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# THE ROLE OF CULTURAL NGOs AND GREECE WITH THE SILK ROADS NETWORK

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## ABSTRACT

The ancient Silk Road formed the first bridge between the East and the West forming an important network that extended over land, but also included sea trading routes. This paper examines how a historic network of routes enabled the exchange not only of silk and other expensive goods, but also cultures, ideas, discoveries and religions, shaping the world as we know it today. It is being discussed how the case of the interconnection between the Chinese and Greek civilizations through the mutual exchange of artistic ideals proves to be a timeless pattern governing the interaction between cultures transcending historical periods, cultural spheres of inspiration and geographic locations.

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**KEYWORDS:** Silk Road, cultural routes, interconnection, Gandhara, cultural heritage, cultural cooperation, Hellenic Committee of the Blue Shield

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Acclaimed as one of the greatest routes in the history of mankind, the ancient Silk Road formed the first bridge between the East and the West and was an important trading vehicle between the ancient empires of China, central and western Asia, the Indian sub-continent and the West. The Silk Road spanned the Asian continent and represented a form of global

economy and even though the world then was smaller, it was much more difficult to traverse than nowadays.

It formed a network that extended over land, but also included sea trading routes. The Silk Road stretched from China to Korea and Japan in the east and connected China through Central Asia to India in the south and to Turkey, Greece and Italy in the West (Fig.1).



Figure 1. Silk road routes from Greece to China (World History Encyclopedia, Source: Whole World Land and Oceans, Public domain)

The Silk Road system existed for over 2,000 years, with specific routes changing over time (Dobra-Manço, 2015). Highly valued silk, cotton, wool, glass, jade, lapis lazuli, gold, silver, salt, spices, tea, herbal medicines, foods, fruits, flowers, horses, musical instruments and new inventions traveled along those routes (Elisseeff 2000; Whitefield 1999).

Travelers in caravans had to brave bleak deserts, high mountains, extreme heat and cold. They had to face bandits and raiders, imprisonment, starvation, and other forms of deprivation. Those going by sea braved the uncertainties of the oceans, the weather, poorly constructed ships and pirates.

This historic network of routes enabled the exchange not only of silk and other expensive goods, but also cultures, ideas, discoveries and religions, shaping the world as we know it today. Many artistic influences and artworks were transmitted via the Silk

Road, particularly through Central Asia, where Hellenistic, Iranian, Indian and Chinese influences could intermix. By far the best-known art of the Silk Road is the Buddhist art, which left the world the most powerful monuments along the Silk Road, among them some of the most precious Buddhist sculptures, paintings and frescoes such as in the Mogao Grottoes, bearing witness to the interconnections of ancient civilizations.

It was unavoidable and fatal that the two great civilizations, the Chinese and the Greek, would meet along the Silk Road throughout the centuries.

## 2. GRECO-BUDDHIST ART

Greco-Buddhist art represents one of the most vivid examples of this interaction. In Gandhara (Pakistan), along the Silk Road from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a peculiar style was created that is known as the 'Graeco-Buddhist art of Gandhara'.



*Figure 2. Greco-Buddhist statue of the standing Buddha, Gandhara Pakistan (1st–2nd century AD). Note the Hellenic style of free body movement and realistic attribution of the folds of the “chiton” (tunic). Tokyo National Museum TC-733. (Wikimedia Commons)*

As the name suggests, the Greco-Buddhist art combines the Greek style of highly detailed and lifelike sculptures with Buddhist themes. This artistic movement emerged after Alexander the Great marched into Asia, conquered the Iranian empire and colonized the region in about 330 B.C. The rulers he left behind had a benevolent attitude towards the Buddhist religion. The Greek language and Greek mythology were introduced to the area. The aesthetics of Greek sculpture merged with the ideas developed in the Indian kingdoms and a distinctive local school of art emerged. The Hellenistic art style began naturally to blend with Buddhist elements (Fig.2).

According to many scholars, the influence on the Graeco-Buddhist art by the Hellenistic models is clearly detected in the decoration of many sculptures, including a multitude of Hellenistic themes and patterns, such as winged atlases, putti with garlands and flowers, meanders, scrolls, Corinthian and Ionian capitals, vines, and bunches of grapes, anthemions and acanthus leaves (Fig.3, 4). The Hellenistic influences can also be discerned in the draperies of the figures of the statues that remind one of the Greek cloaks.



*Figure 3. Detail from a Kushan frieze. Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara, Here Vajrapani the protector of the Buddha depicted as Hercules. Adoption of the image of Hercules as hero and God, a figure close to a hero benefactor of humanity. Note the modelling similarity of the materials folds. (Source: licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported, CC BY-SA 3.0, British Museum).*



Figure 4. Figure of the Buddha, within a Corinthian capital, Gandhara, 3–4th century, Musee Guimet, Paris (Wikimedia commons public domain).

Most importantly, the first anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha were naturally inspired by the sculptural styles of Hellenistic Greece. Buddhist art was initially aniconic. The first depiction of the Buddha in human form coincides with the conquest of Central Asia and part of northern India from the Kushans, who originated from the north-west borders of China and marched southwards gradually conquering the Hellenistic kingdoms of Bactria and the Hindus, as well as the Indian-controlled area of Punjab.

From the 1st to the 5th century A.D. statues of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (the saints of Buddhism) were produced by the local workshops of Gandhara (Fig.3). It is generally accepted that in these sculptures, the image of the Buddha has distinctive Greek features. The latter used the figures of Apollo or Dionysus as models, with a Greek nose and Greek hairstyle, with undulated hair tied on the top of the head in a bun. These characteristics were mixed with Asian elements, such as the protruding eyes and cheekbones. In this context, one can refer to the published work by Dr. Yu Gan from the China Academy of Art on the similarities between the Kizil Cave Paintings in Xinjiang and the Byzantine Murals at Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome (Eberle et al., 2021).

The mutual exchange of artistic ideals between civilizations is a timeless pattern governing the interaction between cultures transcending historical periods, cultural spheres of inspiration and geographic locations. Such is the case of the interconnection between the Chinese and Greek civilizations (Arndt, 2005).

There is little doubt that the ancient Silk Road was a cultural route of great significance, whose story is far from over today. Its importance has been understood once again nowadays. Greece is strongly interested in further developing the friendly relations with

China in the fields of culture and heritage protection by establishing a network of cultural routes.

### 3. CULTURAL NETWORKS AND CULTURAL COOPERATION

Networks of Cultural Routes are powerful tools for promoting and preserving shared and diverse cultural identities. Mutual understanding and exchanges across boundaries should be the target of involved countries' cooperation. Both the knowledge and sharing of cultural heritage, in a multicultural approach, encourage understanding of the other's diversity, culture and education, and can prevent conflicts, aiming to ensure for all citizens a life based on peaceful coexistence (Melissen, 2005). The cultural routes promote cooperation as a tool for raising awareness and building a world identity, encouraging dialogue among populations and between religions, in order to ease tensions and prevent discrimination.

Cultural Routes offer a wide range of possibilities, including the advance of new tourism strategies, local development and the improvement of network interactions. As a destination, cultural routes can help promote cultural, religious, ecological and creative tourism. They can boost economic and social development through the proper tourist management of cultural heritage. As a consequence, the arts as well as the creative industries can flourish. This type of tourism is one of the backbones of cultural and creative economy and could potentially offer opportunities for the local communities. Cultural tourism promotion in the framework of the cultural routes is the best way for someone to learn by direct experience and individual discovery of what makes us different and similar at the same time and provides a spectrum of areas for wonder and imagination.

Cultural cooperation between Greece and China could focus on the following:

- To promote the cultural exchange between the two countries and to enhance a better understanding and interaction between the two peoples.
- To strengthen exchange of information concerning the protection of cultural heritage and its environment including the legal and physical protection of tangible and intangible heritage from ancient times up to the present.
- To propose policies on cultural heritage and protection of its broader environment.
- To propose best practices and standards regarding cultural routes and their cultural essence.

Greece can share its long experience in matters concerning the restoration, conservation, management and broader protection of cultural heritage.

Specifically, NGOs such as the Hellenic Committee of the Blue Shield can strengthen and support the exchange of information with other experts concerning the conservation of large-scale sites, based on each other's experience in the field, to discuss know-how and best practices in the areas of risk mitigation and

confrontation, as well as the holistic protection of such important sites cooperating in specific projects of common interest.

#### 4. CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE ROLE OF THE BLUE SHIELD IN GREECE

In recent decades in Greece the number of disastrous natural phenomena has increased (floods, fires, earthquakes and others), causing both social and economic problems and adverse effects on cultural heritage. We believe that the Hellenic Blue Shield will make a significant contribution to capacity-building, nationally and internationally, with a view to risk mapping, prevention and sensitization, as well as disaster management (Cunliffe et al., 2006). Our Committee has many members, very prominent scholars, experts of various disciplines. We already have close collaborations with all competent public services, other NGOs and Universities (Fig.5). Actually, we have a very advanced information system and data base, research questionnaires and educational programs.

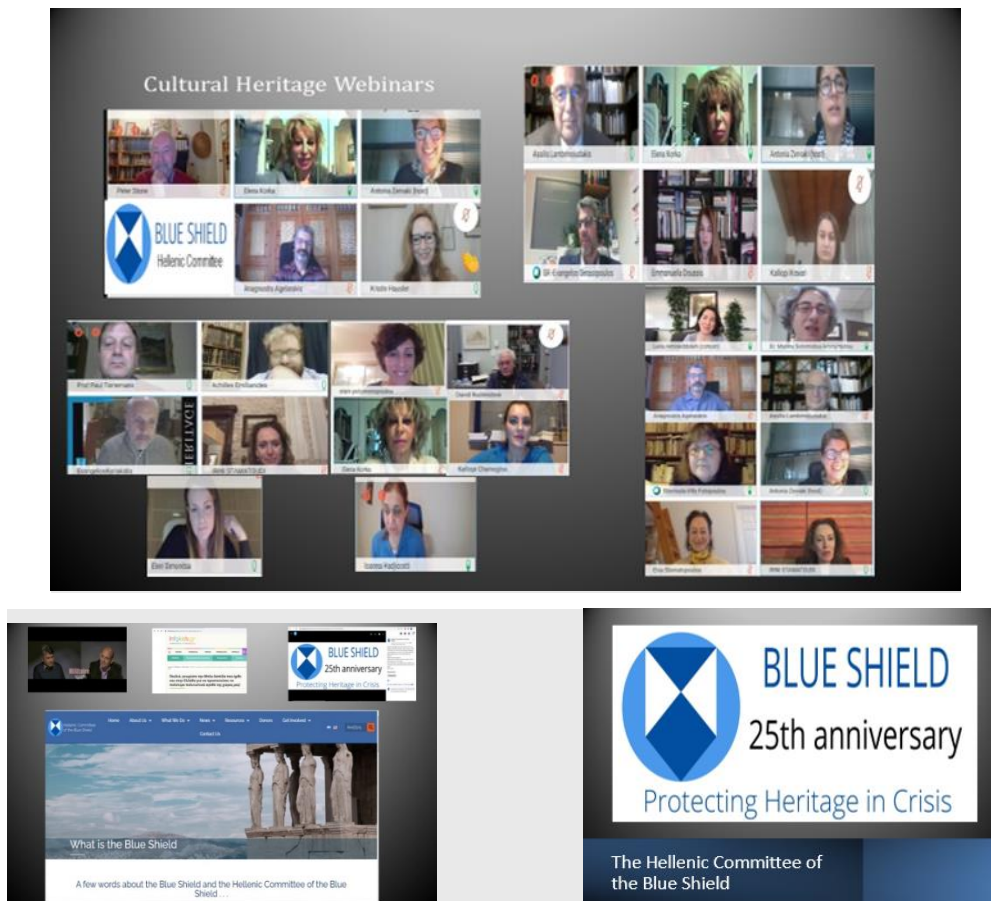


Figure 5. The Blue Shield NGO in Greece with a rapid growth in enhancing awareness in cultural management. (<https://hellenicblueshield.com/en/home/>)

It should be noted that Greece was the first country of Southeast Europe to set up a National Committee of the Blue Shield, strengthening at the level of an NGO, Greece's role and contribution to the implementation of international conventions for the preservation of cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1954), which is very rich in cultural assets that have, however, already suffered or are at risk from man-made and natural disasters (International Committee of the Blue Shield, 2016). We can all cooperate and join forces.

Furthermore, NGOs can:

- encourage a closer cooperation the two countries in the fields of archaeology and cultural heritage (exchange of publications regarding monuments, museums, archives and libraries, tangible and intangible heritage, underwater heritage etc).

- create liaisons and provide support, and coordination for cooperation programs and events.

An interesting cooperative project could be the detection of the risks of cultural goods along the route of the ancient Silk Road.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, the ancient Silk Road was more than a trade route, it was a road of ideas, a platform of culture. As a route of integration, exchange and dialogue, the Silk Road contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of humankind for almost two millennia. An attempt to propose methods and solutions for the risk protection of cultural goods along history's first transcontinental "superhighway" could today again enable commerce, arts, culture and ideas to cross the border between the magnificent countries along its long course.

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