

Connecting Pathways – The Organization and Impact of Medieval Desert Trade Routes in Southwest Central Asia

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The illustrious Silk Roads which traversed Central Asia for several centuries have been subject to a great variety of different studies, but few have sought to characterise the routes themselves, their structure and their organisation. This paper seeks to present a new study, which draws upon a range of different sources to investigate how the structure of routes, their maintenance and control changed over time.

Focussing on the period between the 11th-13th centuries, the study utilises historical and archaeological sources to map in detail caravanserais, way-stations and logistical structures, charting their construction, use and disuse. Whilst the broad aim is to contribute towards a greater narrative of Central Asian empires and their interaction with traders and trade routes, the case study presented examines in detail a region of the Karakum desert – one of several pivotal bridges between Central Asia and the Near East. The hostile climate of the Karakum provides fascinating insights into the methods by which travellers were able to survive the challenges of long distance journeys with very few immediate resources. Furthermore, changes in the landscape over time demonstrate investment by successive empires to control these routes and utilise connections throughout Asia. As the data is starting to show, the traditionally perceived ‘highways’ are but one of a complex mesh of pathways providing many different axes of travel across the desert. It is pertinent to explore these minor routes, and examine how they challenge our traditional perceptions of ‘Silk Road’ connections in medieval Central Asia.