

Caravanserai

0-1500



The Exhibition

Caravanserais were vital hubs for trade and travel across the ancient world, particularly along the Silk Road and other major trade routes. These establishments provided a secure resting place for caravans, offering accommodations, provisions, and stabling for animals. Strategically located, caravanserais facilitated the movement of goods, ideas, and cultures, contributing to economic and social interactions between distant regions.

Architecturally, they varied from simple enclosures to elaborate complexes with courtyards, fountains, and storerooms. The legacy of caravanserais highlights their importance in connecting diverse civilizations and fostering intercultural exchange throughout history.

The exhibition allows visitors to explore ten of these ancient monuments – the physical infrastructure of the trade and exchange that characterized the ancient 'Silk Road'. The sites are introduced, starting in Dunhuang (in China) and ending on the outskirts of Antalya (in Turkey).

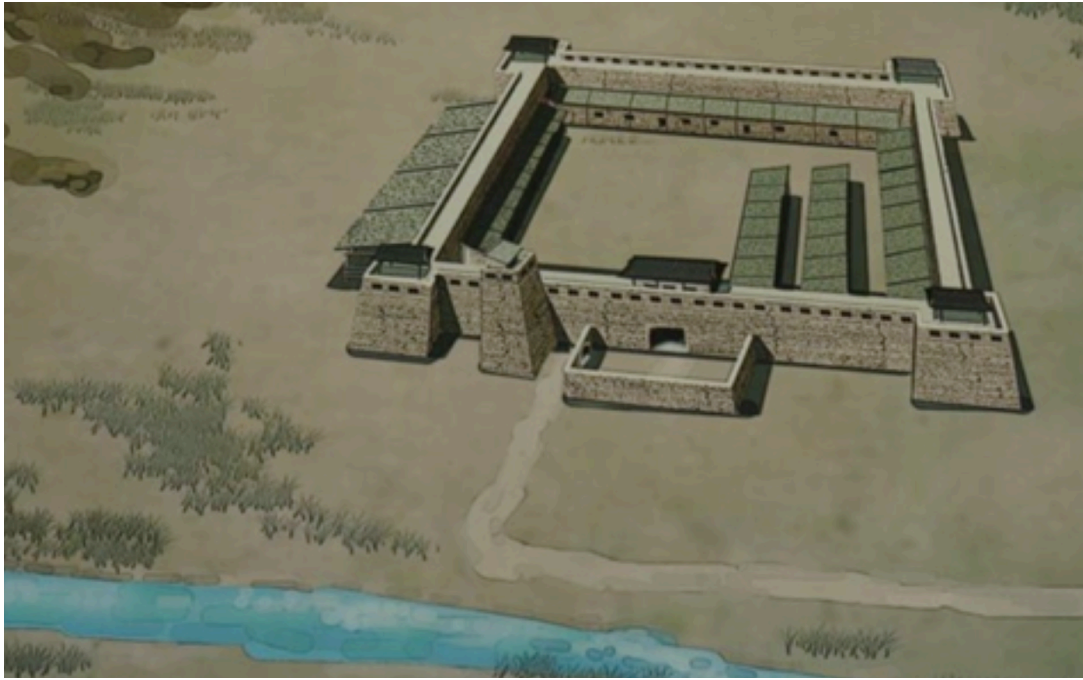


SILK ROAD
VIRTUAL MUSEUM

Caravanserai

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FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION



ARTIST IMPRESSION OF THE HANGING SPRING PAVILION

64kms East of Dunhuang

In September 1987 a road maintenance crew discovered the site of what would be revealed to have been a Han Dynasty staging post, dating from the first days of the ancient silk roads, some two thousand years ago. Archaeologists uncovered the main structures.

More remarkable, however, was the discovery of 23,000 bamboo slips with Chinese writing that enabled them to reconstruct the daily life of a caravanserai. Water was scarce and conditions could be dangerous.



At least two accounts describe horses driven mad by the wild sandstorms. Within the walls there was safety. Covered accommodation was available for the more important guests, the rest would find shelter in the courtyard. Kings and queens, ambassadors and envoys, from over 20 countries are recorded as having passed through the Hanging Spring's facilities.

On one occasion the staff had to prepare a banquet for over one thousand guests, though only three hundred were served wine from goblets. The archaeologists also discovered a decree that insisted that all activities (e.g. collecting wood, farming, hunting) be undertaken in sympathy with the seasons – possibly the world's first environmental edict.

And to think, there was one of these every 40kms – so much more waiting to be discovered.

Caravanserai

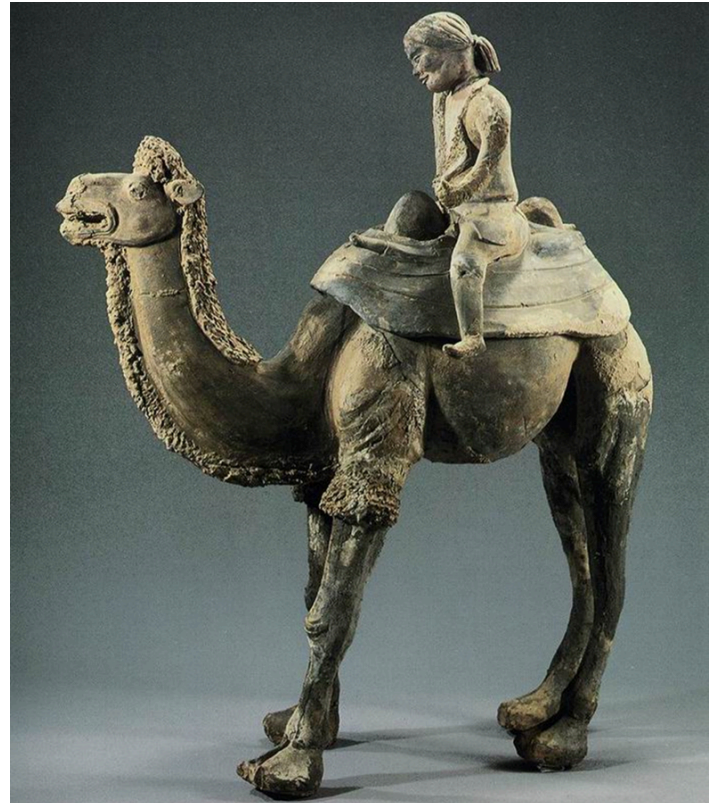
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A GIRL ON A CAMEL (MID 7TH-CENTURY)

Shanxi Province. Shanxi Museum, Taiyuan

This grey pottery Tang Dynasty figurine of the unearthed in Changzhi (Shangdang) has a real sense of proportion and naturalness missing from so many 'grave goods' figures discovered elsewhere.

The 'Hu' riders also seem to differ from other merchant ethnicities. Unlike others, these lifelike figures were individually hand-crafted by skilled artists. The poor girl looks tired after a long day.



RABAT-I-SHARIF

150kms North East of Mashhad

Ribat-i Sharaf is famous as the 'museum of brickwork' for different shapes and inscriptions made with and on brick. There are also stucco carvings with vegetal and geometric patterns on top of two mihrabs and the terraces.

It is probable that it doubled up as a seasonal royal residence – the outer court-yard served the merchants and their animals, the inner courtyard was reserved for the king, his wives and other officials.



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AKSARAY SULTAN HAN

2kms North West from Sultanhani, Turkey

First built in 1229 and renovated 75 years later after a fire, this is the largest caravanserai yet discovered. It has an area of 4,500m² and was capable of accommodating 1,000 people and 300 animals. It features a large central courtyard surrounded by covered galleries and two stories of rooms.

It also has a free-standing kiosk mosque, adorned with decorative motifs and inscriptions, in the middle of the courtyard, reflecting the craftsmanship and artistic sophistication of the Seljuk period.

MULTANI CARAVANSERAI

6km North West of Baku, Azerbaijan

Not all the caravanserai were intended solely for overland travellers. This one, not far from the shores of the Caspian Sea was frequented by of merchants from principally of Multan in present-day Pakistan.

They would exchange textiles, spices and herbs, gemstones, artisanal products and agricultural staples for silks, exotica from the silk road traders, spices from Central Asia as well as copper, iron and silver and foodstuffs.



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