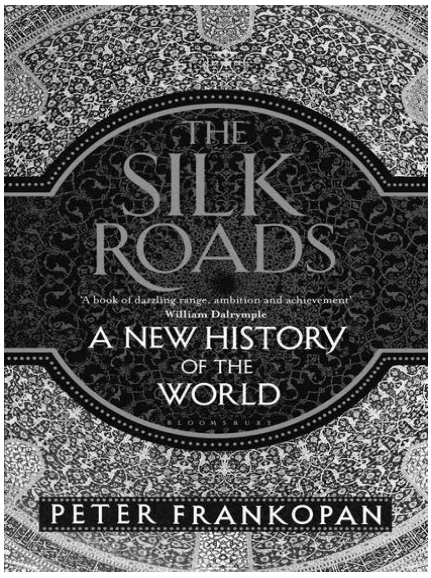
Peter Frankopan

„History has to be spot on accurate, regardless of who the readers are“

Peter Frankopan is Professor of Global History at Oxford University. His research revolves around the history of the Mediterranean, Byzantium, the Middle East, Russia, Persia/Iran, Central Asia. His recent book *The Silk Roads* (Bloomsbury: 2015) narrates global history from a non-Eurocentric perspective. We interviewed the scholar on his experience as a historian with a literary appeal.

Your book The Silk Roads *presents itself as an alternative history of the world, written from a Eurasian rather than a Eurocentric perspective. What do you consider its most challenging thesis?*

Peter Frankopan: It does not present an alternative history, somehow replacing Europe with Eurasia (or elsewhere). But what it does do is to show that it is impossible to understand history without looking at connections, at exchange – commercial, religious, cultural, linguistic and so on – and to somehow think that Europe's past and present are not directly linked with what has happened elsewhere in the world. Europe rose from its connections with the east. That starts with the Ancient Greeks: for them, the military, philosophical and intellectual rivals were not in France or Germany, but in Persia and India. This is a story that can be stretched out from the past right up to today.



Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads. A New History of the World* © Bloomsbury Publishing

We Europeans have become used to a grand narrative about ourselves, starting in Ancient Greece and culminating in our own wealthy, liberal and democratic present. How does your book change the way people think about Europe and its place in the world? Is there any explicit political message you would like your readers to take away from the book?

P.F.: No. I am a historian, not a narcissist. I am not trying to convince readers to take a political message. I am trying to express my knowledge that is based on evidence written in a huge range of languages, on archaeological sources, on numismatics, palaeography and so on, to explain how the past looks to me. I suspect that most people, other than specialisists in my field, are unfamiliar with many of the texts, events and people I describe, so my message is, I suppose, that I am trying to help enlighten and introduce readers to things that they not know about already.

You started your career as a Byzantologist, or as what would be called a 'medievalist' from a Eurocentric perspective. Major parts of Silk Roads deal with topics historically and geographically outwith your area of expertise, such as Dutch and British colonialism or the 19th and 20th centuries. Did you leave your comfort zone? How did it feel?

P.F.: The whole point of being a Byzantine historian is not being a 'medievalist', which as you say is a western European term; but it means nothing to a scholar of the Byzantine empire as it would have

meant nothing to the Byzantines themselves. I do not know what you mean too by 'expertise'. Are scholars only supposed to read one kind of material in one period and one region? Who sets such idiotic boundaries and do they even exist? You can learn much about Dutch or British colonialism if you look at colonialism in the Abbasid Caliphate; under the Mongols; or in Han dynasty China. The difficulty is being able to handle complex materials in a wide range of languages. Part of that requires technical skill (which you can learn) and part requires being a good scholar who understands the problems that primary materials pose. That is much harder to do. Anyone can learn to read a text; but understanding it is another matter. I do not know what my comfort zone is either. I travel a great deal; I follow the daily news in many regions of the world; I read constantly. So it seems entirely natural to write about things I am interested in. It would be absurd not to do so, and a complete waste of my life to think I should be limited by intellectual boundaries that I did not even set for myself.

You write in a graceful and well-balanced manner. How central is style to you as a historian?

P.F.: Much of my work involves reading wonderful works of history and literature. You learn very quickly how to recognise good writing. So it is very flattering for you to say such kind words.

In which ways do you write differently when addressing a broad readership rather than specialised scholars? Do you drop some jargon and relegate technicalities to the endnotes? How does it affect the accuracy of the history-telling?

P.F.: History has to be spot on accurate, regardless of who the readers are. It is not always easy discussing tricky topics, especially ones where scholars do not agree, in a way that allows different opinions to be recognised but without getting stuck in the details. Jargon and technicalities can be important in history – details matter just as they do in mathematics. But sometimes specialists can either be self-indulgent or insecure and feel the need to show their learning. I understand that too, especially from my first years as an academic when I worried that I had to show that I had read absolutely everything about a certain subject. Now, when I write for non-specialists, I will always cite relevant scholarship in the field as I think it is important to do so. But I will point to one work, rather than to 25.

You didn't take history at A-level, but English literature. Has this shaped the way you write?

P.F.: I have no idea. The categorisation of subjects is totally artificial and can in fact by intellectually harmful. Are Shakespeare's works not important for historians? Can you really understand the rise of the Nazis without understanding the culture of the early 20th century? It annoys me that we create these compartments. If you are interested in ideas, who cares what A Levels you do? I genuinely cannot tell the difference between history, politics, geography, literature, language, religion, music and even now the sciences. How can anyone think it is even possible to categorise these as separate?

Do you consider history writing a literary activity?

P.F.: Is there a choice? ◆

(The interview was arranged and conducted by Pit Péporté and Yannick Lambert)

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