

Life as an Historian

Dr Peter Frankopan discusses what influenced him to become an historian, why he chose Oxford and his recent activities



I first thought of coming to Oxford at the start of my final year at Cambridge. I had been captivated by a paper I had chosen on Byzantium and its neighbours, 800-1204 and went to talk to my supervisor, Jonathan Shepard, about carrying on to do post-graduate work. I explained that I was torn between the Byzantine world and Russia at the turn of the 20th century, my true first love, but was certain I wanted to do a doctorate. Jonathan, one of the most brilliant scholars I've ever met (and now a good friend), told me that he had once had the same choice to make and had never regretted choosing medieval Constantinople over modern Moscow. If I wanted to do the same, he said, there was only one place to go next: Oxford. So that's how I ended up here in 1993.

I never looked back. The resources for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies in Oxford are astonishing, ranging from the collection of mediaeval Greek manuscripts in the Bodleian to the holdings of the Ashmolean Museum. Above all, however, is the strength in depth of the academic community. I was extremely fortunate to be able to listen to and learn from Cyril Mango, Nigel Wilson, Elizabeth Jeffreys, Mark Whittow, Chris Wickham and Bryan Ward-Perkins, and above all to have the inspirational James Howard-Johnston as my thesis supervisor.

My D.Phil was on the history of the Balkans, Southern Italy, Asia Minor and Eastern Mediterranean in the 11th century, a time of Norman conquest of Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, a sudden and dramatic collapse of the Byzantine

empire's position in the east as Turkish raiders built up a string of emirates in Anatolia, changing relations and a moment of reconciliation between Constantinople and Rome following the schism of 1054.

The main source that I worked with, *The Alexiad* by Anna Komnene, was very well known, but had been badly understood and poorly exploited by historians who tended to follow Edward Gibbon's withering comment that the text 'displays in every page the vanity of a female author.' In fact, the account is astonishingly rich, but also very complicated. Producing a new translation (for Penguin Classics) was really tough.

Unravelling Anna Komnene's sources, picking apart a chronology that was flawed and misleading and reconstructing a new sequence of events using other documentary evidence in Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Arabic yielded dramatic results – ones that not only transform the way we look at the Byzantine Empire in this period, but revolutionise the way we understand the First Crusade: *The Times* described a book I wrote on the subject as 'overturning a millennium of scholarship.' That's not a bad epitaph for a historian to have on their

tombstone.

My most recent work was called *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*. It focuses on exchange of goods, ideas, faith and disease across the spine of Asia from antiquity to the present day. It is an ambitious book that seeks to shift attention away from the West. I have been amazed by the reception it has had around the world, where it was described as ‘breathtaking and addictively readable’ (Daily Telegraph), ‘magnificent’ (Sunday Times), ‘fearless and brilliant’ (Guardian), ‘a dazzling piece of historical writing’ (South China Morning Post), ‘majestic, brilliant and extraordinary’ (Open, India). The Wall St Journal said that it is ‘a rare book that makes you question your assumptions about the world, while the Berliner Zeitung said that it is ‘not just the most important history book in years but the most important in decades’. It has topped the non-fiction charts in many countries, including the UK, Ireland, India and China.

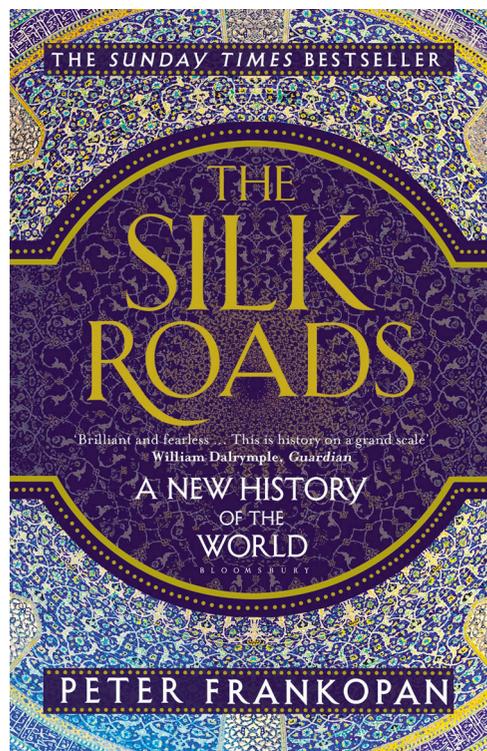
Since it came out I’ve spent a large part of the last year on planes, lecturing at universities like Yale and Harvard, at institutions such as the UN, UNICEF and the EBRD, and giving talks to heads of state, ministers and senators in China, Pakistan, India, Central Asia, the Gulf and a host of European countries about the importance of history and about what the past can teach us about the present.

Alongside all this, I’ve been busy in Oxford with teaching and examining, trying to catch up on my research for future projects and also in my role as Director of the Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research (OCBR) that sits across five

faculties within the university (History, Classics, Theology and Religion, Medieval and Modern Languages, Oriental Languages) as well as the School of Archaeology. There are nearly sixty post-holders, researchers and emeriti who work on matters that intersect in one way or another with the Byzantine world. We help arrange colloquia and conferences, host special lectures, award travel grants and a great deal more. We have been very successful in raising money to support positions in Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, graduate scholarships and our running costs over the last seven years, and I am incredibly proud of how much we have achieved since the OCBR was set up nearly seven years ago.

Oxford has been a wonderful environment to work in over the last two decades. I have enjoyed many happy years at Worcester, where I have been Senior Research Fellow since 2000, and have greatly appreciated the support of my colleagues in Late Antique and Byzantine Studies. These are difficult times for the Humanities, regardless of the long-term implications of Brexit. It is important to make those

outside academia realise what it is that we do at Oxford, and at other universities in the UK. That does not mean making history ‘relevant’, or trying to make it have an impact beyond the dreaming spires. But if I’ve helped keep History at Oxford in the public eye then that can only be a good thing.



Dr Peter Frankopan is Senior Research Fellow at Worcester College, Oxford. [The Silk Roads: A New History of the World](#) is published by Bloomsbury.