

February 2021 Speaker

Lianne Harris

The Silk Road

Costumed in the type of gown, headdress and bangles worn by a Central Asia Turkmenistan woman of centuries ago, historical presenter Lianne Harris took us on a fascinating time travel along the fabled Silk Road. Lianne pointed out that the 7,000 mile (12,000 km.) trade route which linked Asia and Europe between the 2nd century BCE and the 18th century was not one overland road but a network of land and sea routes.

“It enabled the exchange of ideas between diverse cultures as well as goods,” she said. “It was known as the road that takes you to the next town.” (It became known as the “Silk Road” because of the large, lucrative trade in silk along the route.) Lianne’s mantra is that “history is best told through the people” so she told us stories of real travellers in different time periods and social strata, using their letters, reports, journals and diaries as her primary source.

We learned a lot. Some genealogy buffs claim that Queen Elizabeth may be a descendant of Genghis Khan. The Chinese were “obsessed” with European horses, tall and sleek compared to their “solid, sturdy ponies,” willing to trade many bolts of their silk for just one horse. The Chinese invention of block printing (around 1000 AD) was transformational for record keeping, administration and the exchange of ideas. People were trafficked as well as goods. A woman was “owned” by her husband. “If he took off on another caravan without giving her freedom, she was sold as a slave to anyone including relatives.”

Rose oil was a precious gift because it was very hard to get. “60,000 roses were required for one ounce.” Women wore a “unibrow” above their eyes as “protection against the evil eye.” People travelled by foot, camel and/or horse. The two-humped Bactrian camel of central Asia could go six months without water; it could also gulp down 30 gallons of water in just 13 minutes “so people covered their wells.” They could tell by sniffing that a sandstorm was coming and pinpoint underground water supplies by pawing the ground.

Desert was blistering hot in daytime, freezing at night, sometimes without any watering holes (“China has the most and worst deserts”); mountains so high it was difficult to breathe because of lack of oxygen. There were the hazards of flash flood, blizzards, bandit and travelling plagues. “Bribes to custom officials was part of doing business.”

Lianne showed examples of exquisite Samarkand inside staircases and fountains.

She concluded with legendary 13th century merchant-explorer Marco Polo. For many years the Venice, Italy-born Polo was a prisoner/special envoy of Kublai Khan, the first Mongol ruler of China. In 1291, Khan instructed Polo to conduct Mongol Princess Kōkōchin, then 17, and her huge caravan of 1,000 attendants, 120 wagonloads of goods plus horses and camels, to Persia (now Iran) for her arranged marriage to a widower, Arghun, distantly related to her family. The trip took two years; by then Arghun had died, so she married his son. On completion of his assignment, Polo used the opportunity to escape Khan’s control, heading to Venice by sea.

Susan Goldenberg