

The Silk Road

- The **Silk Road** was a vast trade network connecting Eurasia and North Africa via land and sea routes.
- The Silk Road earned its name from Chinese silk, a highly valued commodity that merchants transported along these trade networks.
- Advances in technology and increased political stability caused an increase in trade. The opening of more trade routes caused travelers to exchange many things: animals, spices, ideas, and diseases.

In the first century CE, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius, silk had become a big problem. The luxury fabric, imported at great cost from China, had become a symbol of decadence and excess among Romans. In order to make their supply of silk last longer, merchants unraveled and re-wove their fabric into thinner, sheer garments. This practice had a side-effect of making the garments nearly transparent.

Seneca the Younger, a writer and imperial advisor, complained of people wearing silk: "I can see clothes of silk, if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one's decency, can be called clothes. ... Wretched flocks of maids labor 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."

In the year 14 CE, the Roman historian Tacitus reported that the Imperial Senate made it illegal for men to wear silk, resolving that "Oriental [Eastern] silks should no longer degrade the male sex. " This prohibition on silk did not last. The demand for silk continued to drive trade between the Roman Empire, China, India, and many places in between. To understand what *caused* this trade in silk, we need to look at *how* Chinese silk got to Rome.

State power and the Silk Road: One cause of expanded trade was the growth of imperial power. Near the end of the second century BCE, [Emperor Wu of Han](#) mounted many campaigns against the nomadic **Xiongnu** people. Xiongnu horsemen had raided Chinese settlements along the northern border for many years. Emperor Wu looked for a new source of horses for his cavalry in order to deal with the threat of the Xiongnu.

Emperor Wu sent an emissary named Zhang Qian to find allies in the fight against the Xiongnu. Zhang returned to China, eager to discuss the wonders he had seen in Ferghana—modern-day Uzbekistan. Along with rice, wheat, and grapes, the region produced hardy, "heavenly" horses.



A "Heavenly Horse" of Ferghana, depicted in a 2nd century CE bronze sculpture from Han China.

Stop and consider: What caused Emperor Wu to send an emissary to central Asia?

Choose 1 answer:



The emperor wanted to scout and conquer central Asia _____

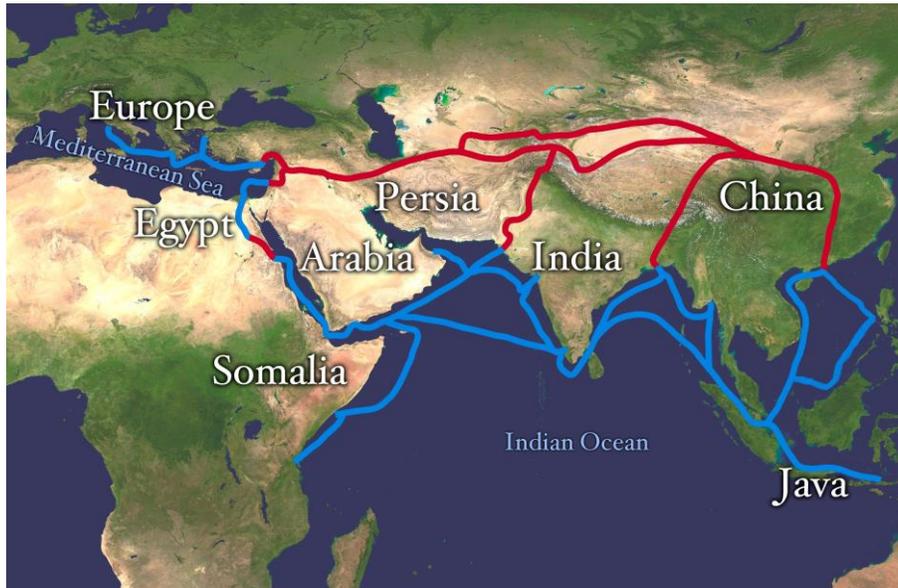
The emperor wanted to find allies and resources _____

The emperor was curious about how people in central Asia lived _____

Ferghana horses became a highly-desired trade item in China. China imported so many horses that the Dayuan people who controlled the Ferghana valley refused to sell any more of the horses! This led to a three-year conflict known as the War of the Heavenly Horses. By 101 BCE, the Ferghana valley belonged to Han China. Control of the Ferghana valley also opened a route to the West. With a new supply of horses, Han China projected its new military strength throughout Asia. The expansion of Han control led to the first *Pax Sinica*—or *Chinese Peace*. During this time, the standard of living in China rose and cities grew in size. Economic growth and political stability led to increased demand for luxury goods from far-off places.

Stop and consider: Why might economic growth and political stability cause more trade?

The Roman empire was expanding during this time, too. Victory in the [Punic Wars](#) gave Rome control over the western Mediterranean Sea. Over the next few centuries, Rome expanded to control all of the Mediterranean shoreline. The first century CE saw the beginning of the *Pax Romana*—Roman Peace. The *Pax Romana* lasted about 200 years and was a period of relatively few wars. As with Han China, political stability brought more trade. Rome gained access to overseas trade routes to India via Egypt and began to trade regularly. Although Rome and Han China expanded greatly, there was still a lot of distance between them. Central Asia is covered with mountains, deserts, and vast grasslands. Traders provided an essential link between the Roman and Han empires.

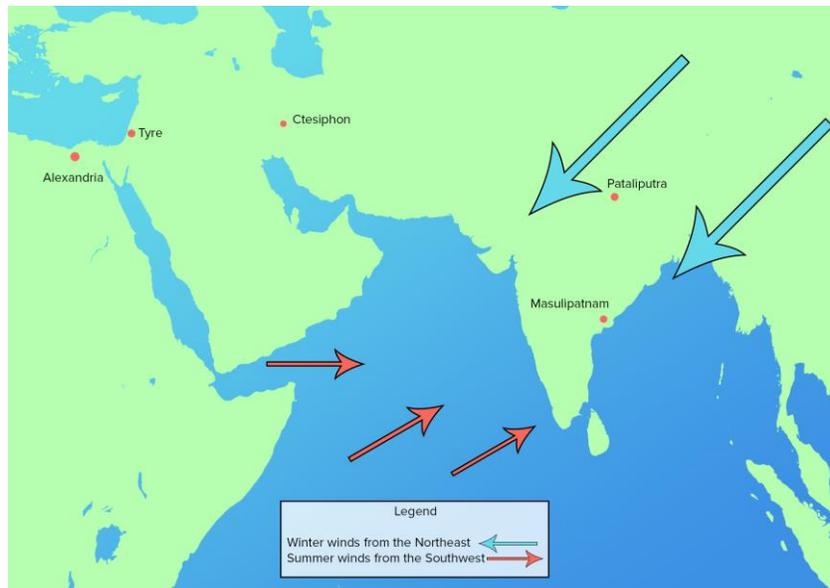


Extent of Silk Roads. Red is land route and blue is sea/water route.

Travel on the Silk Road: Traders had to find ways to move their goods efficiently. To travel overland, the camel was favored mode of transportation. Nomadic peoples in central Asia started domesticating camels as early as the second millennium BCE. For example, the Han Chinese used camels captured from the Xiongnu to carry military supplies. Camels could withstand the harsh desert conditions through central Asia and were also able to carry up to 500 pounds at a time! Pack animals—especially camels—made the transportation of goods over land on the Silk Road viable.

Relief with camel, Persepolis, Iran.

Merchants and sailors made use of the ocean to transport goods, too. Sailors needed a strong understanding of wind patterns and storm systems to successfully navigate the oceans. For example, in the Indian Ocean, monsoon winds blow from the northeast in the winter and from the southwest in the summer. With a southwestern wind pushing them east, merchants were able to travel from the Red Sea between Egypt and Arabia to India in the summer and then back to the Red Sea in the winter. This information was exchanged among sailors and made its way beyond the Indian Ocean.



A map of the monsoon pattern, made by Khan Academy. Map shows the Red sea and the land surrounding it (east Africa, Saudi Arabia, India, southeast Asia). Blue arrows point south and west, showing the winter winds from the northeast. Red arrows point north and east across the Red Sea, showing the summer winds coming from the southwest.

Stop and consider: How did environmental factors influence trade patterns along the Silk Road(s)?

The effects of exchange: One obvious effect of trade along the Silk Road was more goods were available in more places. Silk, owing to its soft texture and appealing shimmer, became so hotly desired that it was used as currency in central Asia. However, the process of raising silkworms and creating fabric from their cocoons remained a Chinese secret through the 6th century C.E. The fact that China remained the only source of silk meant that trade goods continued to travel across Asia. This involved many people and locations in the Silk Road trade networks.

Spices from the East Indies, glass beads from Rome, silk, ginger, and lacquerware from China, furs from animals of the Caucasian steppe and slaves from many locations all travelled along the Silk Road.

Some effects were cultural. During the rule of the Tang dynasty of China, for example, sculptures of camels from the caravans that frequently traded in China were placed in graves. Clearly the animals made an impression!

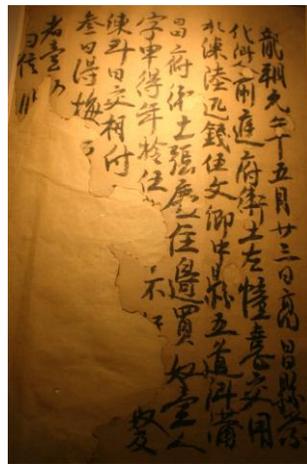
Stop and consider: Which of the following was an effect of silk only being produced in China?

Choose 1 answer:

_____ Trade goods had to cross Asia, incorporating many people and locations into long-distance trade networks

_____ China became more isolated from the world

_____ People outside of China didn't have silk



Part of a 7th-century purchase contract, exchanging a fifteen-year-old enslaved person for six bolts of silk and five Chinese coins. This contract is from the city of Turfan, an oasis city along the Silk Road.

Ideas and diseases were also exchanged along the sea lanes and camel-routes—and both would have profound effects on the locations they traveled to. Toward the end of the second century, a plague tore through the Roman Empire, killing 10% of the population. Historians think that this plague first appeared in China before making its way through trade routes to the Near East, where Roman soldiers were campaigning. As for the exchange of ideas, Buddhism came to China through trade with India. The Sogdians of central Asia often acted as traders between India and China. Sogdians also translated Sanskrit sutras into Chinese and spread the Buddhist faith as they traded. Other faiths, like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity also traveled along the sea and land routes. These religions developed and changed to fit the new regions they travelled to.

Stop and consider: What effects did trade have beyond moving goods?

Chinese silk in Rome: So now we have a sense of the economic and political conditions that enabled Chinese silk to make its way to Roman markets. Both the Han Chinese and Roman Empires controlled vast territories and kept them relatively peaceful. The Han conquered their way into central Asia. From there, nomadic traders carried goods farther west or south. Trade brought new faiths, new ideas, and new goods to places they had not previously been.