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James A. Millward

THE SILK ROAD

A Very Short Introduction

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A Very Short Introduction
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August 2012
Washington, DC

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Chapter 1

Environment and empires

Washington, DC, in June is as hot as many parts of the silk road, though not as dry as the steppes and deserts at the center of the Eurasian continent, from which mountain massifs block moisture from both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. Its humidity is more like that of India, which the conquerors Alexander and Babur found insufferable, or the lower Yangzi River basin in China, the historical center of silk production. The weather, then, was appropriate enough on the National Mall in June 2002, when the Smithsonian Institution convened a folklife festival dedicated to “The Silk Road.”

As the opening ceremonies began in a tent on the long park between the Capitol and the Washington Monument, ventilation fans blew in the scent of dust, hay, and even camels from the transformed Mall. Academics, journalists, embassy representatives, and other special invitees sweated in folding chairs while VIPs perspired on stage: the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, hot but beaming to see the fruition of his project; the Aga Khan, descendant of the prophet Muhammed, Imam of the Shia Ismailis, and festival underwriter, flushed but dignified. Only the featured speaker, the U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell, seemed cool as he stepped smartly to the stage in a crisp shirt and tie. It was less than a year after the 9/11 attacks, U.S. forces were occupying Afghanistan (at the hub of the silk road), and plans for war on Iraq (a major silk-road station) were being hatched only a few blocks