The World We Have Lost

Middle East Christianity, Islam

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Too many historians and commentators view history from a western perspective. In doing so, they turn their back on the roots of our global system, argues Peter Frankopan.

If you were to round up some of the groups of school leavers pictured waving their A-Level certificates in the middle of August, I suspect that most would be able to recall some of the history they had been taught during the course of their school careers. The Romans in Britain will be in there somewhere, as will the Norman Conquest and the murder of Thomas Becket. The Wars of the Roses and the era of the Tudors will feature, as will the Civil Wars (with any luck). Those who stuck at it better and longer would hopefully be on solid ground when it comes to the transatlantic slave trade, the American War of Independence, Gladstone and Disraeli and then the two World Wars.

If you were to sit the same group in front of the evening news, I suspect they might struggle. Prominent on any given day would likely be the breakdown in Iraq and war in Syria; the increasingly likely prospect of Iran coming in from the cold; dramatic military confrontation in the Ukraine; continuing violence and uncertainty in Afghanistan; or perhaps a piece to camera on the significance of China to the global economy. Ask any of the new school leavers about the history of any of these countries, peoples or cultures and you will draw a blank. Ask them about contemporary culture and you’ll get an even more bewildered look: who is the finest Russian contemporary artist, the best Arabic pop star (or classical musician), or the most exciting Chinese author?

Horizons are set, or rather limited, by a narrow focus that is confined to (western) Europe and the US; a focus that is broadly reflected in university history faculties, in books that are written about the past and in attitudes to the world around us. We look from the West at the West. Other regions and places might be interesting, exotic and important in their own way locally, but the stories that matter are those that linked ancient Athens with Rome, produced the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, led to liberal democracy and to the widespread acceptance of the principle of religious, gender and social equality.

The walls and minaret of the Abu Dulaf mosque, Samarra, Iraq, ninth century.

There are, though, other – and better – vantage points from which to look at history. To understand the past and the present, the best place of all to stand is not in the West or in the East, but in the region that links the two together. Although it might not seem promising to assess the world from countries in Central Asia such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, or from Iran, Iraq, southern Russia and the Caucasus, this is the crucible where the world’s great religions burst into life, where Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism
and Hinduism jostled, borrowed and competed with each other. It is the cauldron where language groups collided, where Indo-European, Semitic and Sino-Tibetan tongues wagged alongside those speaking Altaic, Turkic and Caucasian. This is where great empires rose and fell, where the after-effects of clashes between cultures and rivals were felt thousands of miles away.

These are no backwaters, in other words, no obscure wastelands. In fact the bridge between East and West is the very crossroads of civilisation. Far from being on the fringe of global affairs, these countries lie at its very centre, as they have done since the beginning of history. Running across the spine of Asia is a web of connections that fan out in every direction, routes along which pilgrims and warriors, nomads and merchants have travelled, goods and produce have been bought and sold and ideas exchanged, adapted and refined. They have carried not only prosperity, but also death and violence, disease and disaster.

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These pathways, known since the late 19th century as the Silk Roads, serve as the world's central nervous system, connecting peoples and places together. These networks are invisible to the naked eye, just as the body's veins and arteries lie beneath the skin. Studying these connections provides an interesting corrective to standard narratives of the past. But in fact it does rather more. For just as anatomy explains how the body functions, so studying these connections helps understand developments not only across Asia, but in Europe, the Americas and Africa. They allow us to see patterns and links that otherwise pass unseen and they allow us to look at history itself in a very different way.

Curiously, however, all this has been overlooked and ignored by scholars for three reasons. First, the story of the rise of the West – the narrative that seems to explain the modern world so well – is so secure as to be unchallengeable; because the world has revolved around European empires and the US for the last four centuries, there has been little need to dispute the accepted script whereby the rise of western civilisation was both inevitable and desirable.

Second, is the fact that an increasingly crowded and competitive field has resulted in historians specialising in ever smaller, narrower and more precise studies. As Fernand Braudel once noted, it is not just important for scholars writing about the past to be bold, but to attempt to be so on a grand scale. Writing *histoire totale* or 'ultimate history' has not just been dismissed, but has become academically derided, replaced by micro-histories and studies that look at differences between communities living a handful of kilometres apart rather than thousands of miles from each other. Perhaps, though, it is possible to combine the two and to catch enough of the detail while maintaining a broad canvas that spans centuries and millennia rather than months. This requires ambition, but also a new way of conducting research and of writing history; it involves becoming not only a specialist in one's own field, but branching out into those of others.

The third reason, of course, is one that will be familiar to school leavers and the general reader alike. In the same way that our cultural, political and historical horizons are limited to western Europe, so too are our language skills. As it is, modern language teaching in schools is confined almost exclusively to French, German and Spanish and even then in ever falling numbers. For those lucky enough to be able to study classical languages, Latin is the cornerstone; Greek is taken by a tiny number of students and is all but gone from Britain's
state sector. This means that the crown jewels of the past lie ignored and undisturbed. The literature of Byzantium – such as histories by Procopius, Anna Komnene or Akropolites – are known to few, despite being produced by an empire that flourished for a thousand years; treatises written in the great Arabic-speaking world that dominated the southern Mediterranean, North Africa and Asia as far as the Himalayas for centuries, such as those by Muqaddası, Ibn Fadlān and Mas'ūdī, are obscure and overlooked. The great works of Persian poetry and prose – such as the epic Shāhnāma of Firdawsī or the Ta'riḵ-i Jahān-Gušā of Juvaynī, which relates the history of the Mongols – remain a mystery, while texts in Tamil, Hindi and Chinese – such as the Shi Ji, written more than 2,000 years ago by Sima Qian – fare no better. And yet, as King Wu-Ling, ruler of the Zhao state in northern China and beyond more than 2,000 years ago understood, it was important to keep up with the times: 'A talent for following the ways of yesterday', he declared in 307 bc, 'is not sufficient to improve the world of today.' We hear constantly from television adverts and from commentators that we live in an increasingly globalised world; we should rethink the way we look at the present – and at the past – accordingly.

A scene from the Shāhnāma, the national epic of Greater Persia, 14th century.

Perhaps the most obvious starting point concerns the basic irrelevance of Europe in classical antiquity. The Greeks had little interest in – or rivalry with – those in the hinterland of the continent and little to do with those along its littoral. Apart from the internecine struggle between states like Athens and Sparta, the orientation of ancient Greek civilisation was set clearly towards the East: first, Troy and Asia Minor and then the Persians of Asia proper. It never crossed the mind of Alexander the Great to head westwards and subjugate Italy, Spain and continental Europe. The prizes worth taking all lay in the direction of the rising, not the setting, sun.

This was echoed in the orientation of Rome, too. While courses on Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain, the Asterix comic books and the film Gladiator try to make us think that Rome's centre of gravity lay in Europe, its making lay in another continent altogether. It was the conquest of Egypt that transformed Rome from a successful state into an empire. The triumphant hero who oversaw the colonisation of the rich banks of the Nile used to boast about his achievement. I found Rome made of brick, he used to boast; but I left it made of marble.

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The key to this success was access to the agricultural wealth of Egypt and the opening up of trade routes with the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean that were so extensive that states as far away as the Indus Valley soon began to imitate Roman coinage, so plentiful was its supply. As Rome boomed, so did its appetites for luxury from the East: spices, slaves and silks. Not everyone was best pleased about this. It was scandalous, wrote Seneca, that women could wear fabrics that showed all their curves and left nothing to the imagination. That was the least of it, thought Pliny. Just think how much money was leaking out of the Roman economy and into the hands of others: hundred of millions of sestercii, all heading East.

It was not just goods and commodities that flowed along the trade routes. So did ideas. The most successful of these were about faith and, above all, those that involved salvation and eternal life. Christianity became the European export par excellence in the early modern era.
as missionaries fanned out into colonies across the world. It is all too easy to forget that the religion was born in and around Jerusalem within the context and physical setting of the Middle East. Scholars have tracked with great diligence how the disciples of Jesus Christ spread his teachings and stories about his life, death and resurrection throughout the Mediterranean.

Little attention has been paid, however, to the way that Christianity spread in Asia, where, if anything, it was more effective and more popular than in the West, gaining followers quickly as it spread along the trade routes. The growth of Christian communities was further spurred by the dispersal of believers taken captive by the Persians in their long-running wars with Rome. So widespread and fast did the faith spread, in fact, that it was not long before there were bishops dotted across the whole of Central Asia. Indeed, there was a bishop in China (in the region of Kashgar) before Britain received its first nomination to an episcopal position.

Rome's orientation east was so pronounced that, by the start of the fourth century, a major new city was being constructed that was in many ways a model of the mother city itself. New Rome was a city of splendour, with institutions, administration and monuments that aped and rivalled those of Old Rome. Constantinople – as it came to be known after its eponymous rebuilder, the Emperor Constantine – was a statement of intent. The Empire's focus lay in the East; this was where its interests lay and so, too, did its prestige rival of choice, Persia.

Even as Rome itself slipped into the gloom as it went into decline following its sacking by Alaric and the Goths in 410, Constantinople continued to flourish, with fortunes that rose and fell over the centuries. Key was its relationship with Persia, in which several phases of success and failure were charted. In the early seventh century, however, competition between the two became intense as both, in turn, gambled on all out success and on the destruction of the other. As both came within an ace of delivering a knock-out blow that would have transformed the world of Late Antiquity, a new voice could be heard rumbling in the distance, deep inside Arabia, that did precisely that.

Many scholars focus on the apparent violence and intolerance that accompanied the dawn of Islam, but one of the keys to its success was precisely the opposite: offering a message that was understandable and accessible, which played down differences and accentuated similarities. Cataclysmic struggle between the eastern Rome and Persia opened the door for Arabs to stream through and build one of the greatest empires in history. The divine messages that had been received by the Prophet Muhammad were soon being uttered and repeated from Spain as far as the Himalayas.

A page from an edition of the Quran, published in Tunisia, ninth century

The new masters of the world found themselves rulers not only of a vast realm, but controllers of immense fortunes. As money flowed in to the centre of the Islamic world, cities such as Damascus, Merv, Samarra and, above all, a new city – Baghdad – flourished. Magnificent buildings were constructed from mosques to madrasas, from bath-houses to libraries. Money, coupled with surging self-confidence in the divine appointment of the House of Islam, enabled extraordinary advances in sciences and arts, with patronage given to some of the greatest scholars in history, such as Ibn Sīnā, better known as Avicenna, al-Bīrūnī and al-Khwārizmi, who became giants in their fields. A thousand years ago, the Oxfords and Cambridges, the Harvards and Yales were located in places now largely forgotten and confined to obscurity: Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand.
The Arabic-speaking world looked at Europe at that time with bemusement and scorn, dismissing its inhabitants as violent, warlike and backward, unworthy of even being written about. Scholars were baffled by the narrow-mindedness of the westerners they came across and at their intellectual limitations: Europe had, after all, produced Plato, Aristotle and Euclid. Some had little doubt what was to blame. Once, wrote the historian al-Mas'ūdi, the ancient Greeks and the Romans had allowed the sciences to flourish; then they adopted Christianity. When they did so, they 'effaced the signs of [learning], eliminated its traces and destroyed its paths'. It is almost the precise opposite of the world as we see it today: the fundamentalists were not the Muslims, but the Christians; those whose minds were open, curious and generous were based in the East and certainly not in Europe. As one author put it, when it came to writing about non-Islamic lands, 'we did not enter them [in our book] because we see no use whatsoever in describing them'. They were intellectual backwaters.

Backwaters they may have been, but there were plenty of Europeans who had an eye on the luxuries of the East: spices, fabrics, jewels, books even. Our own modern presumptions make it easy to think of the passage of the Silk Roads as passing exclusively from East to West; but exchange is a two-way mechanism. The problem was how to pay for the goods acquired in the Muslim world. Fine swords were highly prized, though they required great skill to make. Archaeological and literary sources also reveal that amber, wax and honey were also shipped East in considerable volume. But the greatest prize that was sold was not food or produce, or even items that had been crafted by human hands; rather, it was human beings themselves.

Cities like Venice, Verdun, Utrecht, Prague and Mainz all did good business trafficking slaves to Arab lands, above all, women and children. It was the Vikings, however, who seized control of this lucrative business, eventually building trading stations along the Russian river systems flowing south towards the Black and Caspian seas that grew into towns such as Kiev and Novgorod.

Determination to get closer to the sources of wealth played an important role during the time of the Crusades, which began in the late 11th century. Tempting though it is to focus on knightly piety, on the bravery and personal devotion of men to fight for their beliefs, not everyone who was involved in taking and maintaining the Holy Land was solely thinking about serving God. The Italian city states of Amalfi, Pisa and, above all, Genoa and Venice earned handsome rewards by opening up new trade routes with Palestine and Egypt and later with the Black Sea, which survived and expanded long after the Crusaders were driven out of Jerusalem in 1187 and then from their last foothold at Acre in 1291.

Christopher Columbus, by Sebastiano del Piombo, 16th century.

It was the desire to get closer to the source of the legendary riches of India and China that spurred the age of European discovery. Christopher Columbus had not been trying to sail around the world to see if it was flat, or to find out what lay across a seemingly endless ocean: his journey was specifically intended to find a new route to Asia. Before the 1490s, countries such as Spain and Portugal found themselves at the wrong end of the world; afterwards, they found themselves at its centre.

The transformation of Europe into a series of powers that controlled empires across the globe has many explanations, ranging from calorie consumption in different parts of the continent,
fertility levels, environmental and climate change, sophistication of financial institutions and the exploitation of fortunate local circumstances. However, one key element to the success of Spain and Portugal, the Dutch Republic, France and Britain in ruling over land and sea was the western propensity for - and experience with - military violence. The struggle for power within Europe was constant, resulting in a near-endless litany of warfare, which in turn led to scientific advances in ballistics, firearms and weapons production. Not all the West's conquests abroad resulted directly from the use of force: in some cases, as in Bengal, local rulers hired westerners as mercenaries, only to find their powers being superseded and expropriated.

In the early modern period and onwards, the Silk Roads remained as vibrant and as central as they ever had been. Bullion extracted from the Americas was recycled via centres such as Seville, London and Amsterdam to fuel building projects in India, China and beyond that reflected an increasingly globalised, inter-connected economy.

By the 19th century, however, rivalries between the great European powers spilled over into all corners of the globe. Nowhere, however, were they more fierce than in the heart of Asia. What was at stake was not just control of India – the subject of growing concern in the corridors of power – but also influence and authority in the Persian Gulf and lucrative trade with China. For understandable reasons, historians look closely at the countdown to the First World War through a European lens, concentrating on German aggression and of missed steps during the July Crisis of 1914, which led to four years of tragedy and suffering.

Here, too, though, what was happening along the Silk Roads had a profound importance. Competition between Great Britain and Russia had reached intense levels in the decades before the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in July 1914, worrying policymakers in London so much as to think of ways of trying to orientate St Petersburg's attention away from the East and towards Germany and its western flank. Britain's buffer against its Russian rival had been 'reduced to the thinness of a wafer', one senior diplomat moaned; better, concluded the foreign secretary, to have an unfriendly Germany than have bad relations with Russia. If Britain did not stand by Russia as Europe lurched towards war, Sir George Clark observed: 'Our very existence as an Empire will be at stake.'

The results were catastrophic and they hid the story of the war by stressing the culpability of the Kaiser and his generals, while quietly leaving things unsaid that were best unsaid. The discovery of oil in Persia, for example, was of enormous importance for Britain's war effort, leaving automobiles, trucks and Royal Navy ships at a distinct advantage against the Central Powers. So, too, did the great availability of foodstuffs as the war went on, something which made a great impression on a young soldier called Adolf Hitler. Two decades later, when talking to a League of Nations official in Danzig, he commented on how important it was for Germany to secure plentiful food supplies. This was essential, he said, 'so that no one is able to starve us again as they did in the last war'. For Hitler, the solution was obvious: capture the wheat fields of the Ukraine.

In fact, it was precisely this that dictated the decision to invade the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. German planners had looked carefully at crop yields in southern Russia and concluded that the richness of the soil would grow food that would fuel a great empire. Plans were drawn up by Herbert Backe, born to German parents in Baku and a specialist in the agronomy of the steppe lands. The Soviet Union was divided in two: a 'surplus' zone that produced much and a 'deficit zone' that only consumed. Attention was to be focused on the former, whose fields would supply Germans for generations. It was envisaged that there
would be dire consequences for Soviets themselves. In the first plans, no number was given to those who would starve to death as a result of a German invasion: x million would die. Two weeks later, an update report made clear the scale of the likely suffering: tens of millions would be likely to starve.

It soon became clear that the invasion, codenamed Barbarossa, was not going to plan. Although the German advance was swift, supply lines soon became overstretched and, more to the point, it turned out that expectations of what the 'surplus zone' would yield were wildly optimistic. Faced with severe food shortages, the decision was taken to start cutting calories in the rations of prisoners of war and inmates of detention camps that had been set up across Poland and elsewhere. Within weeks, it was decided to cut food supplies to a minimum and to begin killing those who were too weak to work. Thus the Final Solution was born.

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The story of the second half of the 20th century and the first decade and a half of the 21st has seen the Silk Roads retain their centrality. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and United States clashed repeatedly, vying for position in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, while attempting to improve ties with China, India, Pakistan and Turkey. Although the story of the problems that have followed is familiar to many, the sudden richness of material that has been made available through the accelerated declassification of documents and from cables and evidence leaked by Edward Snowden and Wikileaks means that the catalogue of errors made by those seeking to gain access to oil supplies, to benefit from the financial spending of unsavoury regimes or to establish strategic advantage in a crucial part of the world can be seen in their full horror.

It is no coincidence that the heart of the world is where we are witnessing the birth pains of a new era: the world is changing around us dramatically and much of the change is driven from the same locations, the same places that it has always been driven from. Nor is it a coincidence that the networks that connect East and West are also an area of opportunity, of expansion and of hope. New Silk Roads are being established across the spine of Asia, as countries bind together their commercial ties and strategic interests to confront a new dawn. As a historian, it is striking to see how powerful ideas about the past are in the rhetoric and co-operation between places such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India and China, whose leaders talk approvingly about re-establishing connections and about a new centre of gravity in the world. The Silk Roads are rising again.

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