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Организация  
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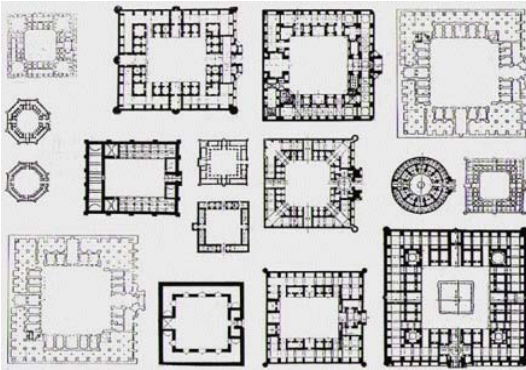
## Inventory of caravanserais in Central Asia

2004

**UNESCO**

Ecole d'Architecture Paris Val de Seine  
EVCAU Research Team

## INVENTORY OF CARAVANSERAIS IN CENTRAL ASIA



Sample of caravanserais plans (Iran, Syria, Turkey)



A Safavid masterpiece : Za'in el Din caravanserai –Yazd (Iran)

### CARAVANSERAIS

The word “caravanserai”, omnipresent in dreams and literature whenever the Orient is evoked, covers one of the most complex geographical and architectural realities. Its lexical variants<sup>1</sup> and the wide-ranging functions<sup>2</sup> of the caravanserai, as well as its integration and adoption by different civilizations, call for a multidisciplinary study of a common heritage that stretches from Europe to China, the Maghreb to the Indian subcontinent, and is found in cities as well as in deserts and mountains.

The role of caravanserais, as supports for trade, multi-purpose structures for meetings between peoples and channels for the transmission of knowledge, could again become just as important today as it was in the past.

These intellectual and material trading posts symbolize and bear testimony to the history and the cultural diversity of the Silk Roads.

Their architecture attests to the spheres of influence of the civilizations which witnessed their beginnings and watched them spread across vast territories.

The need for caravanserais on these ancient trade routes between East and West (but also between North and South) is the reason they now represent, by virtue of their numbers and their architectural quality, a very valuable architectural heritage common to most of the countries concerned by the trade, a heritage that measures out the landscape at intervals equivalent to a day's journey by caravan.



Map of main caravan roads – Source : Nara Research Centre for Silk Roads Studies, Japan.

<sup>1</sup> Khān, hān, qaisariya, funduq, wakala, bedesten, ribat or rabat, and so forth.

<sup>2</sup> In towns: premises for storing and distributing merchandise and also for lodging traders and travelers. Outside towns: a staging post for caravans providing short-term accommodation not only for people but also for merchandise and animals.

Their internal structure graphically illustrates the traditional socio-economic system of the historic city centres sustained by the products traded along the Silk Roads.

Their preservation and incorporation into today's society as cultural communication centres represents an essential contribution to the dialogue which is one of the Project's goals.

## THE INVENTORY

The project for an *Analytic and systematic regional inventory on caravanserais in Central Asia*, to compile a computerized database, was proposed by specialists taking part in the international colloquium held under the auspices of UNESCO, from 8 to 12 November 1998, in Yazd, Islamic Republic of Iran. At the end of the meeting, which brought together more than 40 specialists from 10 countries<sup>3</sup>, Professor Pierre Lebigre (France), the scientific initiator of the project, was proposed as general coordinator of the project.

## Its geographical area

Although the inventory's geographical area mainly concerns Central Asia, other areas are also involved: Eurasia, regions bordering the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, China and the Indian subcontinent. This area covers the network of caravan routes linking East to West (in particular the Silk Roads) and also North to South. On the whole, it coincides historically with the area of expansion of Islam.



Map of countries concerned by caravanserais. In dark grey, countries currently participating in the UNESCO Inventory

## Its historical scope

The most ancient written traces of caravanserais have been left to us by

*Herodotus of Halicarnassus*,<sup>4</sup> who refers<sup>5</sup> to "excellent caravanserais" on the famous Royal Road that Darius I had built to link Sardis to Susa, his capital. However, the vestiges of the most ancient caravanserais seem to date back no further than the eighth century AD.<sup>6</sup> The most recent examples were built in the late nineteenth century. The inventory's historical scope is therefore defined as the period from the fifth century BC to the nineteenth century AD (from the eighth to the nineteenth century as regards architecture).

## Its objectives

Three objectives are pursued in the inventory :

### • Culture and science

To further knowledge of an architectural heritage, whose value and unity are outstanding, through specialized research on each building and group of buildings.

### • The heritage

To support policies for the protection and enhancement of this heritage by :

- restoring the most representative caravanserais;
- comparing knowledge, exchanging experience and transferring know-how;
- establishing a network of scientific teams.

### • Tourism

To contribute to the development of the regions concerned by promoting cultural tourism and the reintegration of the caravanserais into present-day economic life by :

- identifying the thematic itineraries which highlight the cultural aspects common to groups of countries;
- facilitating studies with a view to the conversion of some of these buildings, into tourist and/or cultural facilities.

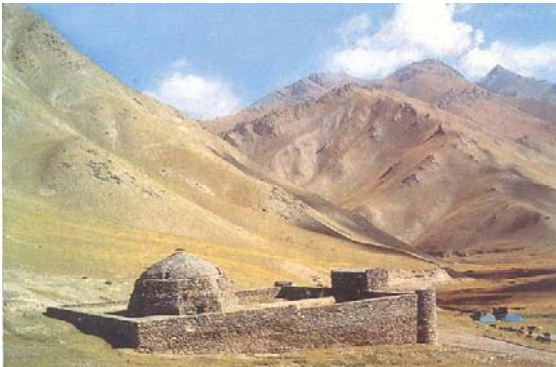
<sup>3</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, China, Turkey, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, India, Pakistan, Russian Federation, France.

<sup>4</sup> Fifth century BC.

<sup>5</sup> Herodotus, Book 5.

<sup>6</sup> According to a number of writers, some could date from the time of the Sassanids.

## Its contents



Caravanserai Tash-Rabat – Altitude : 3000 m – Kyrgyzstan

The project's first phase has served to mobilize a network of scientific teams in eight countries,<sup>7</sup> to gather a great deal of information and to outline a framework and working methods.

The implementation consists of three phases :

- **Information-gathering**<sup>8</sup>

This entails in each country :

- an extensive inventory of caravanserais on the basis of their toponymy and their geographical location;

- a survey on each caravanserai based on a standard international questionnaire.

This information is presented in written (texts), graphic (architectural documents) and iconographic (photographs, paintings, engravings) form.

- **Data entry (database)**

Data are systematically digitized with a view to:

- establishment of a structured, a geo-located database;

- multimedia exploitation and distribution: the Internet, CD-ROM, books, exhibitions, etc.

- **Handling and exploitation**

The handling and exploitation of the data have been undertaken in two ways:

- Through a general mapping of caravanserais and caravan routes

The mapping, a crucial component of the inventory, was carried out by a geographic information system (GIS)<sup>9</sup> which mobilizes new information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly digital cartography, satellite images and aerial photographs.



Kazakhstan – a map and satellite image are superimposed on a digital map. White roads. (Source : Nara Research Centre for Silk Roads Studies, Japan). Red roads. (Source : UNESCO Inventory)



Central Asia - On-going work – Towards a caravan roads synthesis from different proposals : White roads (Source : Nara Research Centre for Silk Roads Studies, Japan). Red roads (Source : UNESCO Inventory)

Although caravanserais (and related objects, such as bridges and water points, etc.) could be considered as spatio-temporal markers for most caravan routes,<sup>10</sup> this GIS also provides an accurate reconstruction of the itineraries and precise course of the routes.

<sup>7</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Russian Federation, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan.

<sup>8</sup> This concerns existing data and not findings from new research.

<sup>9</sup> Developed by Dr. Prof. **Evangelos Thomopoulos** and Prof. **Pierre Lebigre** on the basis of multiple sources including the UNESCO Inventory of caravanserais.

<sup>10</sup> While caravan routes existed long before caravanserais, the latter were all built along the caravan routes.

A tool for synthesis par excellence, the GIS is also a powerful research tool capable of highlighting, at the regional level, inconsistent information, historical breaks and continuities. By the same token, it is not only a means of comparing but also of sharing knowledge.



China - On-going work – Towards a caravan roads synthesis from 2 proposals : White roads (Source : Nara Research Centre for Silk Roads Studies, Japan). Red roads (Source : Prof. Guoqiang Gong, Institut of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing)

■ **By an Internet site**

A provisional Internet site is currently hosted by UNESCO :

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/dialogue/eastwest/caravan/index.htm>

This site, intended for the general public, prefigures another which should be exclusively devoted to caravanserais and caravan routes. The latter site should be stored on the future portal “Advanced Scientific Portal for Distributed Cooperation on the Digital Silk Roads” (ASPICO-DSR), developed by the Japanese National Institute of Informatics (NII).

## Support

● **Actors and partners**

Current contributors to the inventory :

- UNESCO - Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue (CLT/CPD);
- the network of eight teams of scientific correspondents;
- the general coordinator for the inventory;
- the Ecole d’Architecture Paris Val-de-Seine – France (EAPVS) and its research team EVCAU.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Espace Virtuel de Conception Architecturale et Urbaine.

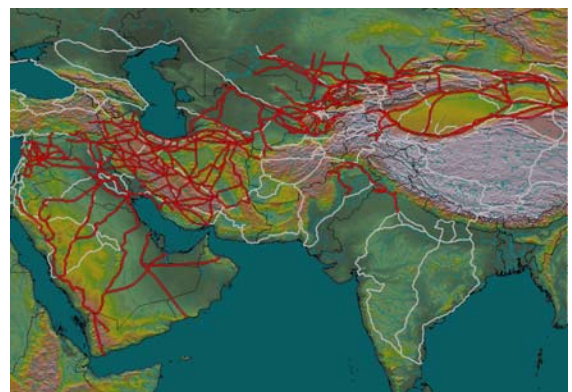
● **Financing**

At present, UNESCO’s CLT/CPD Division is the only source of funding for the Inventory. Sufficient funds have thus been provided for the launching and trial stages of the Inventory.

## Its development

However, its development, not only in the countries which are currently participating in the inventory but also in the other countries concerned, depends also on the involvement and the support of other partners :

- UNESCO (Communication and Information Sector);
- the NII of Japan in the dual framework of a partnership with UNESCO<sup>12</sup> and a cooperation agreement with EAPVS;
- international partners such as the European Union and the World Tourism Organization;
- national institutions such as ministries responsible for heritage and tourism, universities, and faculties of architecture;
- private tourist partners and sponsors.



Towards a general caravanserais database and a synthesis map of caravan roads

## Contact

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<sup>12</sup> for the development of the program “The Digital Silk Roads”.