

# Silk Roads

use this packet and 236-239 in book

## Silk Roads: Exchange across Eurasia

The Eurasian landmass has long been home to the majority of humankind as well as to the world's most productive agriculture, largest civilizations, and greatest concentration of pastoral peoples. Beyond its many separate societies and cultures, Eurasia also gave rise to one of the world's most extensive and sustained networks of exchange among its diverse peoples. Known to scholars as the Silk Roads, a reference to their most famous product, these land-based trade routes linked pastoral and agricultural peoples as well as the large civilizations on the continent's outer rim (see Map 8.1). None of its numerous participants knew the full extent of this network's reach, for it was largely a "relay trade" in which goods were passed down the line, changing hands many times before reaching their final destination. Nonetheless, the Silk Roads provide a certain unity and coherence to Eurasian history alongside the distinct stories of its separate civilizations and peoples.

**Map 8.1** The Silk Roads  
For 2,000 years, goods, ideas, technologies, and diseases made their way across Eurasia on the several routes of the Silk Road



## The Growth of the Silk Roads

■ Change  
What lay behind the emergence of Silk Road commerce, and what kept it going for so many centuries?

The beginnings of the Silk Roads lay in both geography and history. As a geographic unit, Eurasia is often divided into inner and outer zones that represent quite different environments. Outer Eurasia consists of relatively warm, well-watered areas, suitable for agriculture, which provided the setting for the great civilizations of China, India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Inner Eurasia—the lands of eastern Russia and Central Asia—lies farther north and has a harsher and drier climate, much of it not conducive to agriculture. Herding their animals from horseback, the pastoral people of this region had for centuries traded with and raided their agricultural neighbors to the south. Products of the forest and of semi-arid northern grasslands known as the steppes—such as hides, furs, livestock, wool, and amber—were exchanged for the agricultural products and manufactured goods of adjacent civilizations. The movement of pastoral peoples for thousands of years also served to diffuse Indo-European languages, bronze metallurgy, horse-based technologies, and more all across Eurasia.

The construction of the classical civilizations and their imperial states during the last five centuries B.C.E. added another element to these earlier Eurasian connections. From the south, the Persian Empire invaded the territory of pastoral peoples in present-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. From the west, Alexander the Great's empire stretched well into Central Asia. From the east, China's Han dynasty extended its authority westward, seeking to control the nomadic Xiongnu and to gain access to the powerful "heavenly horses" that were so important to Chinese military forces. By the early centuries of the Common Era, indirect trading connections, often brokered by pastoral peoples, linked the classical civilizations in a network of transcontinental exchange. (For the role of Central Asian pastoral peoples in the exchange of the Silk Roads, see Visual Sources: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia, pp. 367–77.)

Silk Road trading networks prospered most when large and powerful states provided security for merchants and travelers. Such conditions prevailed during the classical era when the Roman and Chinese empires anchored long-distance commerce at the western and eastern ends of Eurasia. Silk Road trade flourished again during the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. as the Byzantine Empire, the Muslim Abbasid dynasty, and Tang dynasty China created an almost continuous belt of strong states across Eurasia. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongol Empire briefly encompassed almost the entire route of the Silk Roads in a single state, giving a renewed vitality to long-distance trade.

## Goods in Transit

During prosperous times especially, a vast array of goods (detailed in the Snapshot on p. 337) made their way across the Silk Roads, often carried in large camel caravans that traversed the harsh and dangerous steppes, deserts, and oases of Central Asia. In high demand and hard to find, most of these goods were luxury products,

## Snapshot Economic Exchange along the Silk Roads

Region	Products Contributed to Silk Road Commerce
China	silk, bamboo, mirrors, gunpowder, paper, rhubarb, ginger, lacquerware, chrysanthemums
Forest lands of Siberia and grasslands of Central Asia	furs, walrus tusks, amber, livestock, horses, falcons, hides, copper vessels, tents, saddles, slaves
India	cotton textiles, herbal medicine, precious stones, spices
Middle East	dates, nuts, almonds, dried fruit, dyes, lapis lazuli, swords
Mediterranean basin	gold coins, glassware, glazes, grapevines, jewelry, artworks, perfume, wool and linen textiles, olive oil

destined for an elite and wealthy market, rather than staple goods, for only readily moved commodities of great value could compensate for the high costs of transportation across such long and forbidding distances.

Of all these luxury goods, it was silk that came to symbolize this Eurasian exchange system. When China held a monopoly on silk-producing technology, this precious fabric moved generally from east to west. The demand for silk as well as cotton textiles from India was so great in the Roman Empire that various Roman writers were appalled at the drain of resources that it represented. They also were outraged at the moral impact of wearing revealing silk garments. “I can see clothes of silk,” lamented Seneca the Younger in the first century C.E., “if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one’s decency, can be called clothes. . . . Wretched flocks of maids labour so that the adulteress may be visible through her thin dress, so that her husband has no more acquaintance than any outsider or foreigner with his wife’s body.”<sup>2</sup>

By the sixth century C.E., however, the knowledge and technology for producing raw silk had spread beyond China. An old Chinese story attributes it to a Chinese princess who smuggled out silkworms in her turban when she was married off to a Central Asian ruler. In a European version of the tale, Christian monks living in China did the deed by hiding some silkworms in a bamboo cane, an act of industrial espionage that allowed an independent silk-producing and silk-weaving industry to take hold in the Byzantine Empire. However it happened, Koreans, Japanese, Indians, and Persians likewise learned how to produce this precious fabric.

As the supply of silk increased, its many varieties circulated even more extensively across Eurasian trade routes. In Central Asia, silk was used as currency and as a means of accumulating wealth. In both China and the Byzantine Empire, silk became a symbol of high status, and governments passed laws that restricted silk clothing to members of the elite. Furthermore, silk became associated with the sacred in the expanding world religions of Buddhism and Christianity. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who made their way to India seeking religious texts and relics took with them large quantities of silk as gifts to the monasteries they visited (see

■ **Significance**  
What made silk such a highly desired commodity across Eurasia?

1 **Connection**  
What were the major economic, social, and cultural consequences of Silk Road commerce?

Visual Source 8.2, p. 370). Buddhist monks in China received purple silk robes from Tang dynasty emperors as a sign of high honor. In the world of Christendom, silk wall hangings, altar covers, and vestments became highly prestigious signs of devotion and piety. Because no independent silk industry developed in Western Europe until the twelfth century C.E., a considerable market developed for silks imported from the Islamic world. Ironically, the splendor of Christian churches depended in part on Islamic trading networks and on silks manufactured in the Muslim world. Some of those silks were even inscribed with passages in Arabic from the Quran, unbeknownst to their European buyers.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to contemporary global commerce, the volume of trade on the Silk Roads was small, and its focus on luxury goods limited its direct impact on most people. Nonetheless, it had important economic and social consequences. Peasants in the Yangzi River delta of southern China sometimes gave up the cultivation of food crops, choosing to focus instead on producing silk, paper, porcelain, lacquerware, or iron tools, much of which was destined for the markets of the Silk Roads. In this way, the impact of long-distance trade trickled down to affect the lives of ordinary farmers. Furthermore, favorably placed individuals could benefit immensely from long-distance trade. The twelfth-century Persian merchant Ramisht made a personal fortune from his long-distance trading business and with his profits purchased an enormously expensive silk covering for the Kaaba, the central shrine of Islam in Mecca.<sup>4</sup>

## *Silk Roads Items and Products of Trade*

*Caravans heading towards China were laden with gold, silver, ivory, gems and glass. Foods such as pomegranates and carrots also were traded. While from the opposite direction came lacquer ware, porcelain, jade, bronze, fur and, of course, silk.*

Even before the discovery of silk, there was a vast amount of trade already taking place in Central Asia and China. Salt, a meat preservative, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan and copper and tin from Iran were commonly traded commodities some 5000 years ago. Since no recognized monetary system existed, trade in the early days was done through the careful bartering and exchange of goods by caravan traders. Their trade would be carried out in mutual places, near water and green patches of land used for animal grazing. These sites are the locations where towns and cities developed, many of which can be visited today.

It is impossible to say when silk, the product that lends its name to the trade route, came to be traded (starting with the Han Dynasty, c. 206 BC - 220 AD, silk was the major commodity being exported along these roads). And while the main object of travelling the early caravan routes was to buy or sell goods to or from faraway places, silk ended up the most eagerly traded and mysterious item. It was so rare that the Romans could only afford to sew a thin strip onto their togas.

The silk routes were not trade routes that existed solely for the purpose of trading in silk. Many other commodities were also traded, from gold and ivory to exotic animals and plants. But of all the precious goods crossing these routes, silk was perhaps the most remarkable for the people of the West. It is often thought that the Romans had first encountered silk in one of their campaigns against the Parthians in 53 B.C, and realized that it could not have been produced by this relatively unsophisticated people. They reputedly learnt from Parthian prisoners that it came from a mysterious tribe in the east, who they came to refer to as the silk people, 'Seres'. In practice, it is likely that silk and other goods were beginning to filter into Europe before this time, though only in very small quantities. The Romans obtained samples of this new material, and it quickly became very popular in Rome, for its soft texture and attractiveness. It was considered a luxury item that only the very wealthy could afford to wear. The Parthians quickly realized that there was money to be made from trading the material, and sent trade missions towards the east. The Romans also sent their own agents out to explore the Silk Routes, and to try to obtain silk at a lower price than that set by the Parthians. For this reason, the trade route to the East was seen by the Romans as a route for silk rather than a route for the trade of other goods. The goods carried on the Silk Road moved basically from the East to the West.

In addition to silk, the route carried many other precious commodities. Caravans heading towards China that traversed this ancient trade route carried gold and other metals, ivory, gems and stones, and glass (which was not manufactured in China until the fifth century). The northern caravan route brought to China many goods such as: dates, saffron powder and pistachio nuts from Persia; frankincense and myrrh from Somalia; sandalwood from India; and glass bottles from Egypt.

In the opposite direction furs, ceramics, jade, bronze objects, lacquer and iron were carried. Many of these goods were bartered for others along the way, and objects often changed hands several times. There are no records of Roman traders being seen in Chang'an, nor Chinese merchants in Rome, though their goods reached both destinations. As goods changed hands, many middlemen (such as the Parthians who became very effective -- in c. 50 BC it appears that they prevented the Roman empire's expansion at the battle of Carrhae, and thereby kept Rome almost entirely ignorant of China with whom it effectively did much of its trade.) Traders and merchants along the routes made rewarding profits from the change of hands.

During this period described above, a small tribe, the Kushans, grew independent from the Parthians. The Kushans placed their capital at Bactria and expanded forming another at Peshawar. Their interest was purely financial rather than political. They built cities and connecting canals and before long caravans began to arrive in their hundreds. These middlemen were extremely effective at what they did and at preserving the idea that all trade had to go through them by exaggerating the distances involved in the travel. Consequently goods exchanged hands several times during their travels and the price rose accordingly, allowing the middlemen to also profit handsomely.

At the initial stage of the development of the silk road, China received expensive horses, and the seeds of lucerne and grapes. The ancient world had cultivated grapevines and made wine, but for the Chinese grapes were a novelty. Moreover, Chinese envoys were very surprised when they found that it was possible to make wine not only from rice but also from berries unknown to them. Later, the Chinese also discovered other agricultural crops, such as string beans, onions, cucumbers, carrots, pomegranates, and figs.

Various woolen goods, carpets, curtains, blankets and rugs, came to China from Central Asia and the East Mediterranean. These items were valued by the Chinese who were unfamiliar with methods for making wool, flax fabric processing, carpet manufacture and weaving. Highly appreciated in Ancient China were Parthian tapestries and carpets. Central Asia exported camels which were also appreciated in China, arms and military equipment, gold and silver, semi-precious stones and glass items. Samarkand made glass was especially valued due to its high quality, and was considered a luxury good. Other goods were skins, cotton fabrics, wool, gold embroidery, exotic fruits (water-melons, melons and peaches) fat-tailed sheep and hunting dogs, leopards and lions.

From China caravans carried its famous Chinese porcelains, ceramic lusterware, lacquerware – snow-white vases, bowls, glasses, and dishes with sophisticated patterns. It was solely the Chinese who knew the secret of making the thinnest and resonant porcelain, making it very expensive in European markets. Bronze ornaments and other products from this metal, ornate bronze mirrors, umbrellas, products from the well-known Chinese varnish, medicines, and perfumes were also popular. Chinese paper, one of the most remarkable inventions of Chinese technical genius, was highly appreciated too. Gold, skins and many other things were exported as well. Merchants also carried tea and rice, corals, and amber. Merchants carried sacks filled with ivory, rhino horns, turtle shells, spices, ceramics, iron items, glaze, cinnamon, ginger, bronze weapons and mirrors.

India was famous for its fabrics, spices and semi-precious stones, dyes, and ivory. Iran was known for its silver products. Rome received spices, fragrances, jewels, ivory, and sugar. Eastern Europe imported rice, cotton, woolen and silk fabrics from Central Asia and exported considerable volumes of skins, furs, fur animals, bark for skin processing, cattle and slaves to Khorasm. Northern Europe was the source of furs, skins, honey and slaves.

Because luxury items were transported, and most traders could not afford large armed escorts to fight off robbers, merchants often travelled together in large caravans for increased safety. It is for this reason that the Silk Road expanded into a vast network of roads as individual traders searched for less inhabited territory to cross, so as to minimize the chance of attacks. Furthermore, as local governments realized the wealth of trade passing through their territory, attempts were made to levy heavy taxes along checkpoints, and so routes would change. Not only did the weather determine whether a route was hospitable or not, tribal chieftains would wage war with neighboring tribes. And thus the political circumstances along the Silk Road would also determine on how routes would be taken and developed. Thus many routes merged with other already established trade routes, such as the spice routes which existed with India (spice routes went from Egypt, north of Oman into the Arabian Gulf, to Karachi, Goa, Malaysia, and up to Korea and Japan).

The sheer distances that would need to be covered meant that the time to complete the whole journey would take several years giving an unfeasibly slow turnover of goods. Therefore trade would take place in discrete bundles of goods being carried over short distances, from one city to the next. Each of the merchants keeping within their own well-known territories would meet and exchange or sell their items, and if lucky return home.