CHAPTER FIVE
CAPILLARY ROUTES OF THE UPPER INDUS

While the Old Road across the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan connected Taxila to Bactria and western Central Asia, an alternative network of intertwined passageways through deep river valleys and high mountain passes in the upper Indus region of northern Pakistan directly linked major arteries of the Northern Route of the Indian subcontinent with branches of the silk routes in the Tarim Basin of eastern Central Asia. Capillary routes following the Indus, Gilgit, and Hunza rivers and side valleys across passes through the western Himalaya, Karakorum, and Pamir provided paths for long-distance trade and cross-cultural transmission between transregional overland arteries at a “Crossroads of Asia.”

Before the construction of airports, jeep roads and the Karakorum Highway (KKH) between Pakistan and China, capillary networks gave ancient travelers many choices of north-south and east-west itineraries. Modern routes followed by the KKH through northern Pakistan and the Salang tunnel north of Kabul across the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan have eclipsed the ancient pathways through mountain valleys and passes, but travelers who wrote their names in graffiti inscriptions and drew images on rocks at river crossings and wayside shrines were not restricted to staying on major highways.

As Marc Bloch remarked in regard to medieval Europe: “Traffic, in short, was not canalized in a few great arteries; it spread

---

1 “Crossroads of Asia” broadly encompasses the modern Northern Areas of Pakistan, although the phrase also applies to the Tarim Basin of Xinjiang in western China, borderland areas of northern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, and western Central Asian republics of Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Errington and Cribb extend the concept of “Crossroads of Asia” to parts of India and Iran: “For us the Crossroads of Asia is a broad concept, centrally focused on Afghanistan, but also including the southern Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tadzhikistan, to the north; eastern Iran, or Khorasan to the west, and the northwestern parts of Pakistan and India to the east and south” (1992: 1). Owen Lattimore includes Mongolia, Xinjiang, and other areas of eastern Central Asia in the “Inland Crossroads of Asia” (Lattimore, Owen. 1962. *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928–1958*. London: Oxford University Press, 119–133).


This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC License.
capriciously through a multitude of little blood vessels” (1961 [1949]: 1.64). Bloch’s comments on medieval European roads are relevant to trans-Asian routes:

It is in the nature of good roads to create a vacuum around them—to their own profit. In the feudal age, when all roads were bad, scarcely any of them was capable of monopolizing the traffic in this way. (Bloch 1961 [1949]: 1.63)

Instead of following a single main route, “...the traveler had almost always the choice of several itineraries, of which none was absolutely obligatory” (Bloch 1961 [1949]: 1.64). Rather than functioning like interstate highways in the United States or the Autobahn in Germany, which create vacuums by monopolizing traffic, multiple itineraries allowed merchants, monks, pilgrims, and other ancient travelers to choose from interconnected passageways. Their decisions depended on many factors, including the seasonal condition of mountain passes and river fords, the availability of provisions, animals, and porters, as well as political stability, security, and sometimes the location of religious shrines along the way. Topographical imperatives were often decisive in choosing routes through the high mountain desert environment, where travel from one point to another in a straight line was not possible. Since crossing the high mountains was difficult for large groups of traders in caravans, capillary networks were probably used for a smaller scale of trade than the bulk trade of the main arteries.

Indian, Iranian, Chinese, and Tibetan inscriptions and petroglyphs lining the interconnected pathways belong to travelers and residents from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and show that this region was definitely not a “cul de sac” (Fussman 1986c: 56–58; 1993b: 1). The written and visual records, as well as stray archaeological finds, the testimony of Chinese pilgrims and other literary references, and evidence of Buddhist manuscripts and sculptures found near Gilgit demonstrate significant patterns of cross-cultural movement. Capillary routes through this high-altitude transit zone between South and Central Asia were used for migrations across the mountains, long-distance trade in valued commodities and cultural expansion. Multidirectional flows of travelers bringing trade goods

---