

The Development of the Silk Road

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The 2nd Century BCE Through 2nd Century CE

The first major contact between East and West came with the conquest of Central Asia by Alexander the Great. This brought Greek influence to Central Asia. By 323 BCE Alexander's empire stretched from Greece in the west to Egypt in the south and through Iran to northern India. As the empire grew, so did Greek influence in these new areas. In every place that Alexander conquered he set up new strategic military towns to which he imported Greek people. They brought with them their own cultural items and ideas. New plants such as the grapevine and new technologies in metal work were introduced during this era. Greek influences can be seen in the Central Asian art and architecture of this time period.

Yet because Alexander's empire was so great in size, his successors could not keep it united. Many regions revolted after his death. As the empire of Alexander the Great fell, three new powers arose to assume control of the lands Alexander had conquered. The Romans took over the western part of Alexander's empire, and the Parthians took over the eastern half. At the same time, China extended its dominance far to the west, as far as Sogdiana, the eastern-most boundary of Alexander's empire. Chinese control of this region meant that for the first time silk could be easily transported for trade with the Parthians. The Parthians acted as middlemen, trading the silks to the Romans for gold.

With these vast areas of land united under Chinese rule, trade became much more efficient and much less dangerous. As trade flourished, different people came together, and their contact led to cultural exchange and diffusion. It was during this period in the 1st century A.D. that traders and Buddhist missionaries first brought Buddhism to China.

As time went by, however, the three empires began to lose control over their territories in Central Asia, and one by one they disintegrated. Trade became more treacherous and expensive because the goods had to pass through many small states, paying taxes and fees in each one. As a result, the level of trade declined until the 7th century CE when the Central Asian region was again unified under the Muslim Dynasty and China grew powerful and united under the Tang Dynasty.

The 7th Century CE to the 10th Century CE

In the 7th century, a new influence began to dominate the area of Central Asia—the Islam religion. This new religion, which was based on the life experiences of the Prophet Muhammad, quickly spread throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. The conquests of the Muslim Empire unified the area from Arabia in the west to Kashgar, China, in the east. With the safety brought by unity, the Muslim merchants traveled freely throughout these regions, trading their wares and spreading their beliefs.

At the same time, the Chinese were venturing out beyond their conventional frontiers to the west. Trade resumed, and in the Tang dynasty, China was open to ideas and goods imported from abroad. During this time Muslim merchants introduced the grapevine to the Chinese, and many technological inventions were taken from China, including the mechanical clock, printing, and gunpowder, all of which had enormous impact on the West. Yet the desire for luxury and the corrupt ways of the Tang government weakened the empire, and by 907 CE the dynasty had fallen. This marked the end of Chinese control over Chinese Central Asia. With unity gone, overland trade again became difficult, and the Arabic traders relied on sea travel to bring their goods to China.

The 12th Century to the 14th Century

The next time that both Central Asia and China were unified was under the Great Mongol Empire. Chinggis Khan, the leader of the Mongols, conquered all of the land from China to the Mediterranean. With one empire controlling all of the Middle East and Central Asia, the roads were the safest ever to travel. During this time Marco Polo and other Europeans made their way all the way from Europe to China. Yet because of differences between the Mongol rulers of Russia, Central Asia, and China, the Mongol Empire fell apart. With the fall of the Mongols in the 14th century and the fall of Constantinople in the mid-15th century, the Silk Road disintegrated again.

Epilogue

Though trans-Asian trade and travel would resume from time to time, the Silk Road would never regain its original importance and grandeur. In the Age of Discovery, Western navigators like Ferdinand Magellan and Christopher Columbus would take to the sea to discover alternative routes. Traveling by sea was more economically advantageous because it removed the obstacles of passing through anyone's territory and of sharing profits with middlemen.

Through the centuries, cities such as Antioch, Baghdad, Samarkand, and Chang'an were forgotten by the other people who

Road.

Goods Traded

A wide variety of goods was available at these bazaars. Coming from the west would be items like gold, grapes, pomegranates, woolen rugs, colored glass, and green and white jade. From China came silk, gunpowder, chrysanthemums, paper, compasses, and bamboo. It was often advantageous for traders to buy a diverse range of goods in case the price of one item fell below the price necessary for the trader to make a profit. The trader had to be clever in order to exchange goods quickly and gauge the demand for the item at the market.

During the Tang (618-906 CE) and Yuan (1279-1368 CE) Dynasties, Chang'an, the capital of China was a major destination for most Western travelers. Sogdians*, Turks, Persians, Indians, Arabs, and other peoples of Central Asia and Europe crowded a section of the city called the Western Market, where they traded and sold their wares at innumerable bazaars. Different products and exotic goods from many places were peddled in this bustling center of trade, where foreign traders profited handsomely. Temples and taverns also lined the market. Western performers entertained the visitors and helped them forget their loneliness by reminding them of the delights of their homes.

Importance of the Silk Road Trade

A large volume of goods traveled along the Silk Road. Successful trading meant high profits for the trader and also for the towns along the Silk Road trade routes. Local town people profited from trade by catering to the needs of the passing traders. The regional governments made a profit as they levied taxes on foreign traders passing through their regions. The revenue (money) from taxes was so great that wars were fought to see who would control the lucrative trade along different sections of the trade routes.

But more than just enriching the people, trade along the Silk Road also contributed to rich cultural exchange. Pilgrims and monks traveled along the trade routes to spread their beliefs. Envoys of the different kingdoms also traveled along the Silk Road to bring gifts to other rulers. Traders and other travelers gathered at the marketplaces, caravanserais, and teahouses and learned about the cultures of one another. Consumers who bought goods from different lands were introduced to the cultures of the people who made those goods.

**The Sogdians were a nomadic tribe who specialized as caravaneers along the Taklamakan Desert and the Pamirs. visitors and helped them forget their loneliness by reminding them of the delights of their homes.*

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