia and the Eurasian steppe, what has been termed as the silk road began to lose its value and fell into oblivion.

### Conclusion

The nomadic societies and the political entities that were established and/or governed by nomads had until the recent decades been treated as disruptors and negative elements not only for the "civilized" sedentary world of Eurasia, but also for trade, cultural exchange and diffusion of different aspects of civilization varying from religion to food and music. But as argued on this paper, their political organizations, whether they be centralized states or tribal confederations, not only did not disrupt these activities, but to the contrary encouraged the increase in volume of these activities which were vital to the survival and thriving of their polities. In addition, the trade routes that were commonly called as "the silk road" originally did not simply pass through their territories, but were actually created under the encouragement and protection of these nomadic states and confederations. While the goods produced in China, especially silk was an essential trade items that made these trade routes feasible entities, these were not the only or the most important commodities that were carried. There were interim roads that were mainly centered on regional trade, not a Sino-Mediterranean trade, and there were commodities that were carried from other regions along these interim routes or the main routes between regions other than China and the Mediterranean. Additionally there were north-south routes other than the more commonly known east-west routes which were very essential for the nomadic societies and polities that encouraged protected and benefitted from these routes. In a way, it can be said that, the silk road was a construct of these pastoral nomads regardless of their ethnic affiliations which formed throughout a time period of more than a millennium. Without these pastoral nomads both permitting and protecting these routes, a silk road would not have been possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Faxian (Chinese: 法顯 337-422) was a Chinese monk whose record of his pilgrimage to India from China has been the earliest source extant in Chinese about the Buddhist establishments. His description of the lands that he had travelled on his way to India and back are also very important historical records of these areas. His work has been translated into English as *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Xian of his Travels in India and Ceylon in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline* and other languages. (Legge & Faxian, 2005) For a Chinese edition see: (Fa, 1995)

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## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Günümüzde ipek yolu adı verilen, aslında tek bir yol olmayıp çok sayıda yol ve değişik güzergahtan oluşan ticaret ağı ilk göçebe devletlerin Avrasya bozkırında ortaya çıkmaları ile oluşmaya başlamıştır. Son dönemlere kadar tarihçiler tarafından genellikle medeniyet ve kültürel gelişime karşı sanki bir engelmiş gibi görülen bozkır göçbeleri aslında ipek yolu adı verilen bu ticaret ağı üzerinde yapılan ticaretin yanı sıra din, kültürel öğeler, düşünce ve diğer medeniyet unsurlarının taşınmasında aracı rolü üstlenmişlerdir. İskitlerden başlayarak oluşan bu ticaret yolları yalnızca doğu ile batıyı birbirine bağlamakla kalmamışlar, kuzey-güney hattında da farklı medeniyetlerin birbirleri ile tanışmasını, ticaret yapmasını ve ortak gelişimlerini de sağlamışlardır. İskitlerin dağılmasından sonra Hunlar Asya'da yaklaşık altı yüzyıl boyunca bozkırı yönetimler, altına almışlardır. Aşağı yukarı aynı dönemde Çin'de de önce Qin daha sonra da Han Hanedanlarının Çin'i birleştirmesi ile Çin'den Roma İmparatorluğuna ulaşan ticaret ağlarının ortaya çıkmasının aynı döneme denk gelmesi tesadüf değildir. İskitler döneminde yönetici sınıfın meşruiyet sembolü olarak hem doğudan hem de batıdan getirdiği lüks ürünlerin ticareti Hunlar döneminde Hun İmparatorluğunun koruması altında daha da gelişmiştir. Bozkırdaki boylar için bu lüks ürünlerin temini onlara bu ürünleri sağlayabilen Hun Şanyülerini meşru hükümdar yapmakla kalmayıp bu ürünleri elde edebilen boy beylerini de diğerlerinden daha üstün bir sosyal konuma oturtmaktaydı. Daha sonraki dönemde ise İskitlerin uzantısı olan Soğdlar ve Türkler Türk kağanlığı döneminde yine bozkırdan geçen ticaret yollarının yeniden canlanmasında önemli rol üstlenmişlerdir. Türk Kağanlığı için Türk-Soğd ortak girişimi adlandırması kullanan tarihçiler dahi vardır. Bu dönemde Aşina hanedan üyeleri bozkırdaki göçebe boylardan savaşçı olarak yararlanırken Soğdların da bürokrasi, ticaret gibi alanlardaki yeteneklerinden yararlanmışlardır. Aynı dönemde Çin'de ise Tabgaçlar önce Wei daha sonra da Sui ve Tang hanedanlarını kurarak Çin'i birleştirmişlerdir. Bozkırda Türklerin Soğdlarla kurduğuna benzer bir ortaklığı Çin'deki hanedanlar da Çinli yerli nüfus ile bozkırdan gelen ve Çinlilerin ordularında özellikle Tang döneminden itibaren giderek daha önemli roller üstlenen diğer göçebeler ile kurmuşlardır. Kitanlar, Moğollar, Türkler, Tangutlar gibi farklı etnik gruplara tabii olan bireyler ya da bazen bütün olarak boylar bozkırda baskıya uğrarlarsa ya da Çin tarafından verilen ödüller azipse Çin tarafına geçmekteydiler. Bu sırada Türk kağanlığı ise Hun İmparatorluğunun sınırlarından da öteye geçerek Ak Hunları yenip İran'a kuzeyde ise eski düşmanları Avarların peşinden Kırım'a kadar uzanmışlardır. Böylelikle Türk Kağanlığı döneminde Tang başkenti Xi'an'dan Roma'ya kadar uzanan ticaret yolu hem İran hem de İran'ın bu yolu tıkaması durumunda kuzeyden Karadeniz üzerinden devam edebilmiştir. Sonraki dönemde Moğol İmparatorluğu yeniden bozkırı birleştirene kadar Avrasya bozkırında siyasi birlik sağlanamamış ve bozkırdan geçen ticaretin bir kısmı İslam halifeliğinin koruması altında Hint Okyanusuna kaymışsa da Karahanlılar ve Selçuklular da Moğolların gelişine kadar ellerinden geldiğince topraklarından geçen ticareti korumuş, teşvik etmiş ve ticaretle birlikte din, düşünce ve kültürel öğelerin de geçmesine izin vermişlerdir. Bu bağlamda Budizm'in Çin'e ulaşması aslında doğrudan Hindistan üzerinden Çin'e değil Orta Asya üzerinden Batı Türk Kağanlığının izni ve korumasıyla mümkün olmuştur. Daha sonraki dönemde Nasturi Hıristiyanlık ile İslam da fetihlerden çok ticaret yolları üzerinden doğuya doğru yayılmıştır. Moğol imparatorluğunun önce Çinggis Kağan daha sonra ardılları, özellikle de Kubilay Kağan döneminde Avrasya Bozkırının tamamını ve Çin, İran, Orta Asya ile Anadolu'yu da fethetmesi ile ipek yolu Marco Polo'nun kitabında anlatılan ve genel olarak akla gelen hali ile Pekin'den Venedik'e uzanan ipek yolu Moğol Kağanlarının koruması altında gelişmiştir. Batıdan doğuya doğru İslam ve Hıristiyanlık yayılırken aynı zamanda İslam ve Hıristiyan dünyasındaki astronomi matematik, tıp, coğrafya gibi alanlardaki bilgi de Çin'e kadar aktarılmıştır. Kubilay Kağan ve ardılları Pekin'de İslam Bilimi Okulu kurdururken Çin'den de İran'a ve Avrupa'ya bilim, sanat, kültürün farklı alanlarında bilgi aktarımı yapılmıştır. Seramikler, ile diğer ürünlerin yanı sıra yemek, tıp, coğrafya, haritacılık, kağıt üretimi, porselen ve Çini sanatı gibi pek çok kültürel öğe de Çin'den İslam dünyası ve batıya taşınmıştır. Bu taşınma sürecinde Moğol Kağanları ve hanları tıpkı kendilerinden önceki göçebeler gibi yalnızca pasif izleyiciler olmamışlardır. Tersine nelerin taşınacağına dahi zaman zaman bizzat karar vermişler ve doğu-batı ve kuzey-güney eksenli ticaretin yanında iletilen bilgi ve düşüncenin yayılımında belirleyici rol oynamışlardır. Ancak daha sonra *pax Mongolica* olarak da adlandırılan Moğol barışının sona ermesi ve Avrupalıların coğrafi keşiflerle Çin'e giden deniz yollarını keşfetmesi ile Avrasya bozkırlarından geçen bu ticaret yolları eski önemlerini yitirmiş, ateşli silahların giderek daha güçlü hale gelmesi sonucunda da göçbelerin askeri üstünlükleri sona ermiş ve ipek yolu olarak adlandırılan bu ticaret ağı tarihe karışmıştır.