

Evolution and Development of the Trade Route in Ladakh: A Case-Study of Rock Carvings

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ABSTRACT: From the beginning of human history trade has been major source of growth of civilization and material culture. Economy was the main crux which caused Diasporas what disseminated cultures and religions on our planet. The Silk Road was one of the first trade routes to join the Eastern and the Western worlds. Ladakh also underwent the same process of evolution of trade although it was a difficult terrain but it provides access to travelers from central Asia and Tibet through its passes. Ladakh was a crossroads of many complexes of routes, providing choices for different sectors connecting Amritsar to Yarkand. Again, from Leh to Yarkand, there were several possible routes all converging at the Karakoram Pass. Comparative small human settlements in oases of Ladakh's desert rendered hospitality to the travelers being situated as halting station on traditional routes. Indeed, such places (halts) were natural beneficiaries of generating some sort of revenues from travelers against the essential services provided to caravans and groups of traders and travelers. Main halts on these routes are well marked with petro-glyphs right from Kashmir to Yarkand and at major stations with huge rock carving of Buddhist deities. Petro-glyphs, rock carvings, inscriptions and monasteries, mani-walls and stupas found along the trekking routes, linking one place to other, are a clear indication that the routes were in-vogue used by caravan traders; these establishments were used as landmarks or guidepost for travelers. Further, proof is derived from several monumental images of Buddhists deities, which are interpreted as signs of early Buddhist culture. Certainly these images may be the result of the perpetuating tradition of rock-carving that is noticed from China to Rome in ancient time. Nevertheless, the rock images may be taken as signs of the cultural exchange between the initiators (Kashmiri) and the local population. The purpose of this study is to establish the larger cultural and historical contexts of the arts, considering the issues of patronage and art production.

KEYWORDS: trade, diaspora, silk road, petroglyphs, rock carvings, buddhism, culture, ladakh

Introduction

From the beginning of human history trade has been major source of growth of civilization and material culture. Economy was the main crux which caused diasporas, what disseminated cultures and religions on our planet. Path of movement of people to linking places gradually turned into routes, and later trade routes, when caravans of commodities-couriers came into operation on regular basis. Human's surge for destination invented routes and these routes in time became means or channels of socio-cultural and economical interaction. In early times of civilization, travelling might have been very different than it is today but it certainly has been a vital means of exchanges of ideas, values, commodities, dissemination of information and knowledge and other social realities those constitute fabric of culture and its various expressions, indeed art is one of them.

People travelled in the ancient world for many reasons, such as religious pilgrimage, looking for land to cultivate and settle for their families, or simply wish to explore. Whatever the reason for the travel, people in the ancient world needed to trade goods and services along the way in order to make a living and survive. The fact is that bringing goods or services to an area that had not yet been exposed to them are in a sense, exchanging culture.

Actually inter-regional trade is greater stimulant of cultural exchange what finally converged into art culture. In ancient times, prior to the 1500 years, a great deal of trade took place, along with the trade of goods and services nurtured immense cultural exchange. Cultural exchange is a term that describes the transference of ideas, values, traditions and belief systems that takes place when two or more separate civilizations come in to contact with each other. In

this ancient world these instances may have happened for a multitude of reasons including marriage, war, but most notably, commerce and trade (Bentley, Ziegler and Streets 2014, 24).

It is difficult to ascertain the time consumed in evolution of trade routes over the countries and continents, probably ages must have passed in their evolution and innumerable tribes must have contributed in giving them their distinctive character. The nomadic tribes in search of fodder for their flocks must have got themselves gradually acquainted with the natural routes of the country. Even before, the primitive hunters in search of their prey must have tread on the natural routes those followed the river courses which later on obtained the character of highways. This is the region all the routes are perched along the rivers since human settlements from Neolithic were established with emergence of agrarian societies. This search for natural passages must have continued for ages, and in course of time the whole country got covered with a network of trade routes. Needless to explain the hardship and life risk in movement from one place to another ancient man encountered but it was a challenging endeavor. The roads were often infested with wild animals; robbers lay in wait for travelers and as the food problem was difficult, travelers had to carry their own provision. It was very dangerous to travel alone on these roads and therefore people travelled together in well-organized caravans which provided reasonable security and comfort. These travelers were not merely traders but were also carriers of culture. Travelling on the Grand Trade Routes, Merchants entered into different countries and then returned back by the same, as the routes were known better. From the same routes, from time to time, many races and tribes crossed, but only after comparatively short durations they become merged with the culture and the people of the country.

The Trade Route represents an early phenomenon of political and culture integration due to inter-regional trade (Wikipedia, n.d.). A trade route is a logistical route which is identified as safest and most convenient chain of path and stoppages used for the transport of goods. Allowing goods to reach distant markets, a single trade route contains long distance arteries, which may further be connected to smaller networks of commercial transportation routes (definitions.net, n.d.). The Silk Road was one of the first trade routes to join the Eastern and the Western worlds. Major settlements of Ladakh region were connected by a network of trade routes. The so-called “Silk routes”, the most important of these ancient trade roads, connected China to India and the Mediterranean world. The northern and southern branches of the silk route intersected in Chinese Central Asia (Eastern Turkestan) where they joined the three main trade routes from northwest India. These latter routes traversed the Hindu Kush, the Pamirs, and the Karakoram.

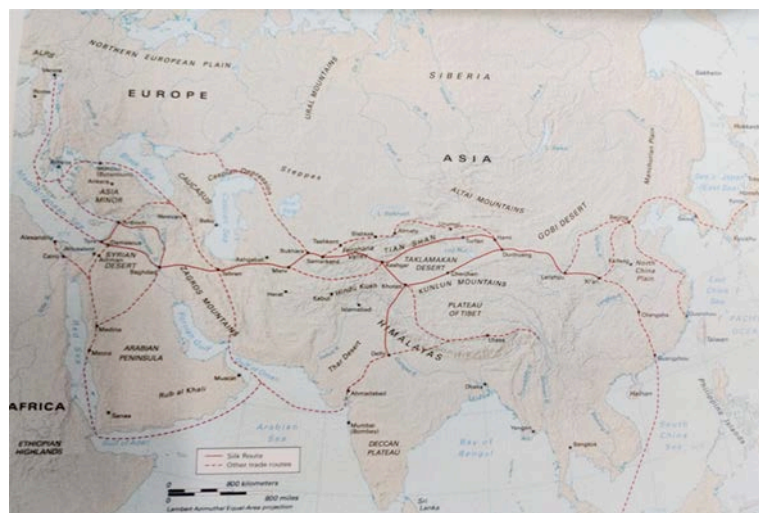


Figure 1. Map of Silk-Route.

Source: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/207236020332479220/>

One of these routes turns southeast along the Amu Darya (river) including Bukhara and Samarkand the center of silk Road trade to the Aral Sea, through ancient Civilizations under the present site of Astrakhan, and on to the Crimean Peninsula (erwin.bernhardt, n.d.). From there it crosses the Black Sea, Marmara Sea and the Balkans to Venice, another crosses the Caspian Sea and across the Caucasus to the Black sea in Georgia, thence to Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey).

The southern route is mainly a single route running through northern India, then the Turkestan & Khorasan region into Mesopotamia and Anatolia; having southward spurs enabling the journey to be completed by sea from various points. It runs south through the Sichuan Basin in China and crosses the high mountains into northeast India, probably via the Ancient tea route. It then travels west along the Brahmaputra and Ganges river plains, possibly joining the Grand Trunk Road west of Varanasi. It runs through northern Pakistan and over the Hindu Kush mountains to rejoin the northern route briefly near Marv. Then it followed an almost straight line west through mountainous northern Iran and the northern tip of the Syrian Desert to the Levant (tbb, n.d.). From there Mediterranean trading ships plied regular routes to Italy, and land routes went either north through Anatolia (Turkey) or south to North Africa. From the second millennium BC Nephrite Jade was being traded from mines in the region of Yarkand and Khotan to China. Significantly, these mines were not very far from the lapis lazuli and ruby mines in Badakhshan (Afghanistan) and, although separated by the formidable Pamir mountains, routes across them were, apparently, in use from very early times.

The silk routes can be most easily traced in the Tarim Basin of Chinese Central Asia, where traffic was forced into northern and southern routes in order to circumvent the deadly sandy wastes of Taklimakan. Starting from the Chinese terminus, Luoyang, the trade caravans moved to Dunhuang and then proceeded by either of the two main roads. Apparently, the more important one was the northern route, which led via Turfan and Karashahr, or Loulan (in the Lopnor area) and Karashahr or Shorchuk, to the prominent trade Centre of Kucha, and continued via Aksu to Kashgar at the western end of the basin. The southern route passed through Miran, Cherchen, Khotan and Yarkand (where tracks branched off towards the Karakoram or Pamir passes on the way to India or Bactria), and then rejoined the northern route at Kashgar (Elisseeff 2000, 27).

Probably the most important among the leading trade emporia and communication centers were Kashgar and Balkh. Kashgar was situated approximately in the middle of the silk routes and linked the branches of the main east-west roads to the routes leading across the Pamirs to India or to Badakhshan and Bactria. According to Chinese sources, Kashgar was the largest and most populous principality of both the Tarim Basin and Sogdian/Bactria. In the seventh century the town boasted several hundred Buddhist monasteries with 10,000 followers-more than twice the number in Khotan and Kucha (Klimburg 1982, 27).

Balkh, the ancient capital of Bactria, was another important junction on the silk route, for it was there that travelers took the main road to northwest India. This trail proceeded via Samangan to the mountain valley of Bamiyan (famous for the Buddhist monastery with gigantic rock Buddha images), crossed the major mountain ranges to the west of the Hindu Kush via the easy Shibar Pass (3285 meter), continued through Kapisa and Laghman in eastern Afghanistan, and finally led over the low Khyber Pass (1028 meter) into Gandhara where trade emporia were stocked with Indian merchandise. A less important route, probably crossing the Hindu Kush Range at the difficult Khawak pas (3550 meter), connected Gandhara with the silk route from Balkh via the Alai to Kashgar and with the paths leading through Badakhshan over the Pamirs directly into the south western part of the Tarim Basin (Klimburg 1982, 27).

The routes that crossed the inhospitable Pamirs were naturally much shorter than the main roads which circumvented them. Although most travelers were probably reluctant to expose themselves to the hardships of a prolonged high mountain journey, there was still considerable traffic on these trails. Most wayfarers probably just wanted to shorten the huge distances, but some may have selected the routes over the Pamirs for religious motives. Hidden among the mountains at the south-west of the Tarim Basin were religious centers of ascetics. Otherwise this

remote area attracted only venturesome merchants and travelers pressed for time, or, by, way of exception, armed forces (Klimburg 1982, 27).

Ladakh also underwent the same process of evolution of trade although it was a difficult terrain but it provides access to travelers from central Asia and Tibet through its passes. Comparative small human settlements in oases of Ladakh desert rendered hospitality to the travelers being situated as halting station on traditional routes. Indeed, such places (halts) were natural beneficiaries of generating some sort of revenues from travelers against the essential services provided to caravans and groups of traders and travelers. Ladakh in itself was a crossroads of many complexes of routes, providing choices for different sectors connecting Amritsar to Yarkand. From Punjab there were two routes to Leh: One via Hoshiyarpur, Kullu, Rohtang pass, Keylong, Bara Lacha pass, Lahchung Pass and Tanglang Pass. Another was via Srinagar, Zojila, Namika Pass, Fatula Pass. Again, from Leh to Yarkand, there were several possible routes all converging at the Karakoram Pass, at 5578 meters.

Goods and commodities of Trade

The networks of trade routes were mainly used for trading of goods and surplus commodities e.g. gold, silk, jade items, horses, pashmina wool, precious stones, ivory, spices, rock salt, borax, perfumes, brocades, textiles, carpets, muslin, herbs, etc. either in exchange (barter) or gold. Historical accounts reveals that gold was brought in China from Central Asian Nomadic world and Greece as early as in the 8th century BC, and Chinese jade carves began to make imitation designs of the steppes, adopting the Scythian-style-animal art of the steppes (descriptions of animals locked in combat) what become popular motif in the art of whole region and even percolated to the classical style as idiom spreading over vast region of Central Asia, Iranian world, Tibet, Kashmir whole western Himalayas. This style is particularly reflected in the rectangular belt plaques made of gold and bronze with alternate versions in jade and steatite which can later be seen in the petro-glyphs of Ladakh Region as well as in the wall paintings of Early-Buddhist Monasteries, which suggest a continuity and tradition of a decorative motif in the composite region of Central Asia and Ladakh.

Ladakh was famous for borax, pashmina, salt and copper. Historical northwest India was especially known for Buddhist sacred or rituals objects, but the region also produced some gold and silver and a large variety of precious textiles, gems, ivories, perfumes, spices, etc. –articles which are still exported by India in modern time (Klimburg 1982, 25). It is known that from the Achaemenian period onwards, Persia (present day Iran) was also a powerful kingdom rich in art and culture, exerted tremendous influence on Central Asia and Northern India. Textile Industry, especially embroidery and brocade was the prized and demanded all over the world. Above description highlights the possibility of trade (export-import) amongst the region which provided a platform for interaction of socio-cultural and religious trends. In this regard it would be relevant to refer the gist of the study of Dr. Max Klimburg who categorically mentioned that huge quantity of merchandise from faraway places found its way into and through the three Asian subcontinents. China exported silk, porcelain, lacquers, furs, cinnamon, vermillion, etc., and it received Mediterranean products like gold and silver, linen and woolen fabrics, coral and glass. Indian articles were traded through Central Asia to China, and in part also to the Mediterranean. In short, the trade emporia of Central Asia, such as Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar, Samarkand, and Balkh, must have been stocked with local and imported products of widely differing value and nature. Presumably most prominent among these articles was silk, which was traded in both raw and finished form. In the Mediterranean world the demand for silk was so high at times that the purchase of this luxury item became a considerable drain on Roman gold resources (Klimburg 1982, 25, 27). On this basis it may be assumed that Ladakhi routes were spinal trade channels probably Leh was important commercial junctions of radiating routes connecting Ladakh with Tibet, Pendjikent, Yarkand, Khotan, Miran on silk road and also Bactria and Iran. It can be easily conjectured on the basis of archaeological remains found on the winding treks linking Jhelum valley. Main halts on these routes are well marked with petro-glyphs right from Kashmir to Yarkand and at major stations with huge rock carving of Buddhist deities since after the

introduction of Buddhism in the region Buddhist temples and monasteries were established by necessary enroute supports what made these establishment wealthy and sumptuous in art treasure. At times it appears as the monasteries also served as emporia for trading costly goods like silk and brocades what produced in Iran, Central Asia and Kashmir.

Important ancient site/establishments on trade route in Ladakh

The network of traditional caravan routes and trade routes provided channels of intermingling of cultures and ethnicities what finally resulted into the material culture and art expression. It is assumed that some roads were principally used by trade caravans, while others were favored by pilgrims, missionaries, or no other travelers.

Thus the clusters of monasteries along the trade routes served as socio-economic institutions. Commodities (such as horses, medicines, textiles, silk, wools, spices, precious stones, etc.) were exchange in the nearby market places. Gradually monastic enclaves established a mentor position in the peripheral communities and tool up the task of education, healthcare, judicial affairs. Inside the monasteries, monks skilled in reading and writing taught literary languages and patronized religious arts. They thus enriched the cultural lives of the local inhabitants. Frequently their knowledge extended to the arts of magic, fortune-telling and medicine. Accordingly, they dispensed hospitality and catered to the spiritual and physical needs of merchants and missionaries bound on perilous journeys. In return, grateful merchants financed the monasteries facilitating the work of the monks (Klimburg, 1982, 19, 20).

Local traditions and authors speak of a long Buddhist tradition being in existence in Ladakh. Various forms of evidences are mentioned. First of all, it is the historic fact of Kushana King Kanishka's regency in Kashmir in the 2nd century CE, who was a devout patron of Buddhism. His empire consolidated vast region stretching from Central Asia and Afghanistan to Varanasi covering whole Northern India. During Mauryan and Kushan period Gandhara and Kashmir were the united province of sixteenth janapada (Council) and remained integral part of the complex culture that shared a lot with one hand with Indo Gangetic plains and Central Asia (Scythian and Sassanian) on other. Obviously this was the time when intensive economic and cultural intercourse took place between the two regions what left its impact on the art and culture of Kashmir, Gandhara and Indo-Gangetic plains, of course, demography and ethnicity also shared the same fate.

Petro-glyphs, rock carvings, inscriptions and monasteries, mani-walls and stupas found along the trekking routes, linking one place to other, are a clear indication that the routes were invogue used by caravan traders; these establishments were used as landmarks or guidepost for travelers (Keilhauer & Keilhauer, 1980, 322; Singh, 2006, 32). These carvings probably had been sponsored by devout merchants and local communities, evidence of establishment is missing. Further, proof is derived from the many monumental images of Buddhists deities carved out rocks like those at Drass (Fig. 2) (near Zozila), Mulbekh (Fig. 3) (Western Ladakh), Sod (Fig. 4) near Humbuting-la (a pass between Kargil and the valley of Dah- Hanu), Sanku and Karshekar (Fig. 5) (both villages located en-route to Zanskar in the Suru Valley), rock carving near Upshi (Fig. 6) (Manali-Leh Highway), which are interpreted as signs of early Buddhist culture. Certainly these images may be the result of the perpetuating tradition of rock-carving that is noticed from China to Rome in ancient time.



Figure 2. Avalokiteshwara, Drass, Kargil
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)



Figure 3. Maitreya, Rock-cut, Mulbek
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)



Figure 4. Maitreya, Sod, Near Hambuting La, Kargil
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)



Figure 5. Maitreya, Rock-cut, Karshekar, Suru Valley, Zaskar
 Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)



Figure 6. Avalokiteshvara, Upshi, Rock-cut, Leh-Manali Pass
 Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)

So Ladakh was not an isolated phenomenon. However, close to the monastery of Shergol, on the national Highway, located close vicinity to the Maitreya image of Mulbek, there are no cave settlements or larger Buddhist monasteries to be found near any of these carvings, as it is in case of Bamiyan/Afghanistan, Dunhuang or other cave monasteries along the silk routes, which importance as central cultic Images. However, some of the image have been created at rather significant places. It seems quite likely that some wealthy merchants, who used these routes and had to cross these passes again and again on their journeys from Kashmir to Central Asia and vice-versa, presumably in accordance with some local sovereign, donated these rock images as both a way to earn merit as well as a sign of gratitude for having survived the dangerous voyage. It may be inferred as creating as creating these images was an attempt to ban the horrors of a local natural calamity as one would again and again be travelling on these routes and thus wanted to assure oneself of a safe journey. Nevertheless, the rock images may be taken as signs of the cultural exchange between the initiators (Kashmiri) and the local population.

Other than the Rock engravings, they are the remaining temple sites. In Western Tibet, at the former kingdom of Purang-Guge with its monastery of Tholing as well as within the neighboring regions such as Spiti with its Tabo monastery and Kinnaur with the temple site of Nako are to be found the most ancient testimonials of Buddhism in the Western Himalayas (late 10th to early 12th century). It is here that in the 10th/11th century the Second Diffusion of Buddhism started under king Yeshe Od, Rinchen Zangpo and Atisa, which took hold also of Ladakh and was responsible for the developments, impact and cultural exchange that reached western Ladakh from Kashmir two three centuries later, could get a firm grip. According to Rinchen Zangpo's biography the only temple site established by him in Ladakh, which also archaeologically seems to be fairly well assured, is that of Nyarma, located between Shey and Thiksey, which remains in ruins today only. However, the last fragmentarily surviving murals in one of the temple ruins and stupas again are of later origin (approx. 12th century) (Kozicz, 2007, 60-64).

The temples surviving from the 10th-11th century – Mongyu, Sumda, the early temples of Alchi, were decorated by Kashmiri artists themselves. From a cultural history point of view, these temples sites, due to their size, beauty and degree of preservation as well as the philosophical concepts found in their interiors are extremely important as they are the most ancient surviving testimonies of Buddhism in this part of the Himalayas as well as the only ones inside of which paintings deeply connected to Buddhist Kashmir may be marveled at.

Regional Routes

In this context the routes of Kashmir and Ladakh (Jhelum, Chenab and Upper Indus Valley) region only will be discussed. These routes have not been discussed in any texts. Here the account is given after locating all the ancient establishments associated with Buddhism of Second Diffusion or even earlier on the trekking routes those are still in use.

- 1) Srinagar to Peshawar: This route goes from Kashmir (Srinagar) to Baramula (Varahmul) to along the Kishanganga River, moving south to Islamabad and Rawalpindi, via Attock to Peshawar (Purushpur).
- 2) Srinagar to Gilgit: This route linked Srinagar to Guraish, with Gilgit via Chilas after passing Barai Pass and Chonc Bal Pass.
- 3) Leh to Gilgit: This route starts from Leh, moving towards North West to Skardo via Khaltse, reaching Gilgit with other sites of Rondu and Bunji.
- 4) Srinagar to Yarkand: This route starts from Srinagar, moving South East towards Martand, Anantnag, Karshekhar, crossing Maryul Pass and Umasi Pass reaching to Kanikhar, Sani and Padum, from there via Charcha Pass Reached to Sumda Chun via Markha valley, linking Alchi and Mongyu. After crossing the river Indus, it reaches to Saspol, and moving towards Phube Pass, it Crosses Saspotse, reached to Hunder in Shyok valley, Charsa, Sasoma, Karakoram Pass to Yarkand. There was another Shorter route, only accessible in winters while rivers frieze, from Sasoma to Yarkand Via Skyempoche Ri, Murgo, Karakash tagh, Hazi langer. This route is of main center of attention in this study where the major ancient sites are still in existence.
- 5) Srinagar to Khaltse: This route starts from Srinagar, then Sonamarg, Baltal, Crosses Zozila, Drass, Kargil (one route from Zanskar joins here), moves to Mulbek, Lamayuru and finally joins at Khaltse. This route joins route no 3 mentioned here to move to either side i.e. Leh or Gilgit.
- 6) Tholing to Srinagar and Leh: This route moves along Suttlej River started from Tholing, Manang, Tika, Shipki Pass. After crossing Shipki, it bifurcates at Namgya, one leading to Spiti and then to Baralacha reaching Padum and joining the Route no 4. Another one coming down along Suttlej, crossing Poo, Kanam entering to Kullu Valley, Chenab Valley Udaipur (Chandrabhaga), via Kishtwad reaching Srinagar or joining route 4 at Umasi Pass.

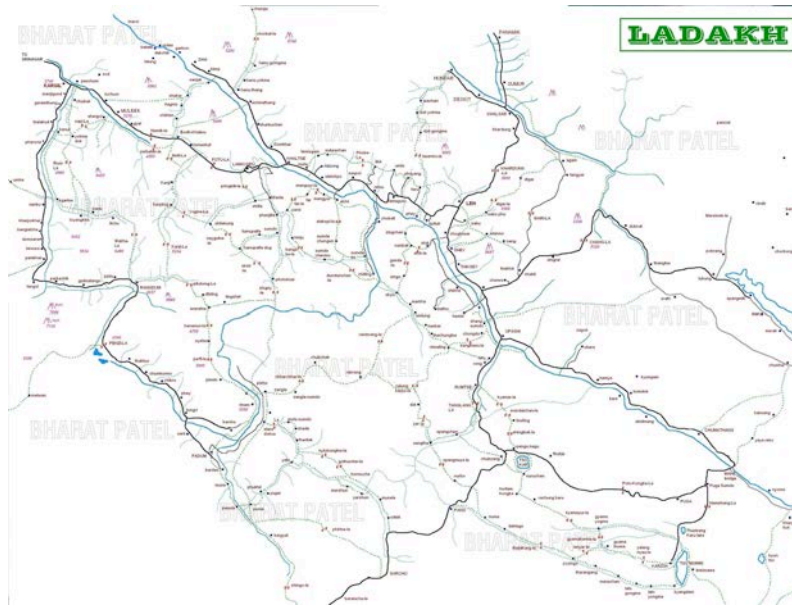


Figure 7. Map of Ladakh with sites and Trade Routes
 Source: <https://www.bcmtouring.com/maps/ladakh-zanskar-map.jpg>

Conclusion

On this basis it may be assumed that Ladakhi routes were spinal trade channels probably Leh was important commercial junctions of radiating routes connecting Ladakh with Tibet, Pendziken, Yarkand, Khotan, Miran on silk road and also Bactria and Iran. It can be easily conjectured on the basis of archaeological remains found on the winding treks linking Jhelum valley. Main halts on these routes are well marked with petro-glyphs and rock-carving right from Kashmir to Yarkand and at major stations with huge rock carving of Buddhist deities since after the introduction of Buddhism in the region. Buddhist temples and monasteries were established by necessary en-route supports what made these establishments wealthy and sumptuous in art treasure. At times it appears as the monasteries also served as emporia for trading costly goods like silk and brocades what produced in Iran, Central Asia and Kashmir.

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