

# Ancient Coins of the Silk Road

## A 20 Silver Coin Set



The Silk Road is not a single road, but rather a network of routes extending from the Far East to Europe, including such storied cities as Alexandria, Tyre, Samarkand, Herat, and Xanadu. One cannot overstate the impact of the Silk Road on the cultural exchange between East and West. Trade along these routes—essentially a highway between two of the world's largest empires (China and Rome) running through a third (Persia)—contributed to the cultural development of China, India, Persia, Arabia, north Africa, and all of Europe.

The Silk Road became more than crude caravan tracks in the second century BCE, when Zhang Qian, an emissary of the Han Dynasty, made the trek across the deserts of western China and through the Hindu Kush mountains to what is today Afghanistan. Learning of new lands to the west, he convinced Emperor Wu to expand Chinese trade routes. By the time Marco Polo set upon his famous journey to Asia in 1271, the Silk Road was at its peak. Only when Vasco de Gama became the first explorer to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in the late fifteenth century did the Silk Road's influence begin to wane, as Europeans traders took to the quicker, less dangerous sea route to India.

The name "Silk Road," coined by the German academic Ferdinand von Richthofen a century and a half ago, is somewhat inaccurate. Silk was not a major commodity until it became fashionable in Rome, where it was worth its weight in gold (The Roman Senate, in fact, tried to ban the material, on the grounds that its purchase was depleting the imperial gold reserves); by then, the Silk Road had been operating for centuries. Indeed, the highway facilitated the exchange of almost anything: nephrite jade and lapis lazuli and silk, music and art and poetry, Christianity and Buddhism and Islam. Genghis Khan used the route in his conquests of the early 1200s, and it was the Silk Road traders who carried the Black Death to Asia in 1347.

The decline of the Silk Road was marked. The once-bustling streets of the Silk Road lay empty, and the cities that sprung up along the route are ruins buried in the sand. Many of these ancient places are known only by the coins they left behind.



**1. Central Asia, 600-303 BCE**  
**Taxila silver 1/8 satamana**  
 W: 1.3-1.5 g | D: 14-16 mm | Obv: 6 armed  
 Gandharan symbol w/ dot | Rev: Blank

*Coin image is for illustration purpose, and not true to scale. Coin grade may vary somewhat from image in this collection.*

India developed some of the world's earliest coins sometime around 600 BCE. The coins were made by taking a flat, though often irregularly shaped, piece of silver, cutting it to the proper weight, then applying a series of punches to the front of it, indicating where and when it was made. The punches covered a wide variety of symbols. As the coin circulated, additional punches were sometimes put on the back, verifying the weight and fineness of the coin. Gandhāra was one of the major ancient Indian Kingdoms (Mahajanapadas) in Central Asia, located mainly in the vale of Peshawar, the Potohar plateau, and north of the Kabul River. These satamana fractions were not the earliest silver satamanas, but some probably entered circulation around 500 BCE.



**2. India, 4-1<sup>st</sup> BCE**  
**Mauryan Empire silver karashapana**  
 W: 2.94 g | D: 12-17.8 mm | Obv: Impressions of various  
 symbols and or animals | Rev: Minute punchmarks

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Issued initially by merchant guilds and later by states, the coins represented a currency belonging to a period of intensive trade activity and urban development. They are broadly classified into two periods: the first period (attributed to the Janapadas or small local states) and the second period (attributed to the Imperial Mauryan period). The motifs found on these coins were mostly drawn from nature. The six most common punch marks are: elephants, hills, the sun, geometric shapes, and flowers.



**3. India, 2-4<sup>th</sup> CE**  
**Western Satraps silver drachms**  
 W: 1.4-2.5 g | D: 13.5-16.5 mm | Obv: Bust of  
 ruler | Rev: Brahmic script around "3 peaks"

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The rulers of the swath of western India comprising modern-day Gujarat, Saurashtra, and Malwa during the early centuries CE are collectively called the Western Ksatrapas—Satraps, as they are today known. The term *ksatrapas* derives from ancient Persian and means "protector of the land." Although there is some evidence that the Satraps were vassals to the Kushan Empire, their neighbor to the north, they were independent enough to strike their own coins. The long reign of these leaders of Persian descent was marked by numerous dated coin issues, each bearing a likeness of the ruler and information about his predecessor, which provide a historical context for the Satraps.



**4. Europe: Rome 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE**  
**Silver antoninianus**  
 W: 4.5-6 g | D: 21-23 mm | Obv: Portrait of emperor  
 Rev: Various pagan deities and religious themes

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238 CE is known in Roman history as the Year of the Six Emperors. In that chaotic 12-month span, the popular father-and-son co-emperors Gordian I and Gordian II were assassinated by a usurper, Maximinus Thrax, who was every bit the villain his name suggests. The Roman Senate, in an attempt to thwart Thrax, installed two of its own members, Balbinus and Pupienus, as co-emperors. This move did not sit well with the Roman public, which erupted into rioting. To quell the unrest, the Senate named Gordian III, the 13-year-old grandson and nephew of his two respective namesakes, as Caesar and imperial heir. The boy Emperor proved up to the task, ruling for five-and-a-half generally stable years.



**5. Persia: Tabaristan 8<sup>th</sup> CE  
Silver 1/2 dirham**

W: 1.8-2.2 g | D: 22.8-23.8 mm | Crowned bust of Governor | Fire altar

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Tabaristan, the area on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea in today's Iran, is named for the *tabar*, the swords the inhabitants were famous for. It was one of the last parts of the former Persian Empire to convert to Islam. Farrukhan the Great repulsed the Turks in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, extending the borders of Tabaristan into eastern Turkmenistan. These large silver coins feature the crowned bust of the governor on the obverse; on the reverse is a fire altar, an imitation of an earlier Persian coin.



**6. Central Asia, Kabul 9<sup>th</sup> CE  
Shahi silver jital**

W: 3-3.5 g | D: 16.5-18.5 mm | Obv: Stylized horseman holding spear | Rev: Stylized Brahma bull

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By the eighth century, the mountainous region of Central Asia comprising the eastern parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan and northwest India was ruled by a succession of kings called the Hindu Shahi, who would hold power for 150 years. It was the Hindu Shahi kings who first minted these silver coins—a simple and elegant representation of the diversity of the region. On one side is the horseman—an iconic image found on coins of the region spanning numerous dynasties dating back to the ancient Greeks; on the reverse, the bull that is so sacred to the Hindus. Although Muslims and Hindus clashed for centuries over these lands, they agreed on one point: this is a beautiful coin, perfectly capturing the history and diversity of the region.



**7. Central Asia, 10-12<sup>th</sup> CE  
Ghaznavid Kingdom silve dirham**

W: 2.8-3.4 g | D: 18-22 mm | Obv: Arabic script w/mint names, family titles | Rev: Arabic script w/dates and declaration of faith

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A former Turkish slave founded the Ghaznavid Kingdom, which ruled Pakistan for over two hundred years. In 998 CE Mahmud, the son of the slave became sultan of a small area around the city of Ghazni in central Afghanistan. Mahmud greatly expanded the kingdom, taking large chunks of territory from the Samanids, as well as conquering parts of India. He spread Islam throughout Afghanistan and introduced it into India, thus bringing the seeds of a conflict that still rages today. Because of the strict prohibition on graven images in Islam, these coins have no portrait, but feature elaborate inscriptions on both sides.



**8. Central Asia, 11<sup>th</sup> CE  
Amirs of Sind silver damma**

W: 0.4-0.6 g | D: 7.5-11 mm | Obv: Arabic script w/mint names, family titles | Rev: Arabic script w/dates and declaration of faith

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The Amirs of Sind were governors of the region of Sind which encompassed part of present-day Pakistan. They owed allegiance to rulers of the great Islamic Empire of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, but because Sind was the most distant Muslim territory, far from the ruling caliph in the capital of Baghdad, the Amirs governed with virtual autonomy. The denomination of the silver, traditionally described vaguely as a "fractional dirham," has lately been identified by Robert Tye as a damma, a traditional western Indian coin of about half a gram previously used by the Gurjuras, Pratiharas and other medieval Hindus.



**9. Arabia, 13-15<sup>th</sup> CE**

**Rasulid Dynasty silver dirham**

W: 1.7-1.9 g |D: 24.5-25.5 mm |Obv: Arabic script w/mint names, family titles|Rev: Arabic script w/dates and declaration of faith

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Descended from Rasul, a Turkmen Oghuz chieftain, the Rasulids was a Sunni Muslim dynasty that ruled Yemen from 1229-1454. The Rasulid era comprises a Golden Age in Yemen's history, which is often marred by political and religious strife. They claimed to trace their lineage to the legendary Islamic patriarch Qahtan. These coins are relatively large and thin, with elaborate script covering much of both obverse and reverse.



**10. Egypt, 13-15<sup>th</sup> CE**

**Mamluk silver fractional dirham**

W: 0.4-1.4 g |D: 12-19.5 mm |Obv: Arabic script w/mint names, family titles|Rev: Arabic script w/dates and declaration of faith

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The Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) emerged from the weakening of the Ayyubids in Egypt and Syria. The Ayyubid sultans depended on slave (Arabic: *mamluk*, literally "owned," or slave) soldiers for military organization, yet in 1250 Mamluks of Qipchaq Turkic origin eventually overthrew the last Ayyubid sultan in Egypt and established their own rule. Their unusual political system did not rely entirely on family succession to the throne—slaves were also recruited into the governing class, hence the name of the sultanate later given by historians. Within a short period of time, the Mamluks created the greatest Islamic empire of the later Middle Ages, which included control of the holy cities Mecca and Medina. The Mamluk capital, Cairo, became the economic, cultural, and artistic center of the Arab Islamic world. The coinage features a distinctively thick Arabic script.



**11. India, 13-16<sup>th</sup> CE**

**Sultans of Delhi billon 2 ghani**

W: 3.2-3.5 g |D: 14-18 mm |Obv: Ruler's titles |Rev: Name of ruling caliph, mints and dates

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By the end of the twelfth century, Mohammad Ibn Sam achieved domination of northern India from the ruins of the Ghaznavid Empire. He was a Ghorid Turk and the founder of the line of Delhi sultans— a succession of Muslim dynasties that ruled until 1526. As practiced in eastern Muslim polities of this period, the institution of slavery provided well-trained and loyal military followers (the *mamluks*) for important political figures. Slave status was honorable and was a principal avenue to wealth and high position for talented individuals. Indeed a number of former slaves themselves rose to the rank of sultans in this period. These bright silver coins feature circles among the script.



**12. Middle East, 14<sup>th</sup> CE**

**Cilician Armenia silver takvorin**

W: 2-2.5 g |D: 19-22 mm |Obv: Levon King of the Armenians |Rev: Lion walking right, with tall cross

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The Armenia Kingdom of Cilicia was established by Armenian refugees fleeing the Seljuk invasion of Armenia, in what is today southern Turkey. Armenia was the first nation to convert to Christianity. Its Cilician princesses, renowned for their great beauty, were married off to the Crusader Kings who settled in the Holy Land. To the Crusaders, Armenian Christians presented the only reliable allies in Anatolia and Asia Minor, and were pivotal in the founding of the Crusader principalities of Edessa, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Tripoli. The coin features a portrait of the king on horseback on the obverse, and on the reverse, a lion.



**13. Middle East, 14<sup>th</sup> CE**  
**Muzaffarid Kingdom silver dirham**

W: 1.3-3.8 g | D: 16.5-22.5 mm | Obv: Arabic script w/ mint names, family titles | Rev: Arabic script w/ dates and declaration of faith

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The Muzaffarids were a Sunni Arab family that rose to power in Iran following the breakup of the Mongol Dynasty—the Ilkhanate—in the 14th century. Allies of the Mongols, the Muzaffari administered much of today's central and southern Iran.

Shah Mansur was the last monarch of the Muzaffarid dynasty, which was one of the last Mongol dynasties in Iran. He killed all his brothers to become the sole lord of the Muzaffarids in 1388, but was assassinated in 1392 by agents of Tamerlane. The coinage is extremely crude.



**14. Central Asia, 14-15<sup>th</sup> CE**  
**Timurid Dynasty silver dirham**

W: 4.5-5.9 g | D: 22-25.5 mm | Obv: Arabic script w/ mint names, family titles | Rev: Arabic script w/ dates and declaration of faith

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Tamerlane, the great Turko-Mongol conqueror, sought to restore the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan. A devout Muslim who converted nearly all his associates to Islam during his lifetime, Tamerlane—whom the Persians called Timur—became the most powerful rule in the Muslim world. His territories included all or parts of modern-day Syria, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and western India. The dynasty that bears his name lasted into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The coins are noted for the elegance of their design and inscriptions.



**15. Europe, 16-17<sup>th</sup> CE**  
**Hungary silver denar**

W: 0.5-0.6 g | D: 15.5-16 mm | Obv: Madonna / child  
Rev: Coat of arms

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During the reign of Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), the patriarchal cross on the Hungarian denar was replaced by the coat of arms and the Madonna and Child motifs. They are the first coins of Hungary to portray these images, the combination of which would later become a signature type for that country. The change was perhaps a sign of piety, or a combination of faith and defiance of the Ottoman Turks. Known as "Maddonnenmunzen," to differentiate them from earlier medieval Hungarian "Shield Coins," the new design heralded the beginning of the Renaissance in Hungary.



**16. India, 16-17<sup>th</sup> CE**  
**Mughal Empire silver 1/2 rupee**

W: 5.6-5.7 g | D: 14-15 mm | Obv: Persian inscriptions of Akbar's name and titles | Rev: Persian inscription of month and year

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Akbar the Great was the third and greatest ruler of the famed Mughal Dynasty. During his reign, he expanded the borders of the empire to include most of the Indian subcontinent. He was a savvy leader and adroit administrator, and his centralized government was effective in uniting disparate parts of the Empire. He attempted to transcend tribal loyalties and took pains to appeal to non-Muslims in the realm, with the goal to unite them by force of his personality. His reign lasted almost 50 years. The coins are thick and, unlike much of the coinage at the time, of relatively uniform roundness.



**17. Middle East, 16-17th CE**  
**Ottoman Empire silver fraction**

W: 0.1-0.6 g | D: 7.4-11.5 mm | Obv: Arabic script w/mint names, family titles | Rev: Arabic script w/dates and declaration of faith

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The Ottoman Empire, that proud and expansive kingdom of the Turks, endured for more than six centuries, from 1299 to 1922. At its height, under Suleiman the Magnificent in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans possessed arguably the most powerful kingdom on earth, a vast and diverse dominion that included most of Northern Africa, the whole of the Balkan peninsula, Persia, Arabia, the Crimea, and the Holy Land, as well as modern-day Turkey. It was also, at the time, the most tolerant and heterogeneous society in the world. These “fractions” are, as the name suggests, smaller units of larger denominations.



**18. Europe, 17-18th CE**  
**Russia silver kopek**

W: 0.1-0.3 g | D: 6-8.5 mm | Obv: St. George on horse slaying dragon | Russian legend

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For hundreds of years much of Russian commerce was based on these tiny silver coins, called wire money. Silver wire was cut to the requisite weight and then manually smashed between a pair of dies. Peter the Great, who ruled Russia from 1689-1725, famously modeled his kingdom after the more progressive countries to the West. Among his many reforms, he abolished these crude coins in favor of machine-struck coins that were popular in the rest of Europe.



**19. Asia, 18th CE**  
**Nepal silver dam**

W: 0.03 g | D: 7.5-8 mm | Obv: Nepalese inscription  
Rev: Nepalese inscription

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Sandwiched between India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, Nepal contains Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. The kingdom of Nepal was unified in 1768 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, who fled India following the Moghul conquests of the subcontinent. Under Shah and his successors, Nepal's borders expanded as far west as Kashmir and as far east as Sikkim. At 30 milligrams, the Nepalese dam is the world's smallest silver coin ever minted.



**20. India, 17-19th CE**  
**Travancore silver chuckram**

W: 0.3-0.6 g | D: 6.2-7.4 mm | Obv: Dots, pellets, lines | Rev: Dots, pellets, lines

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The princely state of Travancore is located in the extreme southwest India. Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this predominantly Hindu region was under Muslim control. In 1739-53, the Travancore-Dutch War was the first time as Asian region defeated a European colonial power in war. The caste system in Travancore was among the most deeply entrenched in all of India, with hierarchical castes dominating the social order for centuries. Because they are so small, the chuckram were counted using a wooden plate with fixed holes.

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