

THE SILK ROUTE AND ITS REFLECTION
ON KNOWLEDGE
SYNCRETISM AND IMAGES IN PAINTING AND
ARCHITECTONIC FORMS IN MIDDLE-INNER ASIA:
A PARADIGM BEYOND SPACE AND TIME
13th – 15th CENTURIES AD

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(Adunanza del 15 novembre 2018)

SUNTO. – La Seta e le sue Vie tra Passato e Presente. Una Dimensione al di là di Spazio e Tempo. Alle soglie del terzo millennio, in un'atmosfera di anacronismi e contraddizioni condizionati, se non dominati, da un'incalzante ricerca scientifica e inconfutabili scoperte tecnologiche, nuove realtà sembrano configurarsi mentre barriere regionali e confini territoriali si disfano per dar forma a una nuova forma di globalità. La 'Via della Seta', con la sua ben articolata rete di vie primarie e secondarie, oggi torna a rappresentare il simbolo e le sfide di questa era ancora largamente sconosciuta. In una condivisione di idee e stimoli intellettuali, più di una volta e sin da passati anche molto remoti, nell'intreccio delle sue strade essa ha dato vita a nuove forme scientifiche, a sincretismi religiosi, e ad evocative immagini artistico-culturali espressione delle realtà del tempo.

Il testo che segue intende puntualizzare questa visione riferendosi a una dimensione cultural-religiosa medio-centroasiatica, incontro e interazione fra Passato e Presente. Sebbene nei vasti spazi di questa regione sopravvivano tradizioni e forme culturali profondamente radicate nel humus di questi territori, le nuove dimensioni dell'oggi tendono a riallacciare Europa e Asia, riorganizzando spazi e forme in una caleidoscopica cornice, e dando vita a nuove energie. Pur profondamente radicate nel passato e figlie di passate dinamiche e di poteri politico-istituzionali ed economici del passato, queste forze persistono, confluiscono e si fondono col presente, e si proiettano in un futuro ancora tutto da costruire e sviluppare, in una visione che non esprime soltanto la dimensione 'economica' e 'tecnologica' della vita ma ne sottolinea anche valenze e va-

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lori speculativi, artistici, religiosi...in cui la globalità è sempre più una realtà senza spazi e senza tempo.

Questo nuovo sistema, già manifestatosi con la disintegrazione dell'Unione Sovietica nell'ultimo decennio del secolo scorso, si è venuto rapidamente impadronendo dell'oggi. La Rivoluzione dell'Informazione e della Comunicazione e relative tecnologie (*I & C Technologies' Revolution*) ha creato uno spazio dominato da 'non distanze', il quale coinvolge la società nella sua interezza e con i suoi poteri *de jure* e *de facto*. È lo spazio globale, ancora simbolizzato dalla Via della Seta, amalgama e sintesi di nuovi legami tra società politica e civile, e quest'ultime con la società militare. Nuove dimensioni tuttora in evoluzione ma già in atto da vari decenni, alla ricerca di nuovi bilanciamenti fra sviluppo tecnologico e preservazione di antiche tradizioni, alla ricerca di una giustizia sociale ed economica che è ancora più un'utopia che una realtà, considerata dalle nuove generazioni la base di nuove strutture politico-istituzionali, fornitrici di ordine, stabilità e sicurezza (*hard and soft security*)...questa tuttora considerata nella sua doppia valenza economico-sociale e speculativa.

Nulla di nuovo. Si tratta di un fenomeno che ricorre nella storia e nelle sue varie fasi epocali sia pure tramite strumenti e cognizioni tecnologiche fra loro diverse rispetto al presente. E in questo contesto, sarebbe stato del tutto irrealistico trascurare un altro fattore, quello Religioso, fattore-chiave di tutti i tempi. Elemento chiave di profonde rivoluzioni culturali, risposta a sfide esterne, invocato per la costruzione di un nuovo ordine dove il 'religioso' subentra, legittima conquiste e nuovi spazi, propone e/o crea nuovi sistemi riempiendo vuoti culturali e politici. E così, l'Uomo e l'Umanità, la Storia e la Filosofia, l'Universo e le sue Leggi si ricompongono a loro volta – o cercano di ricomporsi – in un nuovo ordine e sistema. Il mondo e il suo destino – con la sua eterna dialettica fra storia e storicismo, economia e società, fra società e religione, fra scienza e tecnologia da un lato e religione dall'altro, fra ratio formale e relatività fra culture nella eterna antitesi fra cultura e/o civiltà.

Inevitabilmente oggi, in questo nuovo spazio globale, il mondo intellettuale si sta confrontando in un rinnovato dibattito storiografico, nel quale il fattore religioso fa sentire autorevolmente la sua voce. Conoscenza e visione del mondo e del suo ordine/disordine sono tradotti in una nuova filosofia della cultura e della storia, della società e della religione. Razionalità, storicità del sapere scientifico e tecnologico, natura ed esperienza, natura e 'ratio' umana, scienza ed etica, scienza e suo linguaggio, rivoluzione e potere, la forza e il suo uso (o, in contrapposizione, dialogo e tolleranza, o meglio "rispetto dell'Altro" come sostenuto apertamente da Francesco Bergoglio pochi mesi fa) sono fra i principali temi del dibattito attuale, cui non è estranea consapevolmente o meno anche la gente comune.

La fine della Guerra Fredda e il nuovo "Villaggio Globale" di Samuel Huntington con le rispettive rivoluzioni tecnologiche oggi appaiono realtà lontane e superate. Purtroppo, hanno indotto a ripensare parametri speculativi, paradigmi tradizionali, modelli di società e potere/i, umanità e statualità. Si tratta di elementi che potrebbero portare a nuove forme di contrasti anche molto violenti – e lo hanno fatto e lo stanno facendo ben aldilà del ben noto modello del "*clash of civilizations*" di Huntingtoniana memoria. Un disordine 'globale', perlopiù senza frontiere, nel quale, tuttavia, nuove forme politico-istituzionali, economiche e sincretismi culturali si stanno configurando, scaturendo dalle radici di un passato con le sue tradizioni: l'immagine concettuale della Via della Seta, o forse, e meglio ancora, il ben noto paradigma della Seta e le sue Vie.

Questa si presta a confrontarsi con la caleidoscopica immagine della realtà attuale e vorrebbe – nel nuovo immaginario collettivo – raccoglierne le sfide fondendo lungo le sue vie la dimensione materiale, scientifico-tecnologica ed economica della vita attuale con valenze e vocazioni culturali (o neo-culturali) attraverso risposte sistemico-strutturali anche religiose, aperta risposta alla decadenza e/o collasso dei valori culturali tradizionali. Sotto questa prospettiva, ci ritroviamo in un ordine/disordine inclusivo, nel quale scelte pragmatiche, sentimenti religiosi, idealismi di varia natura, preoccupazioni di carattere ‘altruistico’ ispirati al bene dell’umanità si incrociano costantemente e interagiscono, avvalendosi della nuova immensità degli spazi e la mobilità che le tecnologie garantiscono.

Il Medio-Centro Asiatico dei Secoli XIII-XV: Riflessi su Espressioni Pittoriche e Architettoniche. Le riflessioni che precedono non sono nulla di particolarmente nuovo nel corso degli eventi storici e di quelli di questi primi decenni del terzo millennio. Il prof. Axel Berkowsky si sofferma autorevolmente sull’attuale con puntualizzazioni concrete. Il testo che segue intende invece recuperare la concezione di Via della Seta dei secoli XIII-XV, le immagini che questa creò in una fase dominata da grossi sconvolgimenti e incontri e scontri fra civiltà profondamente diverse; si tratta dell’irrompere del mondo delle steppe dagli estremi lembi dell’Asia settentrionale, ossia il mondo delle “orde” (*ulus*) Mongole che arrivarono fino al Mare Adriatico e, poco più tardi, le terribili armate Timuridi. I figli delle steppe raggiunsero e soggiogarono il mondo Mesopotamico a occidente con i suoi ordinati canoni medici e scientifici, e travolsero le civiltà indo-iraniche che incontrarono sul loro cammino nel centro-asiatico toccando con Tamerlano i confini della Cina. Il mondo delle steppe irruppe con prepotenza, sconvolse regni e imperi, annientò antiche civiltà e i rispettivi codici di vita sedentaria e urbana, impose con la forza delle armi i propri codici e modelli di vita. Si sorvolerà qui sulle fasi storiche e le feroci campagne militari dall’una e dall’altra parte, campagne che portarono a profondi sconvolgimenti politico-istituzionali e a nuove dimensioni territoriali dove spazi e tempi tradizionali furono annullati. Tuttavia, sarebbe largamente improprio considerare questi tre secoli solo come secoli di devastazione, eccidi e orrori di vario genere. I figli delle steppe portarono sulla punta delle loro frecce il sapere astrologico-astronomico e matematico-algebrico della Cina e lo iniettarono nelle ideazioni sia scientifiche (mediche e farmaceutiche, scienze naturali in generale, scienze matematiche, numeriche, geometriche) che politiche e sociali (geografiche soprattutto, economiche e politico-strutturali) dell’antico mondo mesopotamico. L’elio-centrismo mongolo calcolò spazi cosmici e li tradusse in laboratori astronomici dalla sofisticata precisione. Al centro, pose l’Uomo e il suo Sapere, la Vita e l’Universo in una visione culturale (e politica) che riunificò gli spazi dalle sponde orientali mediterranee fino alla Cina. Fu in questa fase che sulla scena dell’epoca si ripresentò il paradigma ideologico e concettuale della Seta e le sue Vie. Questo creò nuovi spazi di conoscenze e nuove dimensioni, formulò nuovi sistemi e concezioni, in taluni casi queste furono tradotte in stupefacenti realizzazioni, e le lasciò. Si trattò di enunciati nuovi nei quali confluirono saperi dell’Oriente e dell’Occidente, una realtà che non si fermò quando la chiusura della rete commerciale di allora e l’arrivo prepotente sulla scena dell’Europa sembrò segnare con il declino e la fine degli scambi tradizionali anche la fine degli scambi culturali dell’epoca. Un percorso senza particolari cesure, invece, che si è rinnovato costantemente col rinnovarsi delle conoscenze.

Per quanto riguarda il periodo qui trattato, i valori ideologici e speculativi del

momento furono interpretati e proposti iconograficamente e visivamente attraverso le 'Belle Arti'. Si tratta di valori e immagini che il 'turismo cultural-gastronomico' dell'oggi ripropone e consente loro di riemergere nell'ambizione di ricreare un dialogo (nuovo) fra genti diverse e i rispettivi canoni di valori umani, religiosi e speculativi in una realtà politica sconvolta dalle continue ondate migratorie, fluida, a-territoriale e senza più tempi.

'Belle Arti' – o *Visual Fine Arts*. Nei secoli e nella regione in questione, Natura (*nature*) e Paesaggio (*landscape*) erano tema centrale 'anche' delle Belle Arti, percepiti e registrati dai pittori e dagli architetti dell'epoca – spesso su commissione 'di palazzo' – con caratteristiche formali, stilistiche e tecniche che riflettevano fortemente l'incontro della tradizione con un mondo che viveva attivamente la sua vita in stretto, intimo contatto con la natura, un mondo e una cultura che osservavano la Natura e il Cosmo, li registravano in ogni loro dettaglio seguendone la ritmica marcia dei giorni e delle notti, delle stagioni e dei cicli lunari. Si tratta di forme artistiche che disegnano un'immagine ben precisa: un mondo e un ordine nuovo, il quale viveva la propria propria vita spesso in lotta con la natura e un ordine cosmico che ne minacciava la sopravvivenza, un mondo che o riusciva a condizionare l'ordine cosmico attraverso scienza e conoscenza, o ne era condizionato a sua volta e spesso anche soggiogato. Si trattava di una natura e un ordine cosmico che erano spesso percepiti dall'artista in aperta tensione con l'incertezza, la violenza e la cieca dissolutezza del mondo della propria epoca.

Tuttavia, a un'analisi più attenta, queste stesse forme artistiche modellano un ordine che non è solo disordine, naturale e celeste al tempo stesso. Spesso si percepisce un'armonia (specialmente nelle forme architettoniche) che è al tempo stesso 'tecnologia' 'cultura' e 'religione'; ed in entrambe si percepisce chiaramente la 'curiosità di conoscere' e la 'scienza' come suo strumento e fine ultimo. Non solo. Aldilà della conoscenza e della scienza, queste forme (specialmente quelle pittoriche) si animano, abbandonano la staticità della visione iranica o di quella mesopotamica del secolo XIII. Prendono vita attraverso nuove tecniche stilistiche; pennellate, colori, movimento disegnano una scena in cui animali, uomini e natura partecipano attivamente al pathos dell'evento rappresentato rispecchiando profondi stati d'animo del momento.

Nelle vastità delle steppe Euro-Asiatiche, tagliate da grossi corsi d'acqua, spezzate da montuosità e altopiani aspri e rocciosi oppure da inospitali distese desertiche, la Seta riuscì a costruirsi una propria via, articolata, diramantesi in un continuo intersecarsi di vie e viuzze, lungo la quale insieme a merci di lusso si incontrarono e scambiarono anche elementi culturali di cui le "fine arts" ci restituiscono suggestive immagini pittoriche ed architettoniche.

Le varie forme stilistiche e le caratteristiche strutturali e architettoniche scandiscono un ordine fatto da potenti sincretismi, il quale è scienza, conoscenza, armonia e religione al tempo stesso. Un ordine che è proiezione di una precisa realtà politica e sociale dominante all'epoca, una realtà la quale, tuttavia, è anche espressione di un mondo 'non scritto', non registrato dalla cronachistica contemporanea se non con brevi fugaci cenni a latere di qualche importante evento, un *underground world*, sempre ben presente nelle eterne dinamiche della vita nomadica oppure di quella sedentaria ed urbana, nelle quali l'Uomo si sente centro di un Universo di cui si sente intima parte.

Le immagini che seguono sono parte integrante del testo.

ABSTRACT. – **The Silk Route Between Past and Present. A Paradigm Beyond Space and Time.** On the threshold of the third millennium, in an atmosphere of anachronisms and contradictions, dominated and conditioned by scientific and technological discoveries, new ideas seem to take flight whilst regional barriers and territorial boundaries are collapsing to give way to a new form of comprehensiveness. Sharing ideas and intellectual stimuli, amalgamating cultural elements circulating along its intertwining branches, the Silk Route has more than once given life to new scientific forms, cultural and intellectual systems and, amongst these, artistic shapes and religious syncretism. The “Silk Route”, which, with its articulated network of twisting routes and sub-routes, even now well represents the challenging paradigm of a new age yet standing at its threshold.

A paradigm beyond time and space. The following paper aims at focusing on the Silk Route’s Religious-Cultural dimension in the middle-inner Asia of the 13th-15th Centuries, when, whatever may have happened regarding local realms and rulers, it played the role of junction and meeting point of different worlds and their civilisations. Even now we are confronted with a political trend that is at once and the same time a cultural current; emanating from the past, it is re-linking Europe and Asia and, re-uniting territories with their individual and traditional cultural forms, is shaping a renewed kaleidoscopic framework. We are confronted with new forces deeply rooted in the past, which, emanating from the far eastern fringes of Asia, by the second decade of the 21st century have reached the far western fringes of Europe, dynamics that are not only ‘economics’ and ‘scientific technologies’ but also thought, religion, and other intellectual values. These forces are heir of past times, nevertheless they endure in the present and are the active lively projection of a future time...though still largely to be understood and matured. A vision of life and universe where speculative and religious values coexist with astounding technological and scientific discoveries in a global dimension without space and time.

At the verge of this millennium, the Information and Communication Revolution has given life with its advanced technologies to a new space conditioned and dominated by no-distances. And this space with its always-evolving scientific discoveries today involves the society in its entirety (what is commonly named as “*global space*” actually symbolised by the Silk Route), endeavours to amalgamate it creating new links between civil and political society and positioning them in a new military dimension. New forms and structures that are rapidly evolving in search of some balance between technological development and preservation of ancient traditions, which might make possible social and economic justice, yet an utopia more than a reality. However, both (social and economic justice) form the ideological basis of order and stability, anxiously pursued by the young generation in search of an economic and speculative order where stability, security (hard and soft security) and religious structures should in their turn become the platform of new political-institutional structures.

Be that as it may, this is not a new phenomenon. Technological advancements are astoundingly new, but not the process and its aims. We are confronted with a phenomenon that has already occurred in more than one historic phase. Epochal phases. That is the human search for economic and social justice, and their framing into new conceptual schemes. And within this ratio, it would be unrealistic to ignore an additional key-factor. It would be unrealistic to deny that Religion has always been a major player. It has been at the basis of more than one revolution, it has represented the cultural-political response to foreign challenges, it has legitimised military action, it has given life to new spaces and political systems, it has filled with its pathos cultural and political

voids. It has given to Mankind and Universe a new centrality, creating a new space within which Man and Mankind, History and Philosophy, Cosmos and Universe with their laws meet and merge in new systems and structural orders. The World and its Destiny, core of lively debates, conditioned by the eternal dialectic between economics and society, between society and religion, between science and technology on the one hand, and religion on the other, between formal ratio and ideologies or myths, which underline with their voice the eternal antithesis between cultures and civilisations.

At the verge of the third millennium, the intellectual world is facing a new historiographical debate, into which the Religious Factor has also entered. Knowledge and the vision of the world and its new order/disorder are translated into a new philosophy of culture and history, of society and religion. Rationality, historicity of scientific knowledge, nature and experience, nature and human 'ratio', science and ethics, science and its language, science and its new aims and objectives are amongst some of the major themes of this debate. But not only this: which aims, which objectives? And within which new order that might ensure security and stability, social and economic justice? Thence, revolution and power are coming to the fore with another factor: Force and its use... a stage that, however, does not disregard dialogue and tolerance, or, as recently stated by Francesco Bergoglio, more than tolerance, "reciprocal respect". These are only 'some' amongst the main issues discussed and heard of also in the traditional culture of ordinary people.

Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War and the well-known "global village" dealt with by Samuel Huntington, the global village with its technological revolutions, have induced to re-think our own speculative parameters, traditional paradigms and models of society and power, mankind and statehood. And once again we have been confronted with elements that might bring to new forms of sharp opposition and a global disorder. However, beyond and behind the Huntingtonian cliché of the "clash of civilizations", a new cultural current seems to take flight spurring from the roots of a traditional past, which however has not yet disappeared. The Silk Route stems out emanating from the far-eastern lands of Asia as the conceptual image, the paradigm of a conceivable new order. By merging the material, scientific-technological and economic dimension of life with a new cultural (or neo-cultural) vocation it seeks (and seems to be able) to give life to a new social body and new systemic-structural answers, a comprehensive order capable of tackling the challenges opened by the collapse of the traditional cultural parameters and the dramatic backdrop of a mere clash of civilisations.

Middle-Inner Asia of the 13th -15th Centuries: the Silk Route and its Reflection on Painting and Architectonic Forms. As just pointed out, nothing is new in the course of History. Professor Axel Berkowsky has authoritatively lingered on the Silk Route – or better "the New Silk Route" – with specific regard on practical aspects of these last decades. In the following text, I wish to linger on a past historic period, particularly fertile when confronted with the collapse of traditional values and the challenges posed by new fearful forces and their dynamics: the Mongols with their hordes (*ulus*) and, some later, Tamerlane with his terrible Army. Sons of the steppe and its culture, these people suddenly appeared on the stage, raced it from Mesopotamia to the north-eastern corner of Asia with their hordes and their allied tribal groups, shattered previous civilisations and imposed a new dominion, a new political-military order and new models of life. But, with their Military superiority, they also brought the codes and the ancient traditional knowledge of the nomadic world. It is misleading to watch to this epochal phase only as a phase of devastation and horrors. With their codes, Mongols and Timurids

brought with them the Chinese algebraic, mathematical and scientific knowledge, and fused it with Mesopotamian mathematical and medical sciences reaching peaks of astronomical, arithmetical, numerical, geometric, algebraic theoretical and practical knowledge. They also brought with them from vital centres of religious scholarship and life a large number of theologians, *pirs*, traditionists and legal religious scholars with their individual religious features and systems. Shamanism, Buddhism, Muslim forms, Nestorianism and other cults vigorously practised in the mobile world of the steppe gave life to an important phase of religious culture and multifarious practices largely imbued with mystic feelings and traditional emotional states.

Then, and once again, within the global space created by the military conquests of the new-comers, the Silk Route – or more precisely, the Silk and its Routes – reorganised and revitalised trades and business, gave life to close diplomatic connections and matrimonial allegiances reinforced by a vigorous traditional chancery and official correspondence, that tightly linked Asia with Europe. Within this new global order, the Silk and its routes played the crucial role, shaped new political, institutional, scientific and intellectual formulae, gave life to new conceptual forms that – at their core – had Man and Mankind as centre of the entire Universe. We are confronted with a cultural development begun at a time when the sons of the steppe were taking over lands of the classical Arabic civilisation (like Syria, Iraq and al-Jazīra), at a time when the Iranian world was still centre of intellectual life and its social norms were still spreading over large spaces of Inner Asian territories. Visual Arts wonderfully mirror this phenomenon.

We witness a process that renovated itself ‘from within’ in the course of three centuries and did not stop even when the arrival of the European Powers on the Asian markets seemed to sign, with the decay and end of the traditional market economy, also the closing of the cultural interactions created by the Silk Routes of the time. Once again, Visual Arts wonderfully mirror this phenomenon: a dramatic transitional, fluid period, marked by a distinctive timeless reality, which had no longer territories well delimited by frontiers to conquer or defend.

Herewith I have dealt, as an example, with the reflection of the new conceptions of Life and Universe on visual Fine Arts in the 13th-15th centuries, specifically painting and architectonic forms. Ideological values that aimed to forge new relationships among different peoples and their individual human values, religious thinking, moral codes...and economic, scientific, technological achievements.

‘Fine Arts’. Visual fine arts, in my case painting and architecture, are the mirror of feelings shared by the Lords of the time, registered by painters and architects in plastic forms, the signal of these stances to an often confused Humanity. Here, I linger on two pictorial themes: Nature and Landscape on the one hand, and Religion with its very images on the other. With regard to architectonic forms, these reflect the same conceptual paradigm shaped through technical features. By those ages, Nature and Landscape were perceived by contemporary painters and architects with formal, stylistic and technical characteristics which strongly reflected the impact with a world which lived its life in close, intimate contact with nature, a world and a culture which observed Nature and the Cosmos, and perceived them in every detail over the slow rhythmical march of days and nights, of seasons and the lunar cycles. These artistic features depict a precise image, that of a world which lives its life often at odds with nature for its very survival, a world which conditions nature or is conditioned in its turn. At that time, it was a world and a cosmic order which were often perceived by the artist in their tension with uncertainty and the blind recklessness of modern-contemporary times. However, to a

closer analysis, these same artistic forms shape a celestial order which was at one and the same time a culture and a religion.

In the vast borderless space of the Euro-Asiatic steppes, cut by great rivers, broken by steep rocky mountainous chains and inhospitable desert fig.aux, the Silk succeeded in building and organising its own network of twisting routes and sub-routes, along which transited (albeit, yet still transit) caravans with their goods...but also cultural elements and their conceptual-philosophical forms. Of these latter and their syncretic imageries and dreams, the fine arts have left evocative pictures and architectonic images, which depicted a world that is the projection of a precise social and political reality and its underlying factors, such as the restlessness of a nomadic pattern of life and the culture of the Town and its urban life. Little is changed today despite the collapse of the Soviet empire and its order. Features and forms change, but in both cases they announce a different world with its order built on a robust syncretism, which is at the same time science, knowledge, harmony and religion (divine or human, or both). A world that is the projection of a precise political, social and economic reality. A reality that, at one and the same time, is the silent voice of a humanity often disregarded by contemporary writers, an 'underground world' that echoes traditional forms and their dynamics, and a no less authoritative *de facto* power that politically, economically and militarily conditions and dominates its times. A reality that finds an authoritative voice through the Silk Route.

1. THE SILK ROUTE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT. A PARADIGM BEYOND SPACE AND TIME

On the threshold of the third millennium, in an atmosphere of anachronisms and contradictions, dominated and conditioned by scientific and technological discoveries, new dreams seem to take flight whilst regional barriers are collapsing to give way to a new form of comprehensiveness. The Information and Communication Revolution, which developed its highest potential at the end of the previous century, is now giving way to new and more frightening technological revolutions, which are emerging on to the world stage as new worrying strengths (ideological and technological at one and the same time). In this context, the dominant factors are uncertainty, violence, micro-macro criminality, abuse of power, regional conflicts and modern forms of conflict. Corruption prevails together with illegal trafficking and crime. The indiscriminate exploitation of the environment adds natural disasters and new forms of human catastrophes. All these realities represent additional challenges and demand a positive reshaping of civil and political society within a new global space.

Sharing ideas and intellectual stimuli, amalgamating cultural elements circulating along its intertwining branches, the Silk Route has

more than once given life to new scientific forms, religious practices, cultural and intellectual systems, and, amongst these, artistic shapes mirroring the landscape of the time. The Silk Route, which, with its articulated network of twisting routes and sub-routes, even today comes again to the fore and represents the challenging paradigm of a new age... however yet standing at its threshold.

The Silk Route, a paradigm beyond time and space. The following text aims at focusing on the Silk Route's religious-cultural dimension in the middle-inner Asia of the 13th-15th Centuries, when, whatever may have happened regarding local realms and rulers, it played the role of junction and meeting point of quite distant and different worlds and their civilisations.¹ There, transited caravans and convoys directed to the markets that prospered along these twisting routes. There, bankers (s. *ṣarrāf*, pl. *ṣarrāfūna*) and agents (s. *wakīl*, pl. *wkālā'*) of the Great Merchant Families of the time were stationed to control economic and financial trends, to inform their lords, to bargain, sell and buy the precious goods stocked in magazines and/or produced in loco. Business and trades were carried out on a global scale, at land and on the sea. A telling evidence of this global dimension are the commercial codes of Ṣūḥār and the maritime code from the Al Salimi Library, just presented to the international community by Abdulrahman Al Salimi at Beijing.²

¹ With regard to the terms-concepts of 'culture' and 'civilisation', in this paper both are used following the designation given by P. Rossi, in *Enciclopedia del Novecento* sub voce "Cultura", vol. I, pp. 1143-1157.

² With regard to Ṣūḥār and the commercial codes of the time, see V. Fiorani Piacentini "The mercantile empire of the Tibis: economic predominance, political power, military subordination", in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 34 (2004), pp. 251-260; Idem, "Ṣūḥār and the Daylamī interlude (356-443/967-1051)", in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 35 (2005), pp. 195-206. See also J.C. Wilkinson, "Ṣūḥār (Sohar) in the Early Islamic Period. The Written Evidence", in M. Taddei (ed.): *South Asian Archaeology 1977 – Papers from the Fourth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists in Western Europe, held in the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*. 2 vols., Istituto Universitario Orientale - Napoli 1979 vol. II, pp. 887-907; and the paper read by Abdulrahman Al Salimi ("Regulating the Sea: A 9th Century Ibadi Manuscript on Maritime Law") at the Conference on Ibādī Studies held at Peking on the 17-19 September 2018 – Peking University, on the theme "China and the World: Development and Cooperation from the Perspective of Belt and Road Initiative. The Silk Route between Past and Present" and "Diachronic and Cross-Border Transmission of Ibadi Knowledge". Salimi's paper focuses on a manuscript from the Al Salimi Library, in press in the Proceedings.

Beyond and despite political frontiers, the Great Merchants dominated.³ They were the social positive force that conditioned political powers and ruled de facto supported by their families, allies and subordinated employees appointed to some administrative office in distant regions. The Great Merchants, the very force that waged wars, organised alliances and planned agreements. The Great Merchants and the active “underground world” of sailors, craftsmen, pious men, saints, geographers and travellers that lived, acted and prospered along the Silk Route.⁴ Financial and Economic Power was often at the basis of allegiances and conflicts. Local rulers were the dominant cast, the ‘Army’, the military force that could ensure order and security along the pilgrimage and trade routes. As long as they could ensure order and stability, then the system and its structures could work; but when internal feud disrupted the system and its gears...then the Force swiftly shifted to different hands and other rulers, promptly followed by the Merchants, craftsmen ... capitals and business.

However, along the contorted routes of the silk, with goods and pilgrims also travelled cultural elements from distant corners of the world. And with them new conceptual positions, that did not fail to take flight forging new dreams, new political visions and new knowledge. The visual arts of the time interpreted these haunting stimuli and the suggestions that were behind them, recorded, and sealed the features of a new epoch in the memory of human beings.

At the threshold of the third millennium, we are confronted with a political trend that controls on territories and ‘their’ riches. What is drastically changing are the structures and the modus operandi heavily conditioned by the technological discoveries of these last decades. Biotechnologies are rapidly forging within a new human and animal environment also a new conceptual order that focuses on the eternal dilemma of Man and Mankind, History and ‘its’ Philosophy, Universe and its

³ V. Fiorani Piacentini, “Merchant Families in the Gulf. A Mercantile and Cosmopolitan Dimension: the Written Evidence (11-13th Centuries AD)”, in *ARAM* 11-12 (1999-2000), pp. 145-159; Idem, “Hormuz – Qalhat – Kij: A New Maritime and Mercantile System”, in *The Ports of Oman*, Vol. 10 of the Series Al Salimi, A. and Staples, E. (eds.) *Studies on Ibadism and Oman*. Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim – Zürich – New York 2017, pp. 283-356.

⁴ A.J. Fromherz ed., *The Gulf in World History. Arabia at the Global Crossroads*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018.

Laws.⁵ The I & C technologies and the gradual entry of tech-giants in the market and in banking services are drastically changing the structure of the market and the weight of its individual actors. “Time itself becomes the pathway towards progress...and knowledge”.⁶ The times of the Merchants and their world-wide business is over, but the pattern is still the same: markets and tech-giants are the positive game-changers in global finance and, with them, in politics, too. They are the players on the modern global space. A timeless space, where a cultural current emanating from the past is re-linking distant regions and their civilisations, is re-linking Europe and Asia and, uniting territories with their individual and traditional cultural forms, it is shaping a renewed kaleidoscopic framework. We are confronted with new forces yet deeply rooted in the past, which, emanating from the far eastern fringes of Asia, by the second decade of the 21st Century have reached the far western fringes of Europe, too, dynamics that are no longer ‘economics’ and ‘scientific technologies’ but also thought, religion, and other intellectual forms. These forces are heir of past times, nevertheless they endure in the present and are the active lively projection of a future time...though still largely to be understood and developed. A vision of life and universe where speculative and religious values coexist with astounding technological and scientific discoveries in a global dimension, commonly named as “*global space*” and actually symbolised by the “*Neo-Silk Route of the Present*”.

This space with its always-evolving scientific and technological discoveries involves the society in its entirety. A space without frontiers that tries to amalgamate itself by creating new links between civil and political society on the one hand, and the new military dimension generated by the advancing technologies of no-distance, on the other. New forms and structures that are rapidly evolving in search of some balance between technological development and preservation of ancient traditions, which might make possible social and economic justice, yet an utopia more than a reality. However, both (social and economic justice) form the ideological basis of the new order and its stability, anxiously

⁵ A masterly panorama of the main themes and positions in this regard is a critical study by Pietro Rossi, *Il senso della storia. Dal Settecento al Duemila*, Il Mulino – Le vie della civiltà, Urbino 2012.

⁶ P. Rossi, *Il senso della storia...cit.*, p. 31.

pursued by the young generation in search of an economic and speculative order where stability, security (hard and soft security) and religious structures should in their turn become the platform of the political-institutional structures of the Present and Future world.

2. THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR. MAN AND MANKIND, HISTORY AND ITS PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSE AND ITS LAWS

Be that as it may, as just noted above this is not a new phenomenon. Technological advancements are astoundingly new and rapidly evolving, too, but not the process and its aims. We are confronted with a phenomenon that, through the acquisition of new spaces, in its ultimate aim mirrors the human search for economic and social justice, and their framing into new conceptual schemes. It is within this ratio that it would be unrealistic to ignore an additional key-factor. It would be unrealistic to deny that Religion has always been a major player.⁷ It has been at the basis of more than one revolution; it has represented the cultural-political response to foreign challenges; it has legitimised armed action and, within it, new strategies and terroristic attacks; it has given life to new spaces and political systems; it has filled with its pathos cultural and political voids. When referring to 'Religion', herewith I refer to the belief of the existence of a supernatural ruling power, creator and controller of the Universe through his Laws; in other terms, a

⁷ During the first two decades of the third Millennium, such issue has been at the core of more than one lively debate. A propos of the 'silk route', an international conference held at Srinagar University (India) in October 2008 has marked the waking up in the Central Asian world of this ancient paradigm with all its political, economic and cultural implications. The papers read and the following proceedings echo the Islamic Past and look to the Future through the present impending times and their knowledge. Within the Western and, in particular, the Italian panorama, such issues are part of a larger line of studies and research: historiography. Authoritative voices are, amongst many others, Fulvio Tessitore and Pietro Rossi. See F. Tessitore, *Schizzi e schegge di storiografia arabo-islamica italiana*, Palomar Athenaeum, Bari – Italy 1995; *Idem*, *Contributi alla storiografia arabo-islamica in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2008. See also Pietro Rossi (ed.), *La storiografia contemporanea. Indirizzi e problemi*, Il Saggiatore - Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano 1987; *Idem*, "Introduction to Max Weber's *Sociologia della Religione*", Edizioni di Comunità, Milano 1982, pp. 1-44; see also above note (5).

system based on faith and worship of a transcendent, ethical and spiritual entity with its codes and harmony. However, 'religion' can also be an ideological faith that goes to the person, a political and social movement that is directed to the society in its entirety, a movement without times and spaces which aims to embrace the society in its entirety, whose aspiration is the well-being of its members through human rules and structures. In other terms, a movement headed and led by a strong charismatic personality that, for his/her services in the name of freedom and economic/social justice, receives faith, respect, obedience and devotion. A 'human religion' where obedience goes 'to the person', and neither to a transcendent God nor to an institutional system with its apparatus, a person that conditions and dominates the social body through articulated structures heading to a system (often a hierarchical system) deeply rooted in human laws and values. In any case, both 'religions' have given to Mankind and Universe a new centrality, creating a new space within which Man and Mankind, History and Philosophy, Cosmos and Universe with their laws meet and merge in new systems and structural forms.

Nowadays – as in the Past – the World and its Destiny are at the core of lively debates, conditioned by the eternal dialectic between economics and society, between society and justice, between freedom and power, between science and technology on the one hand, and 'religion' on the other, between formal ratio and ideologies or myths, which underline with their voice the eternal antithesis between cultures and civilisations.

At the same time, at the verge of the third millennium the intellectual world is facing a new historiographical debate, into which the Religious Factor has also entered. Knowledge and the vision of the world and its new order/disorder are translated into a new philosophy of culture and history, of society and religion. History is once again the key to understanding the Present and its gears, and planning the Future. Rationality and scientific knowledge, nature and technological experience, nature and human 'ratio', science and ethics, science and its language, science and its new aims and objectives are amongst some of the major themes of this debate, dominated, conditioned and often deformed by the I&C technological devices. Thence, worrying questions are coming to the fore: which knowledge? Which aims and which objectives? And within which new order that might ensure security and stability, social and economic justice? Thence, revolution and power stand out

in a position of prominence with another imperative: the Force and its use...it is a stage that, however, does not disregard dialogue and tolerance, or, as recently stated by Francesco Bergoglio, more than tolerance, “reciprocal respect”. These are only ‘some’ amongst the main issues discussed and heard of also in the traditional culture of ordinary people.

Undoubtedly, the end of the Cold War and the well-known “global village” dealt with by Samuel Huntington, the global village with its technological revolutions, have induced to re-think our own speculative parameters, traditional paradigms and models of society and power, mankind and statehood. And once again we have been confronted with elements that might bring to new forms of sharp opposition and a global disorder. However, beyond and behind the Huntingtonian cliché of the “clash of civilizations”, a new cultural current seems to take flight spurring from the roots of a traditional past, which however has not yet disappeared. The Silk Route stems from this past, emanating from the far-eastern lands of Asia as the new conceptual image, the paradigm of a conceivable new order. By merging the material, scientific-technological and economic dimension of life with a new cultural (or neo-cultural) vocation it seeks (and seems to be able) to give life to a new social body and new systemic-structural answers, a comprehensive order capable of tackling the challenges opened by the collapse of the traditional cultural parameters and the dramatic backdrop of a mere clash of civilisations.

3. THE MIDDLE-INNER ASIA OF THE 13TH-15TH CENTURIES: THE SONS OF THE STEPPE

As just pointed out, nothing is new in the course of History. Professor Axel Berkowsky has authoritatively lingered on the Silk Route – or better “the New Silk Route” – with specific regard on practical aspects of these last decades. In the following text, I wish to linger on a historic period of the past, particularly fertile, and its response when confronted with the breakdown of traditional values and the challenges posed by new fearful forces and their dynamics: the Mongols with their hordes (*ulus*) and their empire, and, some later, Tamerlane with his terrible Army, and the Tīmūrīds, his successors.

Then, visual arts – here it will be dealt with painting and architectural shapes – formed an inseparable part of the challenges that the new

obligations were imposing; they gave life and animated hopes and fears, human aspirations to penetrate into hidden realities or new scientific systems, cultural interests and their translation into lines, signs, forms and colours.⁸

Before entering the subject proper, the following notes aim at providing a very sketchy historic outline of the Lords and protagonists of these ages, and the underground world that revolved around them, summarising a complementary backdrop to the following part.

3.1 *The Mongol Empire*

Sons of the steppe and its culture, the Mongols suddenly appeared on the stage at the start of the thirteenth century as a well organised nomadic empire, or, more precisely, as a powerful military confederation of Turco-Mongol tribes. As just said, to trace in detail the history of the Mongols and their doings in Central-Inner Asia is beyond the scope of this paper. Just to sum up, a few sketchy notes to frame the following discourse.⁹ It seems that the name “Mongol” appeared for the

⁸ Particularly telling in this respect is an exhibition held in Rome at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni (23rd January - 10th April 1994), conceptualised and organised by prof. Maria Teresa Lucidi on the issue of the silk and its route. See the Catalogue: M. Teresa Lucidi, *La Seta e la sua Via*, Edizioni De Luca, Roma 1994. For a period here dealt with (Timurid), see also Sh. R. Carnaby and J. Thompson, *A caccia in Paradiso. Arte di corte nella Persia del Cinquecento*, SKIRA, New York – Milano 2004. See also the recent volume by F. Cardini & V. Vanoli, *La via della seta. Una storia millenaria tra Oriente e Occidente*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2017. Cfr. below notes (26), (27) and (28).

⁹ The recorded history of the Mongols starts at the end of the 12th-beginning of the 13th Century AD. It is around that epoch that the “Secret History of the Mongols” and some Persian and Chinese contemporary sources provide historical records. About the Mongol period, we have a rich documentation also from European archives. Literary sources document and comment the hateful appearance and disgusting habits of the invaders, which added horror to the horror inspired by their unscrupulous perfidy and cold-blood cruelty. This is one of the explanations given to the European name of “Tartar-s”: their devilish appearance and the terror they caused, which recalled the “Tartarus” with Satan and its demons. However, European sources, once the horror instigated by their physical aspect and the brutality of their conquests had been overcome and its memory left behind, focus on the reorganisation of the Mongol territories under a new order, that of the “Silk Route”: trades and business, diplomatic missions eastwards (to the Mongol Great Khans) and westwards (to the European courts). Standard literary sources in Persian and Arabic on the course of

first time in a Chinese text of the 9th Century AD as *Meng-wu*. Originally, this name was used for a sub-tribe, and not for the whole of the Mongol people. These latter, in their turn, were part of a larger group of Mongol language, designed as “Tatar” in both the Turkish inscriptions of the Orkhon river and in Chinese texts. The Tatars proper were settled in present eastern Mongolia and in the south-western regions of Manchuria all along the Chinese Wall, where they carried out prosperous trades with the Öngüt, also named “White Tatars”. The term “Tatar” (later on “westernised” as “Tartar”) has survived for cen-

events during the Mongol Age deeply differ. With regard to the military campaigns, both minutely record events and depict the Mongol method of fighting, their military organisation, weapons and corps, lingering on the inhumanity of their warfare, their massacres, merciless violence and pillaging after a town had been militarily conquered; at the same time, they also inform on their generosity and benevolence when a town or a people surrendered and on their cruelty and abuses of all kinds when towns or people revolted after surrendering. But, with the reorganisation of the world of the time under the supreme command of Chingiz Khān’s sons and successors, Arab chronicles are more concerned with the Crusades, the Islamic *reconquista*, the Syrian wars between the Mamlūks of Egypt and the Mongol Īl-Khāns, on the one hand, and the end of the Caliphate on the other. In contrast, Persian chronicles and travelogues – once the first impact is over and the memory of the beautiful towns in Khurāsān reduced to a marsh of blood had been overcome – linger on the political, institutional and economic-financial restructuring of the Asian territories under the Mongol military umbrella, shaping the ‘myth’ of what the European World would name as *Pax Mongolica*, all in all only a virtual ‘Pax’ punctuated by continuous rivalries and feud between Mongol groups and Khāns, which, despite all this, however witnessed the survival of local civilisations with their cultural, religious, scientific and artistic traditions. A phenomenon that was typical of the Central Asian regions and part of the Iranian world inhabited by tribes and peoples that had submitted or had been supporters and sympathisers of Chingiz and his sons, attitude that had spared them the fury of the conquerors and their ruthlessness. Thence, the literature in Persian on the period following the “Mongol Conquest” provides a vision quite diverging from the Arab one, and its information allows a detached picture of a new world articulated all along the ‘Silk and its Routes’, where the peaks reached by Knowledge, Sciences and Arts are minutely described. For a historical and literary outline of the Mongol period, still a masterly study is that by E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. II, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1956. See also V. Fiorani Piacentini: *Turchizzazione e Islamizzazione dell’Asia Centrale (VI-XVI secolo d. Cr.)*, Quaderno n. 33 of the Biblioteca della “Nuova Rivista Storica”, Dante Alighieri ed., Milano – Roma – Napoli – Città di Castello 1974, specie pp. 42-63 and herewith cited and commented literary sources. See also Vol. V of *The Cambridge History of Iran*, J.A. Boyle ed., *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1968. See also below.

turies to designate the whole of the Mongol people and the confederation organised by Chingiz Khān. In European contemporary sources, they are named as *Tartar-s*; in Persian they are *Tātār*, in Arabic and Chinese literary sources they are *Tatar*. According to an ancient myth, the Mongols were direct descendants of the wolf. It seems that, originally, the Mongols were “forest people” rather than nomadic people, inhabiting the Siberian and outer Mongolian forest fringes around lake Baikal, even though they are historically recorded as steppe conquerors moving swiftly on horseback, riding their little black horses typical of the steppe, still an appreciated race in Kirghizstan.

Chingiz Khān was born around the 1155 in a little Mongol clan, that of the Qiyat of the Borjighin, at the sources of the river Onon. Chingiz’ original name was Temüjin (‘the blacksmith’), his father was *Khān* of the Meng-wu. At that time, between Mongols and Tatars there was a fierce rivalry since the formers considered the Tatars traitors and cause of the decay of their first empire. Temüjin’s seizure of power took place through ferocious disputes and fights amongst tribes and clans; his prominence was due to the patronage of the chief of the Kerait (a Christian Nestorian tribe), Toghril or Ong Khān (the Priest John of Marco Polo). Gradually, Temüjin succeeded in having the upper hand on his enemies: the Merkit (who, harshly defeated, found shelter in the Uygurs’ territory, but only to be crushed by Chingiz’ troops in 1216), the Tatars (subdued in 1202) and lastly the Nayman (whose army was massacred and the few ones who survived found refuge in Southern Semirechye, where they gave life to an empire of their own). Some later, Chingiz quarrelled with Ong Khān and defeated him in a battle, getting the supreme command of his people, too. At this point, Temüjin was absolute sovereign on the entire Mongolian territory. In the 1206, at an assembly (*quriltay*) of Mongol chiefs held at the sources of the Onon, he was proclaimed “Great Khān” of the Mongol people with the name of Chingiz Khān, that is “Supreme Commander”, westernised as Gengis Khān.

Son of the steppe and its culture, Temüjin was firmly persuaded of a ‘divine’ mission. Farsighted and extremely lucid, faithful in allegiance and loyal to the Great *Yasa* (the Law of the Steppe),¹⁰ he was

¹⁰ The Great *Yasa* was the code of the steppe, whose rules orally transmitted were at the base of the Mongol consuetudinary law. The Great *Yasa* was also the ‘ethic’

about fifty years old when embarked with his four sons on the military campaigns that would bring him to conquer and rule on a great part of the world of his time. Then, conscious of the “mission” that the Mongol chiefs had voted when he was proclaimed “Great Khān” of the Mongol people, Chingiz set to accomplish his task.

First he turned against the Merkit that had taken refuge in the Uygur lands; the lords of the place (the Uygur *iduqut* and the Muslim Qarluq Governor of the region) submitted and, turning their back to the Qara-Qıtay *gürkhān*, made oath of loyalty under him. Then, disorders at the border with China induced Chingiz to move eastwards with the bulk of his army against the Chin dynasty. The Tungus of the Kansu and Ordos regions of north-western China were bent; in 1213 Chingiz invaded China proper, and sacked Beijing in 1215, undermining the position of the Chinese emperors. The invasion of Semirechye in northern Turkestan brought Chingiz’ territories to have a common frontier with the territories of the Islamic reign of the Khwārizm-Shāhs, with whom he had had peaceful trading contacts. The *casus belli* of his westwards and southern thrust was the Uṭrār incident, 1218-1219 AD, when Chingiz’ envoys and a Muslim caravan of 500 camels and 450 merchants accompanying them, and carrying silks and other precious goods from China to the rich markets of Khurāsān, were massacred by the Governor of the frontier Province of Khwārizm. The *Khwārizm-shāh*, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad, denied any implication, boldly refused to pay the “blood price” and gave order to put to death the Mongol Ambassadors sent by Chingiz Khān to settle the affair. Chingiz’ fury was merciless, as merciless was his retaliation. At the end of the same year, the Semirechye was under Mongol suzerainty almost without shedding blood, since the local rulers hurried to subdue to the Mongol Great Khān. Thence, the Mongol hordes and their allies – well-organised and personally commanded by Chingiz and his four sons – attacked the Khwārizm and started the conquest of the Muslim world: Transoxiana, Bukhara, Khiva and Samarqand (1220), Balkh (1221), Khurāsān and Marv, Afghanistan, Crimea and Southern Russia, Iranian

code of the virtues of the Mongol, essentially ‘military’ qualities, such as courage, discipline, subordination, and obedience to the superior officers carried to the highest degree. Failure, disobedience or incapacity was punished not only by the death of the offender himself, but also of his wife and children.

territories and Mesopotamia up to the Mediterranean basin were conquered, ravaged and subdued. Eastern European lands followed and were laid waste by the Mongol hordes, that reached the Adriatic sea.

The death of the Great Khān in 624 AH/1227 AD brought the Mongol invasions to a standstill; the Mongol chiefs and Chingiz' sons retreated with large part of their troops to Qara-qorum for the great *quriltay* that would proclaim the successor.

It was custom of the Mongol chiefs to distribute vast portions of the conquered territories between members of their families, and this is what Chingiz, too, had done before his death. He allotted to each of his four elder sons a stretch of pasture-ground for himself, his followers and heirs (*injü* - that is what his horses could conquer).¹¹

The eldest, Jochi, died just before his father, but his inheritance was passed on to his own son, Batu. Jochi's allocation had been of western Siberia and the Qīpchaq steppe, extending into southern Russia and including Khwārizm, which had always been linked culturally and commercially with the lower Volga. Batu founded the Blue Horde in South Russia, nucleus of the later Golden Horde. Another son founded the White Horde in western Siberia. These two groups would be united in the 14th Century. At a later date, various khanates will take form in Russia, Siberia and Turkestan, including those of Crimea (Astrakhan), Kazan, Bukhara and Khiva.

The second son, Chaghatai, was given the lands stretching eastwards from Transoxiana to Eastern or Chinese Turkestan. The western branch of Chaghatai's descendants in Transoxiana soon came within the Islamic sphere of influence, but would be overthrown by Tamerlane. The eastern descendants of Chaghatai would be more

¹¹ The great empire conquered by Chingiz Khān, was unified and structured by the Great Khān as a form of nomadic feudal-pastoralism. The supreme sovereign was the *Great Khān*. On the territory that he had allotted to each son or member of the family (*injü*), ruled a *Khān*, who reigned on a given number of nomadic hordes (*ulus*). Each *ulus* was headed by a prince, vassal to the Khān and holder of land by feudal tenure on condition of homage and allegiance (*yurt*). Each vassal had in his turn, a certain number of subordinated vassals called *noyan*, who nomadized in their territories. The boundaries of these territories were not defined, insofar they were defined by individual conquests ("what their horses could conquer"). All in all, the empire was a compact and rigorously-structured military organisation, which followed the rules of the Great *Yasa* (see above previous note (10)).

resistant to Islam. However, they eventually helped to spread Islam in Chinese Turkestan.

The third son, Ögedei, was chosen by a *quriltay* of Mongol chiefs to succeed his father as Great Khān, but within two generations the Supreme Khanate would fall into the hands of the descendants of Tolui, the youngest son, although Ögedei's grandson, Qaidu, retained his territories in Pamir and T'ien Shan fighting against the Chaghataids and the Great Khān until his death in 1301.

The youngest son, Tolui, received the heartland of the Mongol empire, Mongolia itself. His sons Möngke and Qubilai followed Ögedei's line as Great Khāns, but only Möngke retained Qara-qorum in Mongolia as his capital. Their possessions included the Chinese conquests, where the Mongols became known as the Yüan dynasty and reigned till the second half of the 14th Century.

At this point, the cultural and religious attraction of the Chinese civilisation proved strong for the Great Khāns in Beijing; they became Buddhists, and their adhesion to Buddhism gradually opened a breach with the Mongol subordinate Khāns in western Asia and Russia, who were to adopt Islam, essentially for political reasons and not without resistance and rebellions from their own subordinates.

3.2 Balances of an Age Punctuated by Fierce Warfare but also Vivacious Interchanges of Knowledge and Arts

As said above, son of the steppe and its culture, Temüjin was firmly persuaded of a 'divine' mission. However, a re-reading of the information provided by the available literary sources on his conquests and following period allows to affirm that the Mongol invasion – then – was not inspired by any religious vision and impetus. Conversely and de facto, it strengthened the non-Muslim communities, that considered these new lords as defenders and protectors. Chingiz Khān and his son and successor Ögedei were shamanists, who had no desire to be converted to any other religion, though both were very interested to other religious creeds. Chingiz in particular was in the habit of making enquires and get any kind of information, either directly or indirectly, of other civilisations and other people, religious groups, their cults, habits and traditions. At that time, Nestorian Christianity was widespread in Inner and Central Asia, the religious apparatus was well-structured, monasteries and churches had always been respected, as

respected were also the Buddhists, the Jews and other minor religious communities like the Zoroastrians. Among the Turco-Mongol tribes that took part to the Mongol seizure of power, were also the Merkit, the Kerait and the Nayman (most of them largely adherent to the Christian Nestorian creed). The Uygurs, too, were for the most part Christianised, and they even gave life to a Christian kingdom, excellent shelter for Chingiz' enemies, and, at the time, well-known for the fanaticism and intolerance of its ruler.¹²

With regard to the decades following Ögedei's Great Khanate, we may note some significant situations. Güyük, Great Khan from 1246 to 1249, had had strong leanings towards Christianity, even if he remained a shamanist. Möngke (1251-60) seems to have himself been rather indifferent to join any religious creed, although he was always interested to be surrounded by exponents of the major religious cults of the Mongol empire, and always received with honours the envoys from other countries and the European Christianity. It was with Qubilai (1260-1294) that the situation evolved all over the empire: as soon as he embraced the Buddhist faith, shamanism lost its 'official' position and role at court and amongst the Mongol people. With Hülegü Khān (1256-1265) and the Īl-Khānids (descendants of Hülegü) a new evolution took place in favour of Buddhism, to the point that rumours reported by chroniclers stated that Hülegü himself was Buddhist, though he never officially professed this faith. Nestorian Christianity was also widespread, in particular amongst the women of the Īl-Khāns' family. Möngke's mother, several of his wives and Hülegü's wife, the

¹² A. Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols", in Vol. V of *The Cambridge History of Iran* cit., pp. 538-549. See also C. Alzati and L. Vaccaro eds., *Dal Mediterraneo al Mar della Cina. L'irradiazione della tradizione cristiana di Antiochia nel continente asiatico e nel suo universo religioso*. Vol. 2 of the series *Storia Religiosa Euro-Mediterranea*, Fondazione Ambrosiana Paolo VI – Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015. A particularly significant voice of the Nestorian Christianity is the history of two Christian Mongol monks, Mar Yabballaha and Rabban Sauma; the latter in the 1287-1288 headed a diplomatic mission by Argun Khān to the European courts with a younger monk of his own fraternity, who later became Patriarch of the Oriental Church with the name of Yabballaha III. The manuscript of the chronicle is in Syriac, and provides a lively inside picture of the general religious and political situation during the second half of the 13th Century. See P. G. Borbone ed., *Storia di Mar Yabballaha e di Rabban Sauma. Cronaca siriana del XIV secolo*, Lulu Press, Moncalieri – Torino, 2009. See also below *à propos* of the Great Khanate of Möngke and the Īl-Khānid prince Hülegü Khān.

Doguz Khatun – the niece of the Kerait ruler Ong Khān – were all Christians, including Abaqa’s wife Maria, known as *Despoina Khatun*, illegitimate daughter of the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII. These women often had their children baptised, and at least two Īl-Khāns, Tegüder and Öljeitü, were Christians in their childhood. At the time, more than one Mongol dignitary and military commander was Christian.

With regard to the Jews, their position was considerably strengthened, especially where individual Jews could obtain court appointments, which was habitual in particular as physicians, astrologers and astronomers or even officers appointed to some financial or bureaucratic position. An important figure was Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍlallāh Hamadānī (1247-1318), a physician and an important historian of the Ghazan period, who wrote an important universal history, the *Jāmi‘ al-tawārīkh* or *Compendium of Histories*, and a *Tā’rīkh-i Farāngīhān* or *History of the Franks*, both following the annals-writing, and a *Mukatabat* or *Correspondence*. This latter is an informative collection of letters between Rashīd al-Dīn and his sons and representatives posted all along the main stages of the trade routes of the time, which provides a wonderful picture of the interchanges and the general cultural and intellectual milieu. Great patron of arts and sciences, with his enormous fortune Rashīd al-Dīn organised a great “University” – or *Dānesh-gāh*, Centre of Knowledge – at Tabriz, famed for its “Faculties” – or *Dānesh-kādeh* – specialised in scientific learning, teaching and research (mathematics, astronomy, surgery, pharmacology, history and philosophy...), and its Library, where converged scholars from all corners of the world of the time.¹³

¹³ Although the Mongol conquests inevitably had an appalling effect, Persian historiography reached an unparalleled apogee. Indeed the principal historical works on the Mongol period are in Persian and are amongst the finest produced in the Islamic panorama of the time. Chronicles, universal histories following the annals-writing, travelogues or biographies, these works are mostly based on the writers’ personal experience as dignitaries of the bureaucratic apparatus or court officials to one or the other Mongol or Turkish personality of the time. As such, these personages had direct access to relevant documents and witnessed at first hands the events they describe. This historical production does not indulge in eulogies, but depicts facts and events with a detached style. Parallel to their quality, can be considered the Arab Ibn al-Athīr’s *Al-Kāmil fī al-tā’rīkh*: detached from the events he records, this historian provides a lucid and rational analysis of the facts, their causes and effects, and the logic of developments. Rashīd al-

All in all, beyond wars and swift military operations, the rich literature of the time – when carefully sifted – allows to perceive another dimension of this epoch, an epoch of large immense spaces virtually without frontiers, an epoch that was pervaded by a lively curiosity in other contemporary cultures and in all fields of knowledge, an epoch that tried to amalgamate itself by creating new links between the civil and political society on the one hand, and the new feudal-pastoral *and* military dimension of the ruling cast, on the other. New forms and structures that were rapidly evolving in search of some balance between scientific and technological development and preservation of ancient traditions, which might also make possible forms of social and economic justice, the so called ‘divine mission’ of Chingiz Khān and several members and successors of his family.

The Persian and Arabic historians minutely record the eastwards and westwards movements of the Mongol nomadic feudal princes with their hordes, marching through the steppe or regions still inhabited by submitted settled people with their civilisation. These Mongol princes made nuisances to the local authorities, but, with their curiosity and religious tolerance, they also contributed to create a racially and religious mixed milieu. In the wake of the Mongol army travelled also astrologers and astronomers, merchants, officials in charge of bureaucratic affairs at the imperial court or as interpreters, engineers, physicians and surgeons, and others. A mixed Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Indian, Chinese, Greek (or *Rumi*), Arab, Georgian and Arminian population, that often entailed changes of allegiance and faith.

Dīn Faḡlallāh Hamadānī, an exceptionally cultivated man, was originally a physician and later became vizier of Ghazan and, later, Öljeitü, a position he continued to hold until the reign of Abū Sa‘īd, when he was accused of poisoning the latter’s father, Öljeitü, and executed. Not even the insults heaped upon his corpse could satisfy the hatred felt for him. In 1399 his remains were exhumed and re-buried in a Jewish cemetery. Himself a bureaucrat from the middle class and supporter of the centralising policies of the Īl-Khāns, he opposed the particularistic tendencies of feudalism, thus touching the Mongolian nomadic aristocracy and its interests (see above note (11)). His fame goes to the University he organised at Tabriz and its wonderful Library of 60.000 volumes. Another outstanding Persian representative of this historiography was ‘Aṭā’ Malik Juvaynī: personal secretary of the Īl-Khān, he used to follow him in all his military campaigns; he is author of an often quoted *Tā’rīkh-i Jihān-gushā’* or History of the World-Conqueror. This age has also witnessed a special florescence of philosophical doctrines and religious studies. See also below.

Then, the fluid frontiers of the second generation of the great Mongol empire encouraged – with the reorganisation of the network of roads-communications – also trades and interchanges of cultural elements (intellectual, scientific and artistic as well). And with these latter, they also encouraged the circulation of philosophical and religious issues, with interesting syncretism and repercussions on the visual arts of the time, in a common world-view among the Central Asian people and tribal groups, a sort of theological vision of human history as progressing from the Day of Creation to the Vanquishing of the Prince of Evil, the Resurrection and the Last Judgment, when human history would end, and God or the Principle of the Creation would remain in triumphant isolation as he was before the Creation. Similar were also some ethical standards, like the consciousness of the precariousness and mutability of human existence, and the ideals of pursuing justice in earthly affairs.

This same literature informs about the Mongol interest for urban life and its patterns. Warfare and movements across the frontiers naturally involved contacts with, or the capture of towns. And here, the town's issue deserves some attention. I have just pointed out about Chingiz' and Ögedei's curiosity of different civilisations and their costumes and models of life. Urban and settled life was well known to the Mongols due to their trades with neighbouring settled people and their empires or kingdoms. The Chinese were prized for their achievements as technicians and craftsmen. As well, irrigation practices and hydraulic constructions (like dams, cisterns or *birkas*, the *qanat* irrigation system, wind-towers, and so on), land utilisation, and the organisation of large spaces along the great rivers were considered as “hydrological phenomena”, the essential continuity of “Iranian” practices there from pre-Christian to Islamic times (for example, the river basins of the Oxus, Zarafshān and Jaxartes with such oases as those of Khurāsān, Marv, Bukhara, Samarqand, the Khwārizm and large territories of Semirechye, or China itself much coveted by Chingiz Khān and Qubilai, and so on). In Central Asia and Iran, most of the great towns had surrendered, thus sparing their people and the surrounding environment the horrors preceding and following a military conquest. This had allowed the survival (or re-development) of urban life with its traditional patterns of life and social classes: the Merchants, the Bureaucrats (“Men of Pen”), the Peasants and Landowners, the Artists and Scientists. This attitude had also allowed the survival of urban life

with its artistic and architectural skill and craftsmanship in stone and/or baked-bricks. Moreover, the sharing of common world-views and theological visions inspired by religious creeds had shaped new images and concepts of life, man and mankind, man and universe, history and 'its' philosophy, which brought to further investigate and know about the great monotheistic creeds and others...and to 'preserve' this knowledge with its ancient wisdom.

And within this prospect, the spheres of artistic, scientific and technical ventures were perfectly possible, as perfectly possible were trades and, through the exchanging of goods from one region to another, were also perfectly possible cultural and artistic contacts and interchanges along the routes and sub-routes of the Silk – the dominant item of the time – and other precious goods in demand on the Eastern and Western markets. *The Silk, then, and its Routes*, which did represent a perfectly possible cultural paradigm for an Age that had entered a brisk transitional phase.

3.3 *The Īl-Khānate and the Closing of the Mongol Age*

Against this backdrop, there remains to spend a few words on the Īl-Khānate. The Īl-Khāns appeared on the stage in the second half of the thirteenth century. Their dominion represents the turning point of an age, marked by some crucial events that took place on their territory and under their rule: (a) the destruction of the heretic sect of the Ismā'īlīs and their religious and political-economic power (1256); (b) the end of the Abbasid Caliphate (1258); (c) the 'official-political conversion' of the Mongols to Islam under Ghazan Khān (1295-1304), just when an alliance with the European Christianity seemed to be looming; (d) the sealing of the relationships between the Asian Orient and the Asian Occident through the understandings and allegiance between the two Mongol branches of China and Iran (second half of the 13th Century).¹⁴

¹⁴ J.A. Boyle, "Dynastic and Political History of the Īl-Khāns", in vol. 5 of the *Cambridge History of Iran* cit., pp. 303-421. M.G.S. Hodgson, "The Ismā'īlī State", in vol. 5 of the *The Cambridge History of Iran* cit., pp. 422-481; I.P. Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran under the Īl-Khāns", in vol. 5 of *The Cambridge History of Iran* cit., pp.483-537. See also there given primary sources and literature.

In the 1252, Hülegü had been entrusted by the Great Khān Möngke with the task of recovering and consolidating the Mongol conquests in western Asia, since after Chingiz' death large territories of the Islamic world south of the Oxus river had slipped from the Mongols' hands. At the same time, he had been entrusted to exterminate once and for all the Ismaili sect. In the European world, the Ismā'īlīs were well-known since the Crusades' times, and were commonly called "Assassins" for the use they made of hashish drugs. When Hülegü Khān moved westwards from Qara-qorum, he came via Khurāsān and Quhistān. In this latter region, the Ismā'īlīs were all-powerful and, from their impregnable castles all along the main caravan routes of the time, they exercised a de facto power over these eastern Iranian regions.¹⁵ Hülegü Khān moved towards Tūn and Qā'in, where nestled two Ismaili fortresses; he prevailed over the Ismā'īlī resistance, some castles were taken by force others surrendered. The road was now open to Shiraz and Isfahan. The end of the sect came in November 1256, when the Great Master, Rukn al-Dīn, gave himself up to the Mongols; his castle so long impregnable, al-Alamūt also called the Eagle's Nest, a stronghold dominating the northern route from Rages to Qazvin and thence to Tabriz, was taken, pillaged its wonderful library, and burnt. Today, only a few rubbles on the top of a steep mountain are visible, stern monito to the traveller about the frailty of human power and how one of the most powerful religious-political dominions of the time could swiftly be annihilated. The extirpation of the Ismā'īlī sect won for Hülegü Khān the applause of the orthodox Muslims, but what followed came as a shock to all the Muslim world, that is the conquest of Baghdad and the end of the Caliphate. Soon after the take up of Alamūt and the surrender of the Great Master, Hülegü Khān's headquarters were set at Hamadan. In November 1256 – reordered the conquered lands and reorganised his Army – the Mongol Khan took again the field and advanced directly upon Baghdad. He was accompanied by several Muslim princes, by poets and writers, by his personal secretary 'Aṭā' Malik Juvaynī¹⁶ and Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī (reputed theologian and his per-

¹⁵ See V. Fiorani Piacentini: "Vie carovaniere e processi di popolamento del Khorāsān orientale: il Quhestān "Regione dei Monti", in *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, ns XXIX (1979), 4, pp. 563-605 + 21 plates, and herewith cited literary sources on the Mongol and Ismaili period.

¹⁶ See also above note (13).

sonal astronomer and astrologer), plus surgeons, physicians and Chinese engineers. He twice routed the caliphal armies in Iraq (at Tikrit and Irbil), for several days encircled Baghdad, the splendid metropolis of the Abbasid Caliphate, while the panic-stricken inhabitants of the surrounding villages fled to seek refuge in the town. At last, the Chinese engineers succeeded in flooding the Muslim camp, and this final action materially brought to the defeat of the Caliph's army, greatly aggravating the ensuing slaughter of the fugitives. The siege went on for about one month, Hülegü Khān was hesitant about the destiny to both Baghdad and the Caliph. At last he took the final decision of storming the political and spiritual centre of the Islamic world. Baghdad was captured on February 13, 1258. The Caliph, al-Musta'şim, gave himself up with two of his sons to the Mongol Khān, hoping to spare the town a worse destiny. Arab sources are merciless when they describe the horrors that followed the capture of Baghdad. The sack began the same day and lasted for a week, during which 800.000 of the inhabitants were put to death, the town was heavily looted and destroyed. Then, following the advice of his *sbīrī* counsellor and astronomer Ṭūsī, Hülegü Khān sentenced to death the Caliph, executed according to the Mongol costume of not shedding royal blood.¹⁷

To the Christian world it seemed that times were now ripe for a political and military alliance against Islam and the sons of Agar. But this is not what really happened.

Hülegü Khān advanced into Syria, Christian contingents (Georgian and Arminian) fought with the Mongol army under the command of the Christian general Ket-Buqa. The Mongols found a fierce resistance organised by the Mamlūks of Egypt. The decisive battle took place at 'Ayn Jalūt in Palestine on the 3rd September 1260. The armies collided, the Mongols were overwhelmed by the superior number of their opponents and were halted, the greater part of the Mongol army retreated beyond the Euphrates.¹⁸

Hülegü Khān now became ruler on behalf of the Great Khān of

¹⁷ Particularly telling are the accounts by Juvaynī (who wrote the *Fath-nāmah* – or Victory Bulletin – for Hülegü, and tells in detail about his hesitation to attack Baghdad and, then, to put to death the Caliph), and Rashīd al-Dīn's chronicles. Both writers obviously eulogise their Mongol *signeur*, but, in their brisk and detailed chronicles, they never hesitate to report also his inhumane and unjust acts against fugitives and prisoners.

¹⁸ The personality and heroism of Ket-Buqa is described by Rashīd al-Dīn in an epical language reminiscent of the native saga (*The Secret History of the Mongols*).

all the regions of Persia, Iraq, Caucasus and Anatolia, and assumed the title of *Īl-Khān*, that is subject or subordinate of the Great Khān. The *Īl-Khānid* kingdom was now definitely constituted, but it was surrounded by great enemies, included the Mamlūks, that, for the first time in the course of Mongol history, had destroyed the popular belief of their invincibility.

Hülegü died on the 8th February, 1265; he was in his 49th year. The achievements of this Mongol Prince must be valued in a broader context, in association with his cousin Batu, founder of the Golden Horde, and his brother Qubilai, founder of the Yüan dynasty in China. Having destroyed both the Abbasid Caliphate and its Ismaili opponents, he extended the Mongol conquests to the shores of the Mediterranean and left to his successors a dominion (nominally subjected to the Great Khān) over a territory corresponding to the greater part of present Middle East and a “great” Iran. Moreover, its rulers – given the friendly relationships with the Yüan dynasty on the one hand, and the European Christian courts on the other – entered into direct contacts and diplomatic relations with monarchs and princes of both the Occident and the Orient, paving the way to a new cultural ‘global’ and ‘globalised’ era.

3.4 A Curiosity to Know and Understand. The Silk and its Routes: a Paradigm Beyond Time and Space

All in all, despite much warfare and internal stress, the *Īl-Khānid* period was a prosperous one. With the ‘political’ conversion to Islam of

Whilst the greater part of the Mongol forces withdrew, he refused to follow them. In a last message to his master, he declares: “Let not the Khān be distressed with the loss of a single Mongol army. Let him imagine that during one year, the wives of his soldiers did not conceive and the mares in their herds did not foal”. Surrounded by enemies, he fought on until his horse stumbled and he was taken prisoner. The exchange of insults with his captor (the commander in chief of the Mamlūk army, Baybars al-Bunduqdārī) is in true Homeric style; in his last words, before his head is cut down, he contrasts his own faithful service to his Khān with the Mamlūk’s rise to power by treachery and the assassination of his own sultan. Ket-Buqa refers to the seizure of power by Baybars – 1260-1277, who, having valiantly opposed the Mongols, just before ‘Ayn Jalūt while he was received with honours and embraced by his Sultan Qutuz – 1259-1260, stabbed him in the back. Be that as it may, Baybars consolidated the victory of ‘Ayn Jalūt and set the Mamlūk regime on its feet for several years, although the threat from the Mongols continued for several decades.

Ghazan (1295-1304),¹⁹ a reconciliatory process began between the Mongol-Turkish ruling class and their subjects. Under the military umbrella of the Mongol ruling class, the Silk Route could be revitalised along new roads, that took advantage from the allegiances between the various Family members. As just said above, the fluidity of the frontiers created a 'global' and 'globalised' space, where elements of culture, goods and pilgrims could easily move provided they had with them the requested *berat* (a written pass) by the local Khan. In other words, this age mirrors the reshaping of a multi-ethnic civil and political society within a new global space.

The Īl-Khānid capitals of Tabriz and Marāgheh in Azerbaijan became great centres of learning, where historical and philosophical writing, the natural sciences, and mathematics (algebra and the cubic equation, trigonometric techniques, spherical astronomy, mathematical geography) were especially favoured.²⁰ By the 1307, Öljeitü planned a

¹⁹ About the conversion of Ghazan to Islam, there is a rich and controversial literature in both 'oriental' and 'occidental' languages. Undoubtedly, the "conversion" was a political initiative, and it had to be enforced by the Khān on the Mongol feudality that, more than once, revolted and re-embraced Shamanism. Though diplomatic exchanges were by now peaceful and intense with the Christian courts of Europe, these latter were however reluctant to come to any military agreement or allegiance with the Mongols in the Near-Middle East, where the Crusades' era was on its waning, the Reconquista was headed by non-Arab peoples and the power of the Egyptians was proving to be strong and compact not only against the Mongols but also against the Christianity of Great Syria (Arabs, Armenians and Georgians in particular). Moreover, both the Serenissima and the Republic of Genova were carrying out a 'competitive' commercial policy in this same quadrant; keeping a watching eye on Byzantium, they were more inclined to diplomatic intercourses and concerned with their interest and colonies than to an alliance with the Mongols. With regard to Rome, the Pope was principally concerned with internal disputes, theological aspects and the difficulty to find any dogmatic understanding with the Nestorian Church of the East. Delegations from Rome insisted on the "Mongol Conversion" to the Catholic creed of Rome and in recognising the unicity of the Pope's power and the Roman Church, which had already been drastically refused by Möngke (1251-1260). Thence, it seems possible that the major factor of the forced Mongol Islamisation was Qubilai's adhesion to Buddhism in the East, on the one hand, and the Mongol 'isolation' in the West vis-à-vis the mounting Islamic politico-military force in the Levant and the European coldness, on the other. Amongst the many valuable studies, specifically interesting for its eschatological content, and exhaustive documentation, is the study by Davide Bigalli, *I Tartari e l'Apocalisse*, La Nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze 1971.

²⁰ E.S. Kennedy, "The Exact Sciences in Iran under the Saljuqs and Mongols", in vol. 5 of *The Cambridge History of Iran*, cit., pp. 681-710.

new capital at Sultāniyyah, near Qazvin; artists and architects were encouraged and a distinctive style of Mongol-Īl-Khānid architecture and architectural forms emerged.

To conclude, it follows that it would be a mistake to dwell only on the military aspect of the Mongol conquests and their empire. The new roads of the Silk gave life to commercial, cultural, scientific and artistic interchanges between the great civilisations of the time, from the European Christian courts, Russia and Eastern European territories to Mesopotamia, from the Iranian civilisation that still included vast regions of Inner Asia to Central Asia, from Mongolia – heartland of the Mongol empire – to China. The Muslims from the western heartland were encouraged to travel; they had a certain amount of scientific curiosity, not so much in the pursuit of new advances in sciences and technology as in the recovery of the wisdom and knowledge of peoples or personages famed for their familiarity with different ancient traditions. A curiosity to know, to understand their experience and their philosophical approach to Life, Man and Universe. Peaceful intercourses and diplomatic relations built a new network of knowledge and a culture on an equal footing with the East. Centres of cultural and artistic life were created. Astrology and astronomy, botany, medicine and surgery, philosophy and history, mathematical sciences became the main issues of these “centres for scientific activity”, encouraging at the same time the work of translating Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Indian, Tibetan and Chinese texts. Libraries and “Universities” in Baghdad, Tabriz and Kashan, Nishapur, Turfan, Bukhara, Samarqand, Marv ...and elsewhere preserved the ancient wisdom and its knowledge. With this latter, they preserved the history of the ancient people, and, with it, the prescriptions of the revealed religions. Thence, they distributed this knowledge amongst scholars and savants of the age converging from every corner of the Mongol empire...and to the people in general, giving life to a an unparalleled criss-cross mimesis.

This was the great paradigm of the Silk Route of the Mongol Age. This was also – beyond fierce warfare – the indisputable achievement of the so called *Pax Mongolica* of the 13th – first half of the 14th Century.²¹

²¹ The story of this period has been touched upon very sketchily here. It can be broadened under more than one respect and through a deeper sifting of the vast literature of the time. Returning to a small detail, particularly significant is the study of the

4. *TĪMŪR-I LĀNK, THE TAMERLANE OF THE WESTERN WORLD, AND THE TĪMŪRIDS*

The rise to power of Temüjin signed in Central/Inner Asia the last years of vigorous vitality of the Christian Nestorian faith, thanks to the favour of Chingiz' wife, Elayna, and the backing of some Turkish/Turco-Mongol Christian tribes, like the Kerait, the Merkit and the Nayman. The break-down of the Mongol empire and the religious line followed by Qubilai signed the waning of Nestorian Christianity and – a mere coincidence – the rise of another strong personality, who, with his conquests, gave life to a new empire of the steppes that stretched across Asia, from Central Asia to Eastern Asia, from Iran to Mesopotamia: Tīmūr, also called *Tīmūr-i Lānk*, that is Tīmūr the Lame, commonly called Tamerlane in the western world (1336-1405).²²

Tīmūr was Turkish from the Turkish tribe of the Barlas. However, on his mother side Tīmūr's family claimed descent from Chingiz Khān. His father was governor of Kish – present Shahr-i Sabz or the Green

diplomatic missions which passed between the European courts, Constantinople, Baghdad, Tabriz, Shiraz and Isfahan, up to Qara-qorum and the Mongol court in China. These, were usually accompanied by rich exchanges of presents, manuscripts, objects d'art, scientific instruments, silks, brocaded silks, velvets and others. Rich inter-courses, peaceful as well as martial, between great civilisations, when, despite deep religious differences, the various sides respected each other and the values of each other's achievements. This could not have been possible without the Mongol religious tolerance and their curiosity to know and to learn.

²² Tīmūr, or also Tamur, in Turkish means "strength". Following a wound to a foot, that made him limping, Tīmūr was called *Tamur-lāng*, thence our Tamerlane. Literature in Arabic and Persian is not unanimous about the event that made him unable. Some chroniclers report that the nickname of *lāng* was due to a wound he received while raiding some sheep. Others state that he was wounded while valiantly fighting against some enemies of his clan. Be that as it may, the designation of "lame" persisted. About the Tamerlane there is a rich literature in 'Western' And 'Eastern' languages. The target of this paper is not to enter any specific issue and the lively debates about life and deeds of the Tamerlane and his successors. For an overall, precise and well documented picture of the personality and culture of the Tamerlane, military campaigns, administration of the empire, contacts with Europe, economic and political affairs, religious tolerance see vol. 6 of *The Cambridge History of Iran*: P. Jackson and L. Lockhart eds., *The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, Cambridge – London - New York - New Rochelle – Melbourne - Sydney 1986, and the herewith exhaustive bibliography and literary sources.

Town – south of Samarqand, in Transoxiana, at a time when political authority, though heavily weakened by internal feud, was still in the hands of the Mongols. Tīmūr used Transoxiana as the base and nucleus for the great steppe empire which he was dreaming to build up. His first campaigns were in Khwārizm and Khurāsān (1380), after which, he began the conquest of Persia: by the 1385 north-eastern Iran was subdued. During the following years (1386-87), Tamerlane moved southwards: Shiraz and Isfahan fell, and it seems that his army even touched the waters of the Persian Gulf near Hormuz (the “Curmos” of Marco Polo), besieged the town on the island, attacked and sacked the rich bazars and their storehouses on the mainland, coveting the conquest of this harbour town, one of the major outlets to the sea of the Silk Route of the time. Yet, despite the strength of Tīmūr’s army - well equipped, disciplined, with excellent fighting corps, archers and horsemen – his forces had no nautical experience, which fact prevented the conqueror from getting control over the seaboards. We are reported by contemporary chroniclers that the ruler (*mālik*) of Hormuz actually put on a strong resistance supported by the devotion of his fleet, the loyalty of his coastal garrisons and the supplies received from his Arab allies on the other side of the Strait, but at the end he bent his head, made oath of submission and paid tribute to the Tamerlane. Thus, the ruler and his *mulk* could maintain their independence, gained access to the rich markets of the hinterland and free transit along the new routes of the silk. On the other hand, Tamerlane and his successors with the submission of one of the wealthiest harbours and markets of their epoch had also access to the sea, and, when needed, they could also charter the Hormuzi fleet and its skilled sailors either for overseas trading activities and diplomatic purposes or for military aims, or for both. Then, the Muzaffarids of Fars were destroyed (1391-1393), the Jalāyrid Aḥmad ibn Uvais driven from Iraq (1393-1395), Georgia was also annexed.

However, Tīmūr’s northern frontier was an open one. His great rival in the steppes was Tokhtamīsh, Khān of the White Horde, who had united his wing of the Mongols with the Blue Horde, giving life to the Golden Horde and was thus supreme all over the Qipchaq steppe. Tīmūr invaded the Qipchaq in 1395, penetrating as far as Moscow and Astrakhan. But his main efforts were directed against the rich territories of the Islamic heartlands, where his campaigns had a devastating effect on both the main trading routes and the contemporary political systems. During the Indian campaign of 1398-9, Delhi was taken and

sacked, the local power heavily weakened, which facilitated the rise of independent sultanates, like Jawnpūr, Gujarat, Mālwa and Khāndesh. During the Indian campaign, revolts broke out in the west, where Tamerlane swiftly arrived with his army, and reconquered Baghdad and Syria (1401). His rage against the defectors was terrible. Thence, he promptly marched against the House of ʿUthman and defeated the Ottoman Sultan Bāyezīd I at Ankara in the 1402, occupied his capital city Bursa, taking prisoner the sultan himself. This victory gave the Genoese bases in Iran (Tabriz) and along the Black Sea a few years of respite; at the same time it also gave the Turkmen principalities of Anatolia a few more decades of life before their incorporation by the Ottoman sultans.²³

Tīmūr's death arrived just when he was organising a campaign against China in 1404-5.

Before his death, Tīmūr had divided his territories amongst his sons and grandsons. But, once the terror he had inspired when he was alive vanished, his successors sank to the status of local rulers, their territory and power limited to Transoxiana and Khurāsān. At first, there were two great potentates under Tīmūr's two sons: one in western Persia and Iraq, and the second under Shāh Rukh in Khurāsān and some later in Transoxiana, too.

By 1420, Shāh Rukh had taken over all Tīmūr's former territories in Persia and Iraq, and still held a nominal suzerainty over India and China. His great-nephew Abū Saʿīd (1451-1469) was, next to the Ottoman Mehmet the Conqueror, the most powerful monarch of his age. Samarqand, Bukhara, Khiva and Herat were resplendent magnificent towns along the new Silk Route of the time, centres of culture, where merchants and even European travellers and diplomats conveyed from all countries of the world. But Abū Saʿīd was not able to

²³ With regard to Tīmūr's campaigns, there is a vast and varied literature. For a general panorama, see H.R. Roemer in vol. 6 of *The Cambridge History of Iran* cit., pp. 48 ff. and 457-90. See also V. Piacentini Fiorani, "Tamerlano e la Islamizzazione dell'Asia Centrale", in C. Alzati and L. Vaccaro (eds.), *Dal Mediterraneo al Mar della Cina* cit., pp.327 ff. With regard to Hormuz and following intercourses, see V. Piacentini Fiorani, "Hormuz *Bandar* and *Mulk* (Port and Dominion): Eleventh to Early Sixteenth Century", in *The Ports of Oman*, Vol. 10 of the Series Al Salimi, A. and Staples, E. (eds.) *Studies on Ibadism and Oman*cit. specie pp. 333-355 and herewith cited literary sources.

prevent the Uzbeks from raiding and laying waste across the Oxus river; moreover, his campaign of 1468 to help the Turkmen sultan of the Qara Qoyunlu against the Sultan of the Aq Qoyunlu (Uzun Hasan), a campaign aimed at regaining the western territories lost on Shāh Rukh's death, ended up in a positive disaster. Ḥusayn Bayqara (1470-1506) was the last remarkable figure amongst the Tīmūrids. He ruled from Herat over all Khurāsān; it was at his court that the final florescence of Tīmūrid culture took place, with the poets Jāmī and 'Alī Shir Navā'ī, and the painter Behzad working there.

And to conclude, a few remarks. As just said above, Tīmūr was a Turk from the Turkish tribe of the Barlas. However, Tīmūr's family on his mother side claimed descent from Chingiz Khān. Yet, Tamerlane was the very son of the steppe and its culture. Generally prized for his personal courage, he had also received a good education and was himself fond of arts and sciences. Of strict Sunni Muslim faith, he is also recorded as highly superstitious, devoted to saints and holy men (*pīr*), not averse from shamanist cults. Well known for his cruelty and aggressiveness, Tīmūr was also famous for his rage and mercilessness towards his enemies and those who betrayed the agreed pacts or allegiance. Contemporary literary sources alternatively depict him either with the highest respect and admiration, or with the highest disgust and aversion stigmatising all his *operatus*. Be that as it may, beyond the man and his deeds, two facts are indisputable: 1) the Tīmūrid age is commonly considered as the "golden age" of Central Asia for the artistic and scientific splendour of its courts; 2) the same period signs the beginning of the Islamisation of Inner and Central Asia.

But not only this. Beyond Tamerlane's conquests it is also possible to perceive a line of lucid and farsighted ratio.²⁴

Whereas Tīmūr's lifetime had largely been taken up with warfare and conquests, the Tīmūrids of the 15th Century are represented by western literature, too, as the last great dynasty of steppe origin that achieved unrivalled peaks of cultural grandeur. Whether on the one hand this cannot be disclaimed and evidences confirm it, on the other an accurate sifting of contemporary sources in Persian and Arabic pro-

²⁴ V. Fiorani Piacentini, *Turchizzazione e Islamizzazione dell'Asia Centrale* cit., pp. 63-71 and footnotes with citations from contemporary sources; Idem, "Tamerlano...." cit., specie pp. 329 ff.

vides a new clue to the re-reading and understanding of the target that could have been behind Tīmūr's policy, his military action and his 'only apparently' disordered campaigns. Then, also the political line of his sons and successors can be read through a different lens as the completion and accomplishment of their ancestor's dream; and this latter can be envisaged as the aspiration of the son of the steppe to re-draw the ancient pathways of the Silk and its routes, and that of making the eastern-central Islamic world a splendid cultural unity, where converged the new twisting Routes of the Silk, a world whose achievements had to be outstanding in every field, from the fields of Persian and Chaghatai Turkish literature to architecture, from painting and books production to mathematical and astronomical interests and knowledge. The core of this dominion had always been Samarqand, the beloved jewel of Tīmūr's life, where he had deported artists, craftsmen and mastercrafts, poets, historians, scientists and philosophers from all corners of the world he had conquered. Samarqand and its quarters and urban organisation, that mirrored the most resplendent regions of the world of the time and also had their names; Samarqand and its surrounding environment, where all trades and cultural routes converged; Samarqand, where Tamerlane's last wish was to be buried under the resplendent dome of a majestic mausoleum still standing there and dominating Tīmūr's very town and city. Bukhara, Khiva, Kish, Herat were the resplendent gems of a new crown.

5. *THE SILK ROUTE: ONLY A PARADIGM? REFLECTION ON PAINTING AND ARCHITECTONIC FORMS IN MIDDLE-INNER ASIA*

Mongols and Tīmūrids raced with their hordes and their allied tribal groups the Euro-Asian lands from Middle Europe, Egypt, Mesopotamia up to the north-eastern corner of Asia, shattered previous civilisations, imposed a new dominion and a new political-military order; with their military superiority, on the point of their spears they also brought the codes and the ancient traditional knowledge of the nomadic world, and with it the Turco-Mongolian nomadic tradition. But, as just said above, this did not imply, under their rule, the erasing of any urban tradition; this did survive, and flourished, too, though within new political equilibriums and intellectual revivals.

Be that as it may, it would be misleading to watch at this epochal

phase only as a phase of devastation and horrors. With their codes, Mongols and Tīmūrids brought with them the Chinese algebraic and scientific knowledge, and fused it with Mesopotamian mathematical and medical sciences reaching innovative peaks of medical and pharmacological experience; at the same time, they developed astronomical, arithmetical, numerical, geometric, algebraic theoretical and practical knowledge into one of the greatest system of their times. They brought with them from vital centres of religious scholarship and life a large number of theologians, “holy men” (*pīrs*), traditionalists and legal religious scholars with their individual religious features and systems. Shamanism, Buddhism, Muslim forms, Nestorian Christianity and other cults fervently practised in the mobile world of the steppe gave life to an important phase of religious culture and multifarious practices largely imbued with mystic feelings and traditional emotional fervour. They also brought with them from the remotest corners of Europe and Asia craftsmen, artists, painters, architects, who merged the different ideological and artistic forms into one of the most impressive synthesis; images of the Cosmos and its harmonious order predominated, where Nature and Human Beings fade as little players at its centre. Skilled interpreters of the new Age and its political-institutional organisation, they were also the skilled paraphrasers of the paradigm of a new, mobile world without spaces and without time.

Then the Silk Route: only a paradigm? Actually, and once again, within the global space created by the military conquests of the new Lords, the Silk Route – or more precisely, *the Silk and its Routes* – reorganised and revitalised trades and business, motivated new diplomatic connections, whilst matrimonial allegiances, reinforced by a vigorous traditional chancery and official correspondence, tightly linked Asia with Europe. Within this new global order, the Silk – a much coveted good on the markets of that age – and its Routes played a crucial role. Trades shaped new political-institutional forces, and, at the same time, they gave life to new conceptual and scientific forms that – at their core – always had Man and Mankind as centre of the entire Universe. We are confronted with a cultural development begun at a time when the sons of the steppe were taking over lands of the classical Arabic civilisation (like Syria, Iraq and al-Jazīra), at a time when the Iranian world was still the centre of intellectual life and its social norms were still spreading over large spaces of the Inner Asian territories. Sharing ideas and intellectual stimuli, amalgamating various cultural elements which circulat-

ed along its intertwining branches, the Silk Route gave life to seductive cultural and artistic forms and evocative religious syncretism.

As just said above, Visual Arts wonderfully interpret and represent this phenomenon.

All in all, we witness a process that, in the course of three centuries, renovated itself 'from within' and did not stop even when the arrival of the European Powers on the Asian markets seemed to sign, with the decay and end of the traditional market economy, also the closing of the cultural interactions created by the Silk Routes. Once again, Visual Arts wonderfully mirror this phenomenon: a dramatic, transitional and fluid period, marked by a distinctive timeless reality, which had no longer territories well delimited by frontiers to conquer or defend.

Visual Fine Arts, in this case painting and architecture, are the mirror of the new conceptions of Life and Universe shared by the Lords of the time, as registered by painters and architects in plastic forms, the signal of the new stances to an often confused Humanity. The following pages linger on two pictorial themes: Nature and Landscape on the one hand, and Religion with its very images on the other. With regard to architectonic forms, these reflect the same conceptual paradigm shaped through technical features. By those ages, Nature and Landscape were perceived by contemporary painters and architects with formal, stylistic and technical characteristics which strongly reflected the impact with a world which lived its life in close, intimate contact with nature, a world and a culture which observed Nature and the Cosmos, and perceived them in every detail over the slow rhythmical march of days and nights, of seasons and the lunar cycles. These artistic features depict a precise image, that of a world which lives its life often at odds with nature for its very survival, a world which conditions nature or is conditioned in its turn. It is a world and a cosmic order which were often perceived by the artist in their tension with uncertainty and the blind recklessness of modern-contemporary times. However, to a closer analysis, these same artistic forms shape a celestial order which was at one and the same time a culture and a religion.

Let us see, for example, the reflection of this conception of Religion, Life and Universe on Islamic fine arts in Inner-Central Asia, with specific reference to the 13th – 15th centuries AD.

As sketchily hinted in the previous historical notes, we are confronted with a span of time that has witnessed waves of invasions, urban

life challenged by the greed of nomadic peoples in search of new territories and pasture for their flocks, new cultures and new rulers in arms the ones against the others.²⁵

Despite wars and sieges, defeats and humiliating peace-treaties, despite incursions and raids of neighbouring peoples sweeping through the entire vastness of the Central-Inner Asian basin from China to the Mediterranean, destroying, plundering, deporting or eliminating a large part of its population, undermining the shallow security of past epochs. Despite all this, some values survived and merged, giving life to astounding, new religious-cultural syncretism. As just said above, the decorative motifs of the time wonderfully mirror this epoch, punctuated by factional strife and new waves of invaders, tribal dissidence and anarchy, uprisings and massacres. Then, when anarchy gave way to a new semblance of order, new attitudes were also discernible, leading to a revision of earlier policies, reflection of the full impact of the various cultures brought by those people who moved, met, acted and interacted along that intricate network of routes and sub-routes that were heart and blood of the “Silk Route”. Their intermixing gave life to new political theories and deeds from rulers and local officials, bolstering a new vision of power, dominion and humankind.

Then, beyond lust and cruelty recorded by contemporary sources, the flowering of artistic genius well reflects the dynamism that now animated *courts and ordinary people*. Across the most dreaded deserts and impracticable passes, as it has also been hinted at, *sufis*, saints, holy men, monks, missionaries, pilgrims... wandered, and acted as a catalyst for many existing religious trends and earthly justice – as could be interpreted the ‘divine mission’ of Chingiz Khan (see above § 3.1 and 3.2). In the vast expanses of brown deserts and harsh steppes, intellectuals, scientists, artists, craftsmen, traders and merchants exchanged the wealth of their individual social group, a fertile mimesis and cross-fertilisation of religious, cultural, intellectual, scientific and material values destined to resist the ravages of the time.²⁶

²⁵ See above, §3 and §4.

²⁶ Inspiring source has been the exhibition “The Arts of Islam” organised at Abu Dhabi’s Emirate Palace, 22 January – 22 April 2008. Cfr. the catalogue: J. M. Rogers (ed.), *The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection*, Tourism Development & Investment Company, Abu Dhabi – United Arab Emirates 2008. Other publications depict these sophisticated forms of art, mirroring the deep relationship between Man and

Here, “up-hill and down-hill”, through broken rocks and unsteady stones, through kindled fires from sulphurous caverns – recalling the hyperbolic words of Fryer – flooding and impassable torrents, burning heat in Summer and impossible glaciers in Winter, thieves and bandits, the ordinary discomforts of travelling by mule or camel over rough roads for several weeks...”, flourishing and resplendent towns could be found, overflowing with sumptuous merchandise and majestic centres of learning and libraries (like Tabriz, Maragheh, Tus, Shiraz, Isfahan, Herat, Marv, Bukhara, Samarqand and others). There, mosques, palaces, baths and gardens greeted the weary travellers. But also the centres of knowledge and scientific and technological learning with their silent and peaceful libraries welcomed scholars and savants from all corners of the world. There, trigonometry and computational mathematics, elaborated trigonometric techniques closely associated with spherical astronomy (for example, the work carried out by Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī, personal secretary of Hülegü Khān – see above § 3.3 – was a pure landmark in this respect); numerical analysis also received its impetus from astronomy; observational astronomy and astronomical observatories grasped at the stars their secrets, and calculated the elliptical orbit of the Earth around the Sun, and the Sun’s planets...and discovered Mercury.²⁷ Thence, following

God, between Man and Nature; amongst the many ones, see for example Sh. R. Canby & J. Thompson, *A caccia in Paradiso. Arte di corte nella Persia del Cinquecento* cit.; Esin Atil, *Islamic Arts & Patronage. Treasures from Kuwait*, Al-Sabah Collection, Florence 1990; Ghada Hijjawi Qaddumi, *Variety in Unity – A Special Exhibition on the Occasion of the Fifth Islamic Summit in Kuwait, January 1987*, Kuwait 1987. Then, following the intertwining sub-routes of the Silk Route, we can find more than one hint in Maria Teresa Lucidi (ed.), *La Seta e la sua Via* cit.; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Bukhara – An Oriental Gem*, Paris 1997; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Kiwa*, Tashkent 1986; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Samarkand*, Tashkent 1987...and enterprising Travellers, who have left us vivid descriptions of the world and cultures they had visited: Arminius Vambery, *History of Bokhara. From the Earliest Period Down to the Present, composed for the first time after oriental, known and unknown historical manuscripts*, 2nd edition, repr. Indus Publication, Karachi 1990; Antonio Invernizzi (a cura di), *Il Genio vagante*, Mnème – Documenti, cultura, storia del Mediterraneo e dell’Oriente antico, vol. 5, Edizioni dell’Orso, Alessandria 2005; A. Invernizzi (ed.), *Ambrogio Bembo: Viaggio e Giornale per parte dell’Asia di Quattro anni incirca fatto da me Ambrosio Bembo nobile veneto (1671-1675)*, CESMEO – Abaco Editori, Torino 2005.

²⁷ E.S. Kennedy, “The Exact Sciences...”, cit.

the twisting routes and sub-routes of the Silk, astounding Iranian-Central Asian cosmogonic and religious visions reached Cracow and Europe. Also the bazaars played a central role: there, people met to buy, sell and bargain; but also matrimonial alliances were arranged, there, and new forms, new ideas, new perceptions were forged: a fertile mimesis which travelled eastwards and westwards, north and south.²⁸ And amongst extremes of poverty and wealth, the contrast of green oases and river valleys with stark blackish mountain ridges and salty deserts, the culture of the town and nomadic peoples met, too, bargained, exchanged goods and elements of knowledge, as it was at Burana, present Kirghizstan, solemn meeting point of the great tribes of Central-Inner Asian. Thus, a powerful though intangible syncretism took flight whilst regional barriers collapsed.

²⁸ Then, following the intertwining routes and sub-routes of the Silk Route, we find the “Meeting Points”, where people met and gave rise to figurative expressions according to their cultural contexts in time and space (see also previous notes). See for example Rosamund E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza – Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles – California, London 2002. Last but not least, astounding examples of the reflection of Central Asian conceptions of Religion, Life and Universe on Italian fine arts, with specific reference to the 13th – 15th centuries AD, are several monuments, in particular the Basil of San Marco (Venice). Less known but no less amazing for their inspired models of this religious syncretism and its life, are respectively the Abbey of Viboldone (12th-15th Century) near Milan and the “Palazzo della Ragione” (or Government Palace) at Padova. With regard to the first, the Abbey of Viboldone and its “Giotteschi” paintings and astonishing plan, see R.A. Marrucci, V. Cattana, M.L. Gatti Perer, G. Picasso, M. Rossi, M. Tagliabue, *L’Abbazia di Viboldone*, Banca Agricola Milanese, Amilcare Pizzi Editore, Milan 1990. Plan and paintings vividly reflect some of the most syncretic forms of arts and religion which travelled along the *Silk Route* and had deep impact on the West. The latter, the “Palazzo della Ragione” at Padova, goes far beyond the usual *topoi* of the time. Here, the colourful frescos of the 15th Century, representing the lunar cycles and ordinary life, are undoubtedly inspired by Iranian-Central Asian cosmogonic and religious visions. Padova was the “secular” city par excellence within the Italian cultural panorama of the 14th- 15th Centuries; here, one of the first European universities (the *Patavina Universitas Studiorum*) was centre and pole of scientific learning, headline and meeting point of artists (Giotto, Pietro d’Abano, Tiziano etc.) and scholars (Copernicus from the East, Cracow) and Galileus from the West: M.B. Rigobello & F. Autizi, *Palazzo della Ragione di Padova. Simbologie degli astri e rappresentazioni del governo*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2008.

5.1 Nature and Decorative Motifs. Painting and Architectonic Forms

This subject is extremely tempting, nature is part of the very essence of the life of both nomadic and settled peoples, yet perceived and sensed in a deeply different and differing way. Given the ecological environment just outlined in the previous paragraph, the relation between Man and Nature stands out and represents a common emotional leitmotif, which is always clearly perceivable at the core of the physical decorative motifs.

In this text, the relationship embraces a vast though significant chronological period and a no less vast range of topics as distinct as were the relations, and the figurative expressions to which they gave rise according to their cultural contexts in time and space: Man and God, Man (or Beasts) and the surrounding Landscape, Man and the Universe. These figurative expressions can involve different dominions of realisations, like physical sciences and their knowledge and discoveries, that is the applied scientific curiosity of physicians, botanists, astronomers, astrologers et alia. But they can also involve religious and philosophical dreams and their conceptualisations with their intellectual symbolism and images (calligraphy, for example). Yet, recurrent subjects can also be historical accounts of battles, or other events like hunting or daily life, village-life or beautiful gardens, funerary monuments, mosques or sumptuous palaces... with the insight of the pathos inspiring them. These same relationships can also be stylised in intricate patterns of lines or architectonic forms, conform to the rules which well-reflect the harmonious order that surrounds our planet.

For this reason, I have restricted myself to focus on two specific arts: painting and architecture in the Middle-Asian region, and the relationship between nature and decorative motifs, distinguishing two main models inspired by two different and distinct patterns of life and culture, perceived as the individual relationship between Man and God, Man (or Beasts) and his Environment, Man and the Universe surrounding him. I specifically refer to the pattern of settled life on the one hand, and the pattern of nomadic life on the other. Both have animated the Mongol and Tīmūrid epochal phases, both have produced highly sophisticated forms of art, but the perception that these two patterns of life have of Nature is profoundly different, as it is their respective approach to Life and God, to Nature and the

Universe, and their respective ways of living in contact and within them.

Painting

At the time here under consideration, the chief expressive medium was the miniature.²⁹

Let us see, for example, the reflection of this conception in the 13th-15th centuries, when the closing of the traditional Silk Route and its commercial network seemed to sign the decline of all cultural and spiritual exchanges, too. Let us see, for example, how Nature and Landscape were perceived by contemporary painters and artists as ideological values. Let us see, for example, how, beyond stylistic and technical characteristics, one can sense other forms and values.

The 13th-15th centuries – down to the Tīmūrid period and including it – saw the meeting or clash of two patterns of life, the sedentary and the nomadic model of life. As just said above, we are confronted with formal, stylistic and technical characteristics which strongly reflect the impact with a world which lives its life in close contact with nature, a world and a culture which observe nature and the cosmos and perceive them in every detail over the slow rhythmical march of days and nights, of seasons and lunar cycles. But, at the same time, we

²⁹ In the ever increasing literature on Central-Asian and Islamic painting, Great Scholar and Master to all of us is still prof. Ernest J. Grube and his many individual studies on manuscripts and individual iconographical themes and approach. No less reputed is Oleg Grabar, the first to examine complete pictorial cycles. Grabar's study on Hariri's *Maqamat* – I have largely drawn from this text, see for example Figs. 3 and 4 – is a masterpiece of its kind (O. Grabar, *The Illustrations of the Maqamat*, Chicago and London 1984). Full-scale investigations of iconographical themes are still Richard Ettinghausen's, *Studies in Muslim Iconography*, Washington 1950; see also J.-P. Roux, *Sources of Islamic Art* 1982; D. Talbot-Rice, *The Illustrations of the "World History" of Rashid al-Din*, ed. Basil Gray, Edinburgh 1976 (I have largely drawn from Rashid al-Din's *World History*, too. Fig. 6B); Idem, *Islamic Art*, revised ed. 1975, Thames and Hudson, Singapore, repr. 1993. For religious iconography in Islamic painting, see P.I. Arnold, *The Old and New Testament in Muslim Religious Art*, London 1932; see also S. Okasha, *The Muslim Painter and the Divine: the Persian Impact on Islamic Religious Paintings*, London 1981. Valuable study on 'material and tools' of the artist is that by Sheila R. Canby, *Persian Painting*, published for the Trustees of the British Museum, British Museum Press, London 1993.

are confronted with two different perceptions and realisations of this relationship.

The Mesopotamian World of the early 13th Century produces mainly 'secular' illustrations. Nature is the centre and object both of scientific treatises and of their illuminations. Here, nature is the object of knowledge and learning of human beings and human intellect. It is a nature which the human ratio – or psyche – studies, examines and interprets. It is a nature projected upon itself, without landscape and background. It is pure science and technological knowledge: the great legacy of the Greek-Hellenistic world. The artist perceives and reflects this culture and this intellectual world, following a two-dimensional convention, according to which all figures are shown on the same plane and look as if they are silhouetted against an open background. Their centrality is further accentuated by the love of tiny details, such as the drawing of clothing and costumes. One can sense the realism and incredible expressiveness with which they are rendered in every minute detail. The colouring, too, without much gradation in tone, is always bright and pleasing, further underlining the painter's considerable craft and skill in observing and interpreting nature. The love of tiny details is also clearly felt in the drawing of the clothing and various costumes worn by various figures, in the stylised, "pattern-making" manner in which the folds are rendered (*Fig. 1 – A) Kalilah wa Dimnah; B) Dioscorides: De Materia Medica; Fig. 2 – A-B) Dioscorides: De Materia Medica*).

The sudden arrival of the Turkish world on the Mesopotamian scene altered this style of painting as it did alter the architectural style and its patterns, too (see above). With the Seljuks first (second half of the 11th Century), and the Mongols soon afterwards (13th Century), the world of the nomads and the steppe made a violent appearance also in the Levant leaving a deep impression on these arts particularly in Persia and Central Asia (see above §3). In painting, realism became further accentuated, as did the artist's ability to enter the atmosphere of the nomadic world of the Turks, and thus to interpret it through the subject he was painting. The costumes are mostly solid and well-modelled, a real sense of plasticity is now felt. The faces of the various protagonists lose their 'traditional' characteristics, the eyes become oblong, the nose and mouth are now typically central Asian, the faces become rounded and the clothes worn, too, have a more local feel. Nimbi and aloes appear, like those which were to be found in Central Asian and Far

Eastern pictorial models (Fig. 3 – A) *Al-Hariri: Maqamat*; B) *Abmad ibn al-Husayn ibn al-Ahnaf: Kitab al-Baytarah* – Fig. 4 – *Al-Hariri: Village Life*).

Leaving aside the work of the Mamlūk school (which was of considerable relevance), the substantial break came with the Mongols (13th Century AD). A new style was emerging, which owed a great debt to Central Asia and, in some respects, to China, too. Leaving aside other stylistic and historical considerations (which are usually considered as the subject of the history of Arts), it is now interesting to note and compare how the Mongol conquest and the Īl-Khānid rule marked the end of Arab pictorial influence in the Eastern regions.³⁰ Despite the usual traditions about Mongol and Timurid horrors, devastations and sacks, a large number of manuscripts have survived, and their illustrations bear witness to the birth of a new style clearly distinct from the Mesopotamian. Nature now enters the painting and is perceived and experienced through the eyes of other worlds and cultures. It enters through the landscape, becoming an intimate part of it. It is no longer linear, it is no longer the mere object of abstract, scientific observation. It becomes an essential component of the image and an intimate part of the subject represented, acting both as background and object in a multidimensional prospect (Fig. 5 – *The so called “Morgan Bestiary”, probably executed at Maragheh in 1291/1294 or 1298.*).

Then, we come to religious themes. In the previous paragraphs 3.1 – 3.3, it has been roughly outlined how the Mongols themselves were shamanists, but tolerant and inclined to other creeds and cults, well alive in the whole Middle-Central Asian basin, until Qubilai’s conversion to Buddhism and the subsequent ‘political’ conversion to Islam imposed by Ghazan Khān at the end of the 13th Century to a reluctant Mongol feudality. Thence, it is not surprising if religious themes and typically far-eastern motifs, such as the phoenix, clouds and nimbi, now appear. The trees are no longer stylised in a linear representation, now they take on a ‘living’ feature: their leaves, branches and trunks are often gnarled and twisted; jagged mountains in the background add depth and volume to the paintings. The colours become brighter and more varied, taking on a role of primary importance. Sometimes, nature

³⁰ With regard to the phases and events here pointed to, cultural syncretism and evolution, see above the historical sketchy outline § 3.

is recreated through the painter's imagination, taking on idealised and illusionist forms, but always full of movement, dynamic, intimately linked to the mood of the subject represented through light and feathery brushstrokes (see for example Fig. 6 – A) *Al-Biruni: Chronology of Ancient Peoples, 1308 AD, Temptation of the First Man and Woman.*)

But coming back to the painting of animals, the contrast with the Mesopotamian world is definitely striking. We can still feel the influence of the Mesopotamian school on the one hand – with two-dimensional paintings, heavy, solid figures and trees following the stylistic conventions – but, on the other hand, the Central Asian style brought by the Mongols makes its appearance depicting a new world, dawning a new age with all its new instances (Fig. 5 – A) *The so called “Morgan Bestiary”: The Lion and the Lioness.*) and religious and spiritual values (Fig. 6 – in particular B) *Rashid al-Din, The Prophet Jeremiah*). With regard to the first (Fig. 5), thin, tint-like colours, the dominantly fine outlines, and often the use of silver for flesh tints or for parts of the costumes (in this regard also Fig. 6 – A) *Temptation of the First Man and Woman...*). With regard to the latter (Fig. 6 – B) *The Prophet Jeremiah and his donkey's miracle*), the gnarled, knotted tree trunks, the feathery branches, the fantastic background and even the figures themselves show a clear inspiration by the arts of the Sung dynasty of China, which, filtered through the Mongol culture and its religious-spiritual values, makes its appearance into the Persian world and its culture. The same characteristics recur, accentuated, in the following Figure (Fig. 7 – *Ferdowsi: Shahnameh - Scenes from Alexander's cycle*).

Then, gradually, in other manuscripts the two styles appear to have blended together. They give birth to new artistic forms which, from the 14th Century on, can be considered the new image of a world with its new dynamics, a world where free human movements and cultural elements are forging a new dialogue between individual structural realities and patterns of life. This is the peak of the Timurid age. They are deeply diverging from the style of other manuscripts on the same theme (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), now they actively act and interact along the twisting paths of the Silk Route, through the vast spaces of the central-Asian basin. The influence of Manichaean art – especially in Christian subjects – opens the thorny question of Central Asian influence and, in particular, the role played by Uighur artists. Without entering this lively debate, it is interesting to note how, by that time, religious and artistic subjects and forms merge and blend (Figs. 7 – 8

– 9). The trees leave their linear and stylised forms, taking on a ‘living’ appearance; their leaves, branches and trunks are often gnarled and twisted, participating to the artist’s pathos. Coarsely sketched mountains in the background add depth and volume. The colours become brighter and more varied, taking on a role of primary importance. Brilliant blue or gold skies take the place of the almost colourless Mesopotamian ones. Sometimes, nature is re-created through the painter’s imagination, taking on illusive forms, which enhance its participation to the illustrated events. The scene is always full of movement, dynamic, intimately linked – through light, feathery brushes – to the mood of the subject represented. The swirling movements of the clouds, the knotted tree trunks, the ‘mobility’ of all natural elements surrounding the human and non-human protagonists, the same animals...all become the profound interpreters of religious emotions, and of the emotions of life and death.

Nature and Landscape are by now felt and assimilated in a unique vision, a nervous tension towards the Universe surrounding all human beings, which mirror the atmosphere that dominated at the Mongol and Turkoman courts, deeply pervaded by mystic and esoteric tensions (*Fig. 10*. See above §3 and §4).

This concept of Life and Universe is also well reflected in the astounding perfection attained by the physical, mathematical and astronomical sciences in the 14th – 15th centuries, and the helio-centric elliptical canons (the astronomical observatories of Maragheh, Tus, Bukhara and Samarkand, for example).

This conception is also wonderfully mirrored in the religious feeling of that ‘mobile’ world and in all decorative arts and their decorative motifs. As just said above, too, it is a world often at odds with nature for its very survival, it is a world which conditions nature or is conditioned by it in its turn, a world often perceived in its tension with uncertainty. Landscape and nature are the object of a new technological science, a scientific curiosity which aims to investigate, understand and dominate the natural elements and their violence. It is a culture which – in the struggle to know, to understand the celestial cosmos and its rules, to grasp the secrets of the whole universe – has to grapple with this universe for its own life and survival in peace and at war. In the Central-Asian syncretic world, painting perceives it like a ‘religion’ even when it perceives it as a science. Then, it uses knowledge – or the human ratio – through which Man comes nearer to God and to that infinite, spherical

and perfect universe which He created, and of which Man feels himself to be an intimate harmonious part (see also above § 6).

Through this lens, it is well possible to sense the discrepancy between Central Asia and the Iranian world. While in Central Asia nature was to continue to play a key role, violent and strongly dramatic (Figs. 8–9), in the traditional but yet well alive Iranian culture violence gradually softens into lyricism and poetry. Forms, subjects and styles evolve, absorbed and filtered through the traditional culture and its multifarious symbols.

Architectonic forms

The Īl-Khāns were great patrons of the arts and loved a life of luxury, even though they themselves continued to follow the nomadic pattern of life, to go hunting with their retinue, or head their army when disputes arose. They continued to live in tents, where they were surrounded by their court, a ‘mobile’ court with viziers and the Khān’s personal treasure, and where they also used to receive ambassadors, dignitaries and visitors from distant countries, and other guests. However, we are reported that the Īl-Khān’s tent was no longer a simple felt one, it was made out of precious silks, paved with the most sumptuous carpets, adorned with refined cushions and other furnishings, where, under the ‘shiny’ vault, could sit even one thousand persons.

However, they participated to the world of the settled people, regularly visited their towns to administer justice, levy tolls and meet local dignitaries and exponents of the various religious cults practised in their territory listening to their complains and requests, or entrusting them with some delicate diplomatic mission. But they also loved meeting and talking with savants, scientists, philosophers and artists; they used to pay attention to their discourses and entertained them with great interest for their scientific discoveries, literary plans, and artistic achievements. Thus, from the same contemporary historians (in particular Rashīd al-Dīn and ‘Aṭā’ Malik Juvaynī - see supra § 5.3) we have rich information about their architectonic embellishments and how they – faithful interpreters of the Khān’s conceptual schemes – interpreted and elaborated them into new cultural forms.

Thus, usual *topoi* of the time, we know that the Khāns were great builders of roads, bridges, dams, *birkas* (domed cisterns or underground ice-reservoirs), *qanats* and sophisticated irrigation systems,

which allowed wild abandoned territories to flourish again and trades to prosper once more; on the same occasion, we also have precious scraps of information about the monuments they erected, especially palaces with magnificent *pavillons* and gardens, mosques, funerary monuments... even astronomical observatories.

However, beyond these usual *topoi*, literary sources are well complemented with a no less rich and imposing monumental evidence, scientific knowledge and technological advancements.³¹

As already said when referring to painting, the influence of forms and concepts from the Far East and from Central Asia is extremely important. The great change came in 1295, when Ghazan Khān converted to Islam. This period marks a revival in palace building. Tabriz can be considered a significant example of this evolution and its dynamic impacts elsewhere. Ghazan Khān fortified the city, the new capital of Iran, surrounding it with a great wall of 54,000 paces. Three miles to the south, he created the magnificent suburb of Sham, a description of which we can find in Waṣṣāf, with monasteries for the *darwish*, libraries, palaces for the administration and the sultan's tomb. His vizier, the already mentioned Rashīd al-Dīn, built his own compound (the well-known *Rub'-i Rashīdī*), which was planned as a kind of university complex, including hospitals, companies of craftsmen, workshops, workshops for the illuminating of the precious codices of the Library. Between roughly 1312 and 1324, Taj al-Dīn 'Alī Shāh erected – again at Tabriz – a great mosque (the ruins of which are still visible today and are known, locally, as the *argh* or fortress). By those days, Tabriz must have been a marvellous city and one can easily understand how its fame spread East and West, throughout Europe and all Central Asia. Not only this. In the market of Tabriz there was also a Genoese quarter, where Genoese enterprising merchants had a caravan always ready to come and go loaded with all the precious merchandise much wanted on the European markets.³²

³¹ Literature in this respect is extremely rich...but also varied in quality. I restrict myself to quote Creswell and his monumental bibliographies. See for example K.A.C. Creswell, *L'architettura Islamica delle origini*, Il Saggiatore – Arnoldo Mondadori, Milan – Italy 1966 (Italian repr. from the 1958 ed., *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*).

³² V. Piacentini Fiorani, "East and West. Makrān and Sindh within the Topographical Science of the 7th /13th Century: Yāqūt and Marco Polo", in *Proceedings of the Academy of Sciences of Sindh*, Karachi 2017, specie §3 and §4.

The architecture reflects the structural elements of the preceding period. However, significant innovations are to be found. For instance, the funerary monuments: these follow the model of the round, tower tomb, but, at the same time, new elements are introduced. Thus, we have the grand funerary mausoleums on a square plan, fronted by a great portal (Kashmar, Demavend, Bistum, Maragheh, Tus, Sarakhs...). Those on an octagonal base are more frequent, and this is the plan of the most important monuments at the end of the 'Mongol' period. This plan clearly reflects the astronomical conception of the felt tent, the dome being given far greater emphasis than the structure on which it rests (*Figs. 11 – 12 and 13. Funerary Tombs and Madrasah from Central Asia - Uzbekistan*). The octagonal tower is inscribed into a square room, the tower culminating into a typical cone-shaped structure. Innovative is the large and skilled use of baked bricks, the wall decorations are created by means of the positioning of these same bare bricks in varying patterns and designs reproducing natural and star-shaped motifs. The appearance of monumental inscriptions becomes a specific decorative element, carried out in brick or terracotta material. Other important innovation is the use of glazed tiles – playing principally on shades of turquoise, lapis-lazuli and green – the very colours of the landscapes of nomadic people.

One aspect must be underlined. All of this architecture (funerary monuments, caravanserais, mosques...) reveals an impressive tendency to the vertical, to reaching the sky, paradigmatic of the conception of Life and the Universe, which the Mongols brought with them, introduced also on the Persian scene, and then left to the Tamerlane and his successors, who enhanced the architectonic forms of these monument introducing new stylistic decorative patterns and the famous "bulbous dome" (*Figs. 12 – 13 and 14*).

This can be noted especially in the skilful and intricate open play of the vaults, arches and domes, a stellar projection of the cosmos and its harmonious laws which were so well-known to those Turk and Turco-Mongol peoples who had access to – and knowledge of – the laws of trigonometrical and astronomical reckonings of both East and West. People who did love nature and the wide open spaces of the steppe, so much so that they never took up the sedentary life, although they had deep admiration and respect for the 'town' and its world and culture. People whose love for open spaces, skies and stars was (and still is) well-perceptible in their traditional felt tents – the Mongol/Turco-Mongol *yurta*, and would be filtered by skilled archi-

fects of their epoch through rational dictates and architectonic equilibriums, and then merged into religious feeling and perceptions.³³

Read through this clue, the Tīmūrid “bulbous dome” is a particularly telling example of this mystical tension towards the Universe and God. The “bulbous dome”, that is to say two domes, one sitting on top of the other. The upper dome (whose shape recalls a bulb) was for external effect, whilst the other was simply an ordinary dome. The bulbous dome, in itself, lacks stability and must therefore be reinforced by internal ribbing, which rests on the second, the internal dome, held in place by diagonal, wooden beams. The tomb of Tamerlane at Samarkand is a particularly elegant example of its kind (*Fig. 14*). The ribbing of the vaults, the supporting arches of the double dome, the funnel-shaped intersections and trilobite arches are a skilful play of balances and offsetting of masses, reproducing the effects of the celestial vault. The use of turquoise and lapis-lazuli blue tiles, which cover the outside of the dome, completes this optical illusion. The decoration, not yet burdened by the exuberance which was to become prevalent from the 16th Century onwards, complements and melts harmoniously into the architectural structures.

6. THE SILK ROUTE. NOT FOR TRAFFICKING ALONE

Here, at the very crossroads of Middle-Central Asia – the focal point of different worlds with their individual cultures, traditions and civilisations – the Silk Route represented the challenging paradigm of a still lively free course to trade, to hold back the marauders and stand between warring tribes and their victims. The majestic evidence of the pictorial and monumental achievements of the past may represent the hope of the Leaders of that time to resuscitate ancient connections and merge them with the revolution of present technologies forging new relationships, shortening distances, bridging gaps, re-linking peoples and their respective societies, cultures, and also religious and mystic

³³ With regard to the “town” (*madīnah – shahr*), see above §3 and §4, *à propos* of the Mongol and Tamerlane’s respect for urban life and those towns that surrendered and submitted. Their devastating rage exploded when these put on fierce resistance or revolted after submitting, thus betraying the agreed pacts.

conceptions – these latter intrinsic part of the nomadic ethos.

Herewith I have dealt, as an example, with the reflection of the new conceptions of Life and Universe on visual Fine Arts in the 13th-15th Centuries, specifically painting and architectonic forms. Both were palatial arts. Both were expression of the ideological values of the new rulers of that ages, who – through their military conquests – aimed at forging new relationships among different peoples and their individual human ideals and traditions, religious thinking, moral codes, and economic, scientific, technological achievements. Visual fine arts were the mirror of feelings shared by those rulers, registered by painters and architects in plastic forms, the signal of their stances to an often confused Humanity. I have lingered on two pictorial themes: nature and landscapes on the one hand, and religion with its very images on the other. With regard to architectonic forms, these reflect the same conceptual bearings shaped through technical features.

As just said above, by those ages Nature and Landscape were the objective reality of the everyday life, proposed by contemporary painters and architects with formal, stylistic and technical characteristics which would strongly reflect the impact with the world of the time, as this latter lived its life in close, intimate contact with them, a world and a culture which observed Nature and the Cosmos, and perceived them in every detail over the slow rhythmical march of days and nights, of seasons and the lunar cycles. The artistic features then created depict a precise image, that of a humanity that lives its life often at odds with nature for its very survival, a humanity that either conditions nature or is conditioned in its turn. It was a world and a cosmic order which were often perceived by the artist in their tension with uncertainty and the blind recklessness of modern-contemporary times. To a closer analysis, these same artistic forms shape also a celestial order which was at one and the same time a culture and a religion (human or divine, or both).

In the vast borderless space of the Euro-Asiatic steppes, cut by great rivers, broken by steep rocky mountainous chains and inhospitable deserts, despite endless warfare and the hostility of the environment, the Silk succeeded in building and organising its own network of twisting routes and sub-routes, along which transited caravans with their goods... but also cultural elements, artists and craftsmen... and their conceptual-philosophical forms. Of these latter and their syncretic imageries and dreams, the fine arts have left evocative pictures and architectonic images, which depict a world that is also the projection of precise social

and political realities and their underlying factors, such as the restlessness of the nomadic pattern of life and the values of the “town” and its settled urban life. Little is changed today despite the collapse of the Soviet empire and its order. Then, at the time of the Mongolian and Timurid dominions, features and forms evolved and changed, they announced a different world with its order built on the ruins of the past, a world which should evolve into a robust syncretism, made at the same time of science, knowledge, and religion (divine and human). A world that was the projection of a precise political, social and economic reality and its own leaderships. A reality that, however, at one and the same time was the silent voice of a humanity often disregarded by contemporary writers, an ‘underground world’ that echoed traditional forms and their dynamics, and a no less authoritative *de facto* power that politically and financially conditioned and dominated its times. A reality that found its authoritative voice through the paradigm of the Silk and its routes.

Whether the new Lords succeeded in their aims and objectives, or failed, this is another issue. Be that as it may, they have tried to position common values at the core of all human achievements.

Today, at the very crossroads of Middle-Central Asia – still the focal point of different worlds with their individual traditions and civilisations – the Silk Route even now represents the challenging paradigm of a lively free course to trade, to hold back the arms of rival groupings, and stands between warring tribes and their victims, creating syncretic cultural forms, which are slowly and lazily evolving towards new political realities. But, at the end of the second decade of the third millennium, the Silk Route has authoritatively entered Africa and Europe, too.

The dynamics to day put into being by the un-escapable march of Modernity/post-Modernity, Technologies and Globality mirror a world which is living its ‘modern’ life through an impatient transitional phase, and often is at odds with Nature and the Cosmos. It is a world which – in the struggle to know, to understand human and celestial processes and their rules, to grasp the secrets of the whole universe – has to grapple with this universe and nature for his own life and survival, in peace and at war. Science and technological advancements are the means, knowledge and human ratio dominate a reality that is losing its consciousness. No region can be significant in geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic terms without a solid social and political amalgamation based on cultural values. As also stated at the beginning of this article, the religious-cultural sphere today is a no less significant and intimate part of any

conceptual building, or of any “economic” and “technological” society – to use Max Weber’s words. And even when Man perceives it as a science, and uses his knowledge – or human ratio – to understand or grapple with it, then he always comes nearer (for the best or for the worse) to that perfect universe which Man feels himself to be a harmonious part. And despite the prodigious scientific and technological achievements so far pursued by this fantastic scientific competition, social and economic justice are still a mythical, fantastic utopia. Whilst the dominant factors are uncertainty, violence, micro-macro criminality, abuse of power, ferocious regional conflicts and all kinds of modern forms of ‘non-conventional’ conflict (social and economic, cyber and digital, for example), then, we have the evocation of the Silk Route.

Beyond the new technological and economic dimension, undoubtedly to day the Silk Route is the paradigm of a world and a humanity, that are living a dramatic unforeseen transitional phase punctuated by new realities and fresh conceptual values, but also by great uncertainties. Against this backdrop, and within the present framework, rulers look at the Silk Route as a paradigm where knowledge and the vision of the world and its new order/disorder might be translated into a new philosophy of culture and history, of society and religion, which can also be featured as a new ‘dialogue’ through past memories and experiences, and their amalgamation. However, this paradigm can also be sensed as the hope of some leaders and their supporting élites to resuscitate ancient connections and merge them with the revolution of present technologies forging new relationships, shortening distances, bridging gaps, re-linking peoples and their respective societies, cultures, and also religious and mystic conceptions. Beyond the new technological and economic pragmatic dimension of the present, in some circumstances the Silk Route can also epitomise the paradigm of a new form of ‘celestial’ order and new rules of social and economic justice destined to dominate on the disintegration of our present values, a disintegration fostered by the non-distances of the I&C technologies. All in all, we are still confronted with a stern panorama, where prevail values torn by internal discrepancies and personal ambitions, feuds between dashing groupings, conventional and non-conventional conflicts, natural disasters and the digital projection of sumptuous imageries of a wonderful future in the name of amazing scientific and technological achievements, ... as it took place in the vast expanses of the Middle-Central Asian steppes in the past ages here recalled.

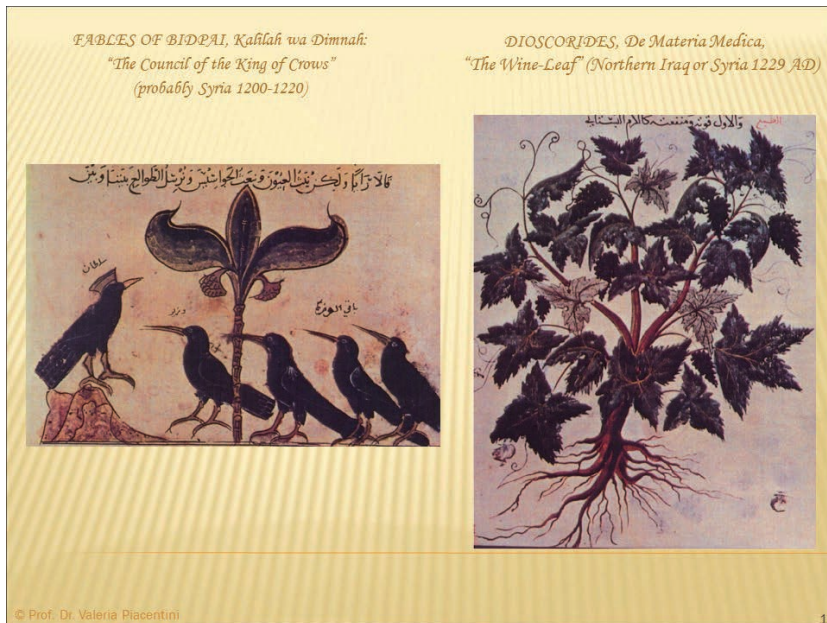


Fig. 1 – A) **Fables of Bidpai**, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*: "The Council of the King of Crows". Probably Syria, 1200 – 1220 AD, Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Ms. Arabe n. 3465, folio 95 verso (131 per 202 mm). B) **Dioscorides**, *De Materia Medica*, "The Wine-Leaf". Northern Iraq or Syria, 1229 AD. Istanbul – Library of the Museum of Topkapi Saray, Ahmet III – 2127, folio 252 verso (235 per 195 mm).



Fig. 2 – A) **Dioscorides**, *De Materia Medica*, "The Astragalos and Hunting Scene". Baghdad, Iraq, 1224 AD. Istanbul – St. Sophia Museum, ms. n.3703, folio 29 recto (160 per 193 mm). B) **Dioscorides**, *De Materia Medica*, "Dioscorides and one of his Scholars". Northern Iraq or Syria, 1229 AD. Istanbul – Library of the Museum of Topkapi Saray, Ahmet III – 2127, folio 2 verso (192 per 140 mm).

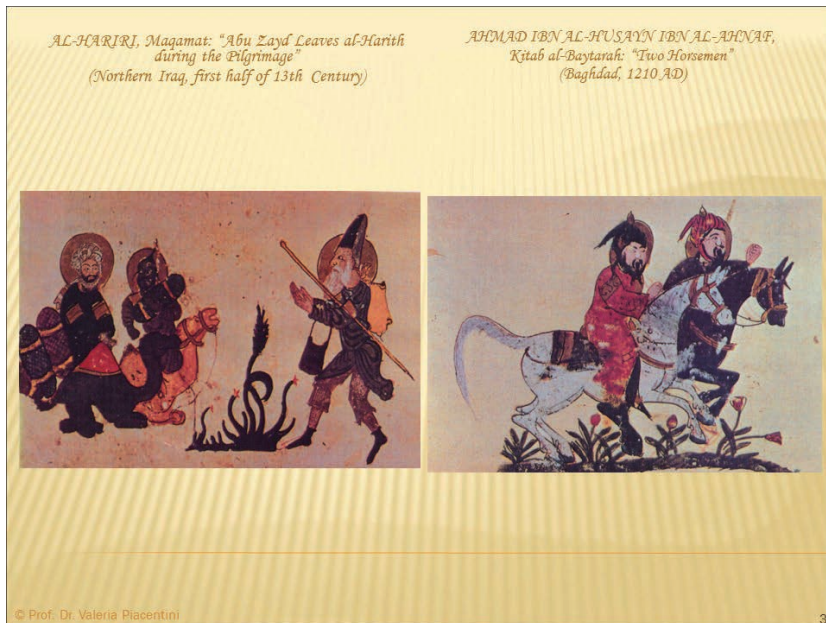


Fig. 3 – A) **Al-Hariri**, *Maqamat*, “Abu Zayd leaves al-Harith during the Pilgrimage”. Northern Iraq, first half 13th Century. Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, ms. Arabe n. 3929, folio 69 recto (92 per 188 mm). B) **Ahmad ibn al-Husayn ibn al-Ahnaf**, *Kitab al-Baytarah*, “Two Horsemen”. Baghdad, 1210 AD. Istanbul – Library of the Museum of Topkapi Saray, Ahmet III – 2115, folio 57 verso (120 per 170 mm).

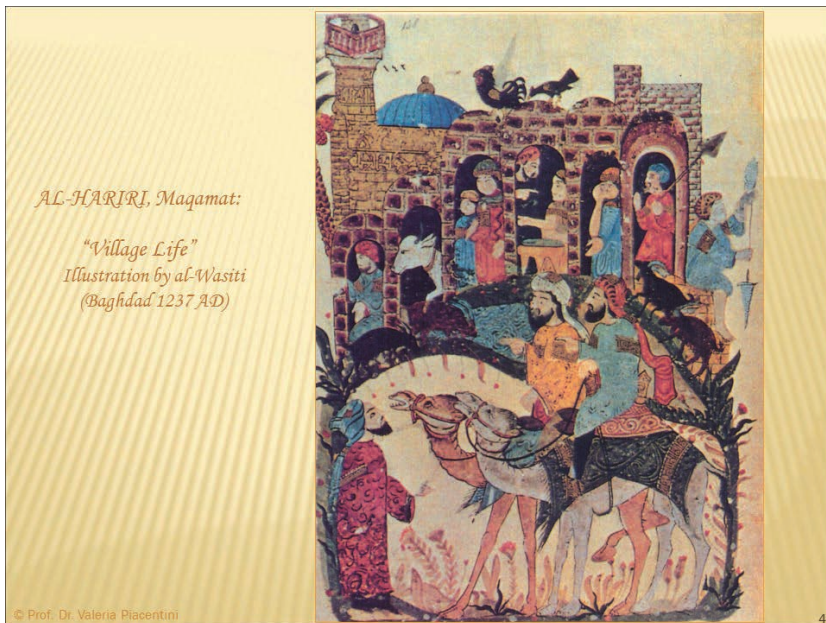


Fig. 4 – **Al-Hariri**, *Maqamat* (“Travels of Al-Hariri”), “Village Life”. Illustration by al-Wasiti, Baghdad, 1237 AD. Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, ms. Arabe n. 5847 (“Hariri’s Schefer”), folio 138 recto (348 per 260 mm)



Fig. 5 – A) Ibn Bakhtishu, *Manafi' al-Hayawan* (or “Morgan Bestiary”), “Lion and Lioness” – B) Ibn Bakhtishu, *Manafi' al-Hayawan* (or “Morgan Bestiary”) “Horses”. Maragheh, 1298 AD. New York, Morgan Library, ms. n. 500, folio 11 recto (340 per 245 mm), folio 28 recto (340 per 245 mm).



Fig. 6 – A) **Al-Biruni**, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah* (“Chronology of Ancient Peoples”), “Temptation of the First Man and Woman in the Garden of Paradise”, Tabriz, 1307-1308 AD. Edinburgh University Library, Arab ms. n 161. B) **Rashid al-Din**, *Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* (“Universal History”), “The Prophet Jeremiah”. God caused the Prophet to dye for one hundred years because of his lack of faith and then brought him and his donkey back to life, Tabriz, 1306 AD circa. Edinburgh University Library, Oriental Fund n. 20.



Fig. 7 – A) **Ferdowsi**, *Shahnameh*, "Eskandiar fights the Dragon", Tabriz, 1330 – 1336 AD, The "Demotte" *Shahnameh*. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, ms. n. 30. 105 (178 per 292 mm). B) **Ferdowsi**, *Shahnameh*, "The Indian Army flees from Eskandiar Forces", Tabriz, 1330 – 1336 AD, The "Demotte" *Shahnameh*. Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, ms. n. 1955, folio 167.



Fig. 8 – **Fables of Bidpai**, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, "The King of the Monkeys throws some figs to the Tortoise", Tabriz, 1360-1374 AD circa. Istanbul, University Library: Alburn of Yildiz Palace, ms. F. 1422, folio 19 verso (335 per 259 mm).



Fig. 9 – A) **Fables of Bidpai**, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, “The Bull Shanzabeh”, Tīmūrid School, Herat, 1410-1420 AD circa. Tehran, Library of Golestan, B.W.G. 44, folio 18 recto (118 per 150 mm). B) **Fables of Bidpai**, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, “The Monkey and the Tortoise”, Tīmūrid School, Herat, 1410-1420 AD circa. Tehran, Library of Golestan, B.W.G. 44, folio 61 verso (118 per 150 mm).

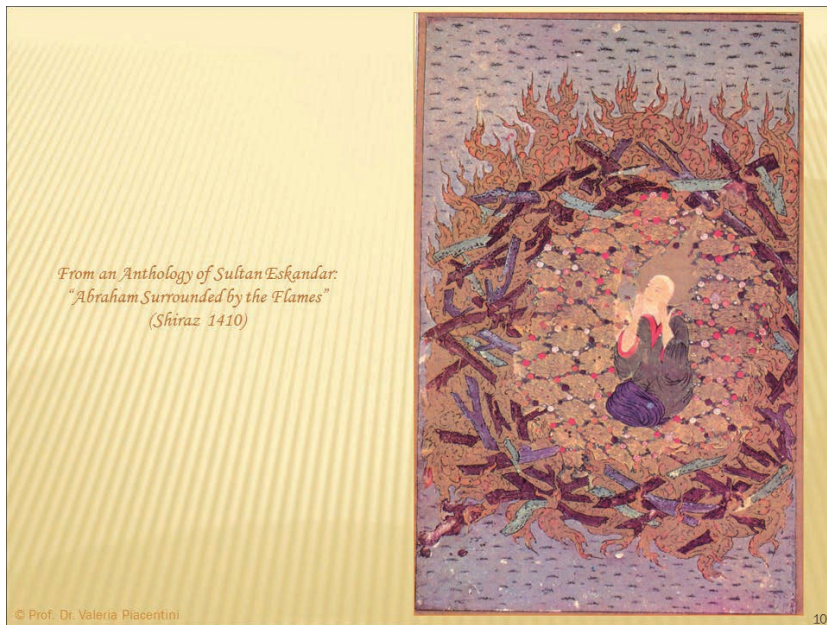
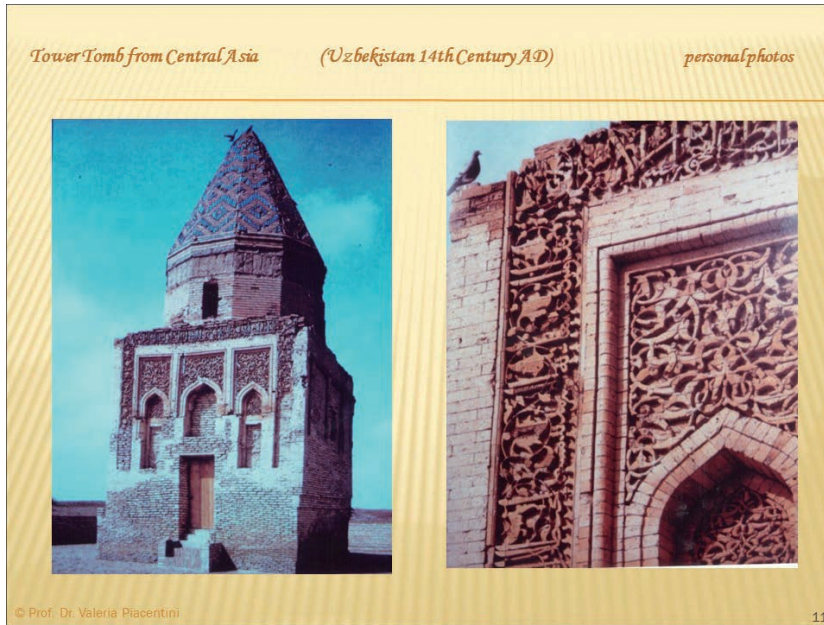


Fig. 10 – From an Anthology of Sultan Eskandar, “Abraham surrounded by the Flames”, Shiraz, 1410 AD. Lisbon, Gulbenkian Foundation, folio 646 (248 per 150 mm).



Figs. 11-12 – Tower Tomb from Central Asia – Uzbekistan (14th Century AD) – personal photos.

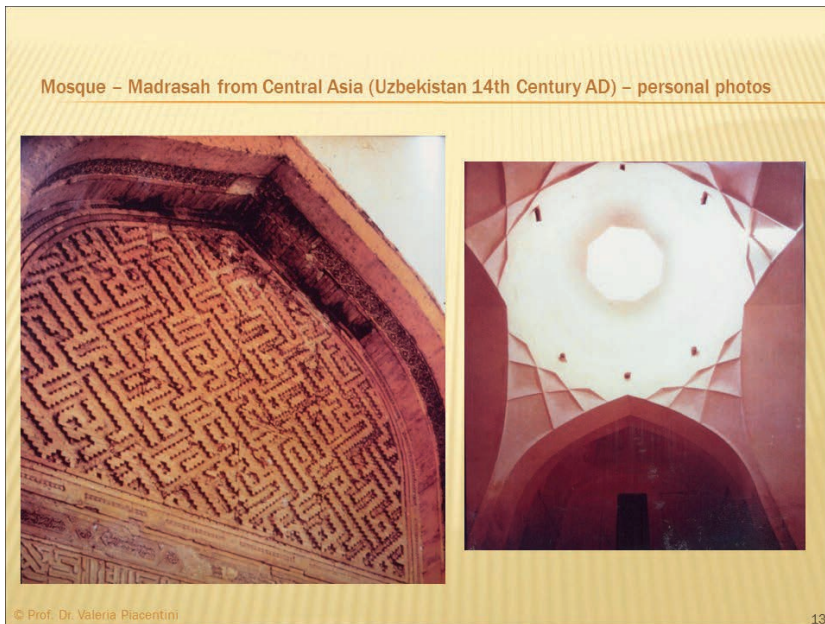


Fig. 13 – Mosque – Madrasah from Central Asia – Uzbekistan (14th Century AD) – personal photos

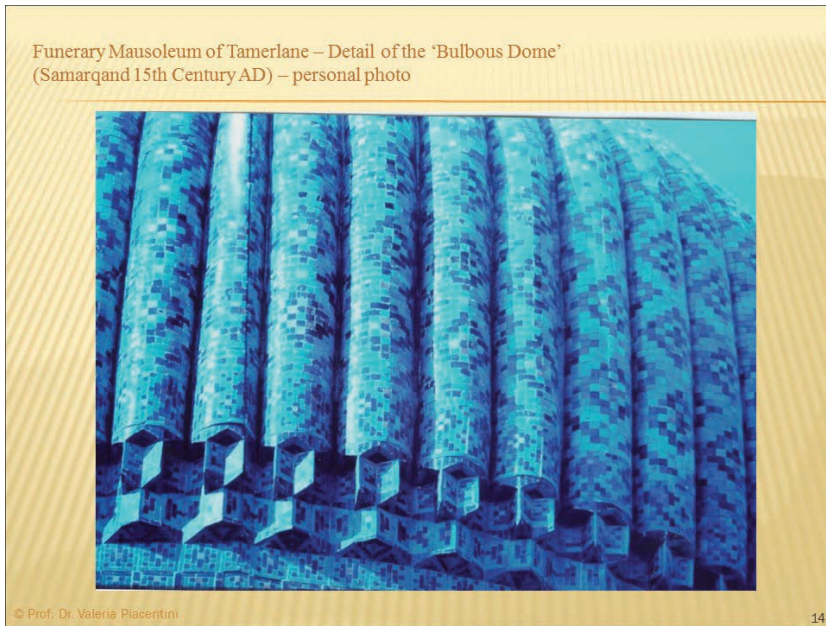


Fig. 14 – Funerary Mausoleum of Tamerlane – Detail of the “Bulbous Dome”, Samarkand, 15th Century AD.