Telling history through objects rather than people or events is not a new approach but over the past two decades it has become more central in teaching and has helped in popularizing world history, notably in Neil MacGregor’s *History of the World in 100 Objects*. Particularly successful have been the histories of commodities, from Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London: Penguin, 1985) to Mark Kurlansky’s *Salt: A World History* (London: Jonathan Cape 2002). This approach is increasingly adopted by academic institutions, especially for modern history, such as the project of the UCSC Center for World History, ‘Commodities in World History, 1450-1950’.

Seeking alternative sources for history is not, however, restricted to commodities and new textbooks in this area cover everything from the mundane, the ornamental, the useful and the built. See, for example, *History and Material Culture: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (Routledge 2009) and *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford 2010).

The use of material culture in classroom teaching is becoming more widespread and understood. A recent initiative is the collaboration between PBS and the Antiques Roadshow to produce a guide for teachers [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/teachers.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/teachers.html), validated by the National History Education Clearing House [http://teachinghistory.org/best-practices/using-primary-sources/19699](http://teachinghistory.org/best-practices/using-primary-sources/19699). They quote:

‘We are surrounded by things, and we are surrounded by history. But too seldom do we use the artifacts that make up our environment to understand the past. Too seldom do we try to read objects as we read books — to understand the people and times that created them, used them, and discarded them.’
The Silk Road is a term that has become fashionable over the past half century to conceptualize the complex networks of trade routes by land and sea across the pre-modern world of Africa, Europe and Asia. There are no comprehensive and complete sources, only fragments of historical and archaeological sources. These are found in the histories of the surrounding empires, in contemporary travel accounts and in literature, and include physical fragments of manuscripts, artefacts and buildings uncovered from the desert sands. The need to ‘read objects’ is vital in understanding this fragmentary legacy. But, as Bloch noted:

‘The knowledge of fragments, studied by turns, each for its own sake, will never produce the knowledge of the whole; it will not even produce that of the fragments themselves.’ (Bloch 1953: 155).

Trade is, of course, essential to the concept of the Silk Road, and objects are necessary for trade. Objects were not neutral and inert in this story: they changed and also effected change. This is where a material culture approach is especially relevant to the Silk Road. This book will aim to take account of more recent discussions of ‘things’ to include both their interaction with humans, the usual approach to material cultures, but also the interdependence of things and humans—their entanglement. It will take a broad view of ‘things’—including commodities to natural ‘things’ such as horses and camels, for example, to complex created things, such as jewellery, glass, paintings and buildings.

Material culture also helps students understand the impact of the environment on human life. This is pertinent to the challenging environments on the cusp of inner and outer Eurasia as found along the Silk Road. Here people developed a variety of responses to survive, reflected in their material culture. Material culture also helps us understand and describe cultural, economic and technological changes, also of key importance to the Silk Road and global history of the pre-modern period.

This area is still largely unexplored. Most Silk Road exhibitions, for example, have
taken a resolutely art historical approach (with the exception of this author’s two major exhibits, for example). There are few studies taking this approach to cover a range of objects relevant to a particular time and/or place. Most offer treatments of single commodities/objects to cover very broad time and scale or a single object in a certain setting. They are directed at a general audience. This book will instead look at variety of ‘things’ to tell a history of the peoples and objects of the Silk Road and their relationships with the world around them, both past and present. Each chapter will start with an introduction to a particular ‘thing’ but then expand to include similar and related things to develop the themes.

Apart from the theoretical complexities and issues involved in this topic, other challenges include the selection of a small range of suitable objects that encompass a broad chronology and geography. Below is my long list of ‘things’ for inclusion with notes on some of the themes the chapters will cover. I’ll show images of these in the introduction to the workshop and I would welcome comments on the selection.

*Xiongnu Earrings* – interactions between steppe and sedentary

*A Greek Glass Bowl found in China*– maritime trade, prestige goods and glass technology

*A Hoard of Kushan Coins found in Ethiopia* – money, Central Asia-African links

*The Rawak Stupa* – religion, worship, architectural movement

*A Buddhist Votive Plaque* – the horse, trade, iconography

*Sogdian Slave Girl on Camel* – Slave trade, women, Sogdians,

*A Bactrian Silver Ewer* – depicting Paris/Helen of Troy – movement of stories, adaption, forms, materials

*Byzantine silk* – silk trade, technology, iconographies, reuse (in church)

*Chinese Printed Almanac* – printing, censorship,

*Ilkanid Three Rabbit Plate* – motifs used across places and religions (Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity)