

ALESSANDRO COSCIA

SERGIO COPPOLA

SECRET STORIES ON THE SILK ROAD

SYMBOLS, ARCHITECTURES
AND MYTHS BETWEEN ITALY,
THE MIDDLE EAST AND CHINA

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Print Finishing. Opera Milano

Chinese translation by Translated Srl. Rome

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Special thanks to:

James Bradburne

Maria Goffredo

Associazione Amici di Brera e dei Musei Milanesi

© 2020 - Mimesis International Edition (Milan - Udine)

Resiliences Series No. 12

ISBN 9788869773396

www.mimesedizioni.it

Via Risorgimento 33

20099 Sesto San Giovanni (MI)

Phone: +39 02 24861657 / 02 2416383

Ristampe

2 3 4 5

2020

“Panta rhei”

Eraclito

535 BC – 475 BC

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CAVEAT

What really surprises Italian people when they get in contact with Chinese people is the great number of similarities: affinities in the way of thinking and doing. Look at the shapes of pasta, at the meaning of family, the dialects we both have. These are all things, results, which stem from an ancient history of relations between peoples: direct and ancient contacts, dating back to the great Roman and Chinese empires. But relations have also been mediated by the populations located between them that have assimilated some traits of both, and these traits have been exchanged “up and down branches”, until they arrived in China and Italy.

This is precious book because it traces a history of mankind, architecture and myths across Italy and China. With everything in between. This reconstruction is different from those in the books we are familiar with: it is an exciting interpretation that opens up new lines of investigation.

However, the research published here has another great value: it is comforting. It provides documented evidence that fear of the Other is only a tool aimed at defending small interests. In fact people, if put in contact in a curious and peaceful way, can only exchange values and opportunities. Thus confirming what has been demonstrated by recent history between our country, the East, and, in particular, China.

Francesco Arecco and Giacomo Ghidelli

概要

PREFACE

The relevance of a history book like this has been confirmed in the newspapers of the last year.

The new Silk Road, to which I am pleased to have made my modest contribution when I was part of the Technical Mission of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, is in fact a strategic partnership project between Italy, China and the more than 70 countries involved that goes beyond commerce and also includes the arts, culture and technology. During his state visit in February 2017, Italian President Sergio Mattarella highlighted the importance of creating a Silk Road of knowledge. Major projects are now underway between Italy and China on the innovation and cultural exchange front and, in particular, on the architecture front. In this context, the Polytechnic University of Milan recently opened an Innovation Hub in Xi'an – a city famous for its terracotta warriors and for being the starting point of the old Silk Road, but today the subject of a major technological development – together with one of the most important universities in the People's Republic of China (Xi'an Jiaotong University).

I like to think, indeed I am convinced, that this is not a simple marriage of convenience, but a union determined by a thousand-year series of relationships and exchanges. There had already been engagement between the Roman Empire and the Han Empire, as Coppola and Coscia point out.

It is up to us now to maintain and develop these relationships which, in relation to the globalisation in which we are immersed, will have the desired and foreseeable effect of, on the one hand, opening up very important markets for all our export-focussed companies and, on the other, re-establishing a cultural dialogue between two of the oldest civilisations on our planet.

Giuliano Noci

RIVERS OF SILK

Shang Shan Ruo Shui (上善若水)

Lao Tsu 3rd – 4th century BCE

When the young Marco Polo set out from Venice in 1271 to travel eastwards, he left a bustling maritime city with a population of just over 100.000. Among the maritime powers, it was Venice that controlled the main routes linking the Adriatic with Constantinople, the Levant and Egypt. The expansion of the Mongols, who had occupied vast regions of Asia, touched the shores of the Black Sea around 1240, and around 1260 it approached the Mediterranean. Its consequences for trade were very important: for about ninety years, safe conditions were guaranteed for the flow of oriental goods and the penetration into the interior of Asia of western merchants, and the Venetians among them, whose direct access to the sources of oriental spices, aromas and dyes had been forbidden by Egypt. The Levant Crusader states, founded at the beginning of the 12th century on the wave of the First Crusade, in the 13th century were for the most part reduced to coastal territories; until their fall into the hands of the Muslims in 1291, they nevertheless played an important economic role. Trade was the lifeblood of Venice's economic life, and Marco Polo was one of its instruments.

Making his way along the Silk Road (actually many roads – it only acquired its popular nickname in 1877) he arrived at a city of nearly 2.000.000, with over 50 Christian churches and at least one mosque – Chang'an. The imperial city of Chang'an was located northwest of today's Xi'an. During the Tang Dynasty, the area included the area inside the earlier Xi'an fortifications, plus some small areas to its east and west. During its heyday, Chang'an was one of the world's largest cities. Chang'an was called a "million-man city" in early Chinese records, and according to the census in 742 CE, 362,921 families with 1,960,188 persons were counted in the metropolitan area of Chang'an. In Chang'an the drums beat at nightfall to

signal the closure of the great gates, and Marco Polo entered the swirling crowds as a small Venetian droplet in the great river of contemporary Chinese civilization.

Roads are like rivers, carrying travelers and their wares along odd byways, often following the path of least resistance; through cold mountain passes; through cruel deserts, seeking the shortest route from oasis to oasis; through humid jungles and dark forests. But whereas the water and the flotsam on its surface both travel the whole way from their source to the sea, trade goods are passed from hand to hand, and rarely arrive at their destination accompanied by the same person or beast of burden they started their journey with. So despite its deeply evocative name, the Silk Road wasn't a single road at all, it was many; and it didn't carry only silk, but spices, tools, jewelry, porcelain and precious metals. The goods that travelled from Chang'an and passed through the Jade Gate at the edge of the great Karakoram desert, and eventually arrived in Constantinople, before finishing their journey by sea to Venice had not only been transmitted, like a letter in the post, but often transmuted and translated as well. A bolt of silk may have been exchanged for a horse in Fergana, and the horse for pepper in Samarkand, the pepper for pistachios in Constantinople, before ending in a market stall in the piazza San Marco in Venice. At each step of the way, merchants met and traded, changed their camels for donkeys, then traded their tired donkeys for camels. The Silk Road was parsed into segments, verses in an epic poem, every way station a pause for breath. There were few single travelers, making their way from the beginning to the end of the long journey, but countless individual traders, of different cultures, races, languages and backgrounds, all swirling towards the West. Ideas travelled the length of the Silk Road, from the centre of power, China, to the hinterland in Europe, crossing the Bosphorus at Constantinople to a continent still centuries behind in terms of art, education, science and technology. It was not a one-way flow, as China too embraced ideas from abroad, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. But ideas are not only expressed in words, but in things, and every bronze mirror, printed book or porcelain vase embodied an expression of an entire culture – its aesthetics, its religion, its beliefs and its technologies – and

every silk banner and every peppercorn carried by the tide of camels travelling the Silk Road brought with it Oriental culture into the West.

Like Daoist virtue, ideas are like water. They gush, flow and trickle along the avenues of human commerce, often appearing when they least expected, collecting underground and emerging as fresh new springs after a welcome rain. Ideas travel quickly, and like viruses, are passed from person to person as they spread across continents. The transmission of Buddhism to China is thought to have started in the late 2nd or the 1st century CE, and during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), Buddhism was introduced from India and Chan (Zen) Buddhism continued to grow in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). We see the contamination of Buddhism by Greek influences in the art that developed from the 2nd through the 11th century C.E. in Serindia, the western region of China that forms part of modern Central Asia. Rediscovered by Sir Aurel Stein at the beginning of the 20th century this art derives from the Greco-Buddhist of what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gandharan sculpture combined Indian traditions with Greek influences. Greek-influenced culture may have existed prior to Alexander the Great's invasions, but travelling Buddhist missionaries introduced this artistic influence, along with the religion itself, into Serindia, resulting in a style that is a hybrid of Greek, Chinese and Persian influences.

The neurophysiologist Sir Jonathan Miller argued that only human beings created 'styles', that they were the only species who could imagine 'something like that, only a little different'. The most elaborate bird's nests or anthills never change in such a way as we could imagine a 'baroque' or 'rococo' anthill. They are always produced according the same imitative logic. Human thought, on the other hand, and as a consequence human material culture, is in a state of constant re-invention, shaped discursively as the result of countless 'conversations', which transform meaning, form and function as the object – or subject – changes hands. Often even our words retain the traces of their origins: a Chinese character such as the word 'an', peace, 安, such as in the word Chang'an, the 'great peace' still retains a memory of a woman at home. In much the same ways Greek and Latin roots continue to inform contemporary words, such as 'contemporary'

which includes the words 'with' and 'time'. So it is that Mausolo's ashes mixed with Artemisia's tears are transformed into a monument, just as a Mongolian yurt finds itself reborn as a tempietto. And so it is that Coscia and Coppola's book tells an enchanting story, the story of travel, trade and transformation; of encounters and exchanges; of culture and communion. Their story is one that is urgently needed today, as it speaks to the need to listen to the echoes of the past, and understand how the people we are is a consequence of the countless reflections and refractions of the waves on the surface of a river, carrying us into the future like flotsam, or polishing us smooth like pebbles on the shore.

James Bradburne

介绍

INTRODUCTION

It all started with a visit to Ravenna.

A famous site, a monument that sparked my curiosity. Consulting texts and research conducted on other sources offered disparate answers to my questions.

I therefore asked myself some questions to understand more. Why is the mausoleum of Theodoric the way it is?

A question that may seem trivial, but the solution to which may not be so obvious.

This question piqued my interest and research led me from Ravenna to the Middle East, and from there even further east to China.

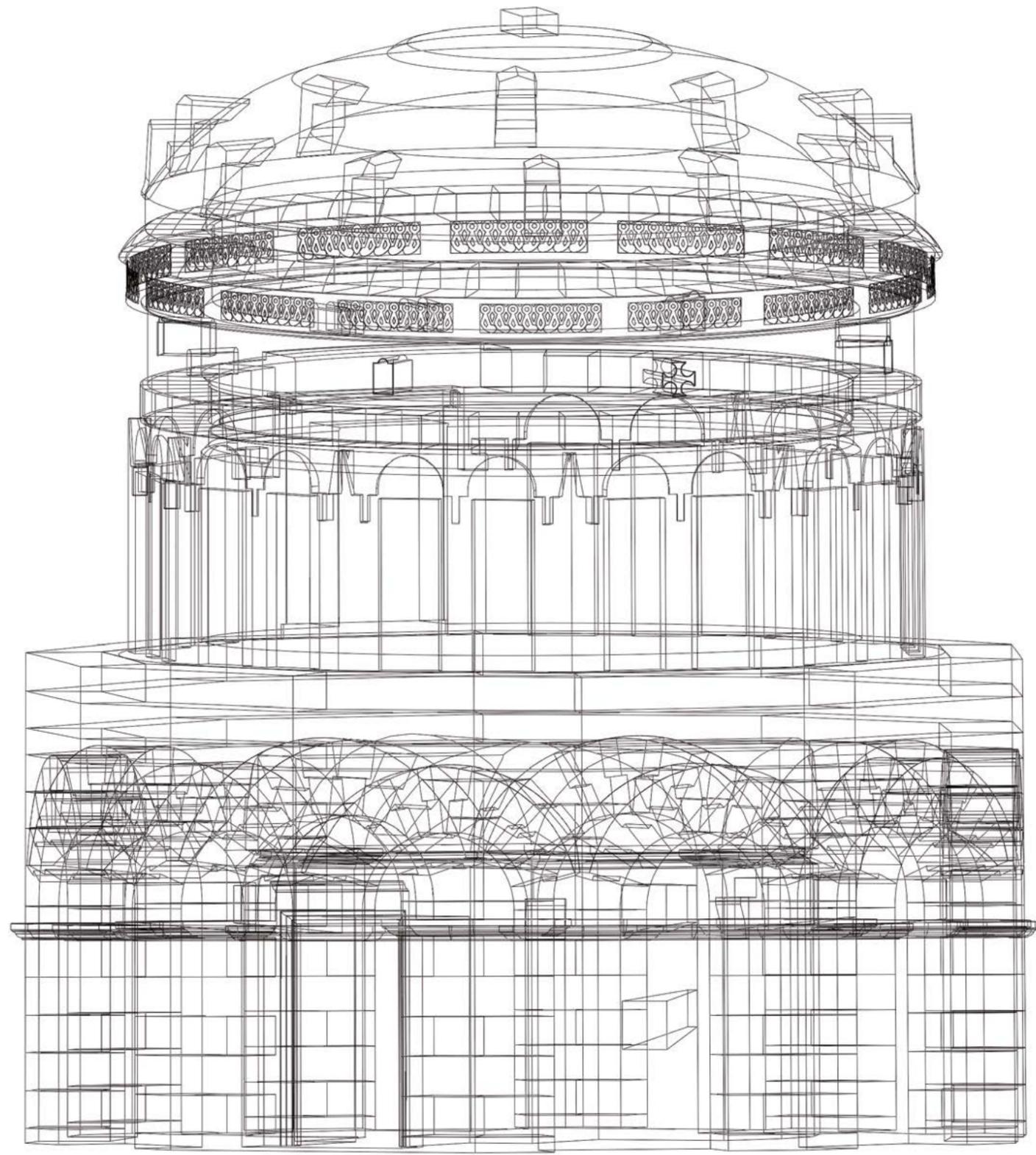
Just as a sailor relies on the route, a line that joins two points on a nautical chart, and knows that he will reach land at the end of the voyage, I persevered with my idea, often following my instinct, until I came across Alessandro Coscia.

It was he who offered me an essential contribution that made this book possible. I was thus able to find the answers to some questions, above all due to the fact that the disciplines of Medieval and Byzantine History and Islamic History follow parallel paths which rarely meet. It is also interesting to have a multicentric vision along the routes that led merchants, warriors and relics to cross paths, in an immense region and over four millennia.

The book presents some knowledge that has already been investigated but never well connected by a logical process of in-depth study and exchange, a process that is still increasingly relevant today. The innovative aspect thus lies in its ability to offer a synthesis between the different cultures that passed through the ancient Near East.

I would like to thank some people I met on my journey and who, in different ways, encouraged me to complete this project: Maria Cristina Carile of UNIBO; Mauro Della Valle of UNIMI; Silvia Togni of Ravenna; Giulio Magli, Archaeoastronomist, Department of Mathematics, Polytechnic University of Milan. In this case, never have these words been so true: *“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable”*. (Seneca, from *Letters to Lucilius*, letter 71).

Sergio Coppola



神 “话” 建 筑

Mathematical model of the architecture of the Mausoleum of Theodoric, in the three-dimensional representation, visualised in wireframe, the starting point and symbol of this research.

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Finito di stampare nel 2020 in Limited Edition da Print-Finishing. Opera Milano

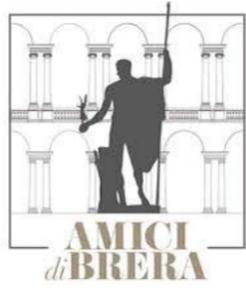


Alessandro Coscia: an archaeologist specialised in the Greek and Roman fields. He studied in Milan and France. He has broadened his horizons to the history of ancient religions and anthropology, to which he has dedicated various articles, essays and conferences. He has added screenwriter and television author to his work as a scientist.

He works in the Exhibitions and Events office at the Pinacoteca di Brera.



Sergio Coppola: poet by birth, scientist by passion, free by vocation. After a successful life in the disciplines of design and engineering, he ventured into his great passions: art and history.



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