

Ancient Trade Routes

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

By the end of the first century B.C., there was a great expansion of international trade involving five contiguous powers: the Roman empire, the Parthian empire, the Kushan empire, the nomadic confederation of the Xiongnu, and the Han empire.

Although travel was arduous and knowledge of geography imperfect, numerous contacts were forged as these empires expanded—spreading ideas, beliefs, and customs among heterogeneous peoples - and as valuable goods were moved over long distances through trade, exchange, gift-giving, and the payment of tribute. Transport over land was accomplished using river craft and pack animals, notably the sturdy Bactrian camel. Travel by sea depended on the prevailing winds of the Indian Ocean and the monsoons, which blow from the southwest during the summer months and from the northeast in the fall.²

Cities along the silk, spice and incense trade routes are prime material for adventure and romance novels. Even the names of the routes conjure up visions and suggestions of exotic sounds, scents and textures. So great were the influences of ancient trade cities that even today, we can almost imagine the cries within their marketplaces. Cities such as Petra and Palmyra once grew rich providing services to merchants and acting as international centers of trade. They also became cultural and artistic centers, where peoples of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds could meet and intermingle. They were the commercial and intellectual hubs with links extending to touch every corner of the known world.

Interestingly, we are only now gaining full understanding of how pervasive such links and hubs are in our lives. In his recent book on networks, physicist Albert-László Barabási provides an overview of ongoing research into the laws governing the way connections form within networks as they evolve and grow.¹ Common structuring seems to exist: from the number of chemical reactions linking key molecules together within a cell; to structures within our bodies for communication, transport and support; to associations between actors who have made films together; to ancient trade routes; to the links between the

ever-increasing information nodes on the Internet. It has become apparent that, on all spatial scales of organization, the linking between nodes or sections is not random. There are patterns with small local clusters of linking, with few links per individual, and certain individuals or places that act as major hubs, with many connections leaping to distant parts and places.

One of the studies Barabási discusses found that job seekers more often succeeded through their acquaintances than through their closer friends. A person's friends were in the same "small world" cluster in which everyone basically shared the same information. One's acquaintances provided links to other clusters of people in which new opportunities were available. In marketing our practices, this concept of long-range links yields the insight that we should seek to find and develop connections with those who will be our gateways to other groups. As we become known for offering services that add to individual support networks, ameliorate stress, and resolve problems of body usage and history, our personal links will multiply, and our practices will prosper.

Several conceptual keys open doors to understanding and modeling what we observe in diverse worlds of interconnectivity. First, making the interconnections needs to be a dynamic process of growth and change. Second, when a new person or item in the network is added, key hubs already possessing many links will be favored to get the new link (literally a type of "the rich get richer" favoritism). Finally, a solution or place providing a better fit to the current need will preferentially attract links, even to the detriment of well-established key hubs.

This last point, in particular, explains how new trade cities might grow, and old ones decline, with the introduction of a newly discovered route or technology. It equally explains how, as an instance of adapting to strain in accordance with Davis's law, the fascia within our bodies will adapt to a change in posture and body usage following the start of a new activity, or following an injury.^{3,6} Our unifying webs of fascia grow from an embryological viewpoint and modify continually from a life usage viewpoint.^{3,5} Tom Myers, particularly with his work on "anatomy trains," seems to have captured the aspects of our fascial webs as networks of communication.⁴

While it is true that 'everything is connected to everything else,' some bits are more connected than others. An extension of the pioneering work of Dr. Ida Rolf and her system of Structural Integration, these 'myofascial meridians' provide a map for postural compensation, which, when grasped, provide a model for 'tensegrity' balance of the myofasciae around the skeleton. Using this scheme, unexpected linkages lead to

new 'whole body' strategies for manual and movement therapists.

The interconnectivity that Myers implies adds the perspective to our work that we are never, in truth, just engaging a local area but initiating a chain of communication and compensations that will spread over a client's entire body. As our fingers ply the ancient trade routes of our physical embodiment, we bring goods of comfort and relief that reach back to our beginnings as human beings and beyond. We are linked by many webs of connection.

Everything touches everything. - Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges

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