

At the Crossroad of the Ancient World – On the Kingdom of Kroraina and its implications for the Silk Route model

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Abstract

Scholarly works and approaches to the Silk Routes, as a model describing exchange and interaction across Eurasia since at least antiquity, are extraordinarily diverse. But, at least within the field of economic history one can broadly speak of two narratives that dominate the research on the early Silk Routes, that of Empires and that of Nomads. The first is primarily interested in the great empires at the “ends” of the routes, Rome and Han, who are seen as the drivers and initiators of exchange. The second focuses on the role of the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe, on the importance of exchange in their social and political systems, and often sets the start of Silk Route exchange far into prehistory.

This paper however aims to challenge both these approaches to the Silk Routes by discussing the evidence from second to fourth century Kroraina in the Southern Tarim Basin, drawing mainly from the famed Niya and Loulan sites. Not only does the rich sources from this kingdom, both written and archaeological, show that Silk Route exchange continued after the fall of the Han dynasty. It also reveals that a wide range of actors were involved, from the Krorainans themselves to the Chinese army and Sogdians merchants far from home. Based on these findings this paper will end by proposing a new multifaceted and tiered model of the Silk Road, one endeavouring to grasp the full complexity of exchange through Inner Asia in late antiquity.