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**The Silk Roads**

WHP AP Unit 2 Overview | World History Project

What do modern pit stops and medieval caravanserais have in common? Quite a lot! Merchants who traveled the Silk Roads, Indian Ocean, and trans-Saharan routes needed safe places to stop, rest, and refuel during their journey, just like modern travelers do. In this video you'll learn how in times of political stability such as the Pax Mongolica, networks of exchange flourished, and pit stops like caravanserais flourished along trade routes. Goods, people, technology, and ideas moved along these networks of exchange, connecting Afro-Eurasian societies. But people traveling these networks also spread diseases, one of which led to the breakdown of networks in the fourteenth century.

0:13

Video clip of car on the road.

Imagine you're on a long road trip with your family or school. What are some things that come to mind? I'm guessing you thought about gas stations, motels, and other pitstops.

Illustration of a motel and image of ball of twine.

Pitstops are great. They let you refuel with gas and food. You sleep somewhere safe. And if you're lucky, you can get some sour patch kids from the vending machine, or, I don't know, or go see the world's largest ball of twine.

Video clip of cars on a highway.

Have you ever stopped to think about why pitstops exist? That convenient bathroom and vending machine didn't materialize just for you. Pitstops exist because there are enough travelers to keep their business running. And there aren't enough travelers because enough people consider the journey safe and worth their effort.

Image of a pitstop.

Now, imagine you had to take that long road trip, but there were no pitstops. Where would you get the fuel, food, and shelter you need?

1:09

Images of cars in the desert.

Oh, and also, there are roving bands of bandits on every highway, looking to steal all your gas and ambush you at the vending machine. Would you still make the trip? Hmm?

I'm guessing you'd decide that the visit to grandma's and the big ball of twine would just have to wait, right?

Illustration of merchants traveling and of nature scenes.

Throughout history, merchants had to make a similar calculation. Was making money worth the risk of bandits, storms, pirates, or dying in the desert?

Graphic of a world map with the Silk Roads highlighted.

Many merchants and travelers took the risk, establishing long-distance trade routes all over the world. Many didn't make it home alive. Yet, in some places, in some times, merchants could travel safely, and they could expect to find pitstops along the way.

Images and illustrations of caravanserais.

On the huge trade network known as the Silk Roads, these pitstops were called "caravanserais".

2:01

Video clip of a person weaving fabric.

From China to the Mediterranean, caravanserais were guesthouses that offered protection and hospitality to travelers. They were kind of like the motels, gas stations, and restaurants you find on along the highway today. From 1200 to 1450—the period covered in this unit—many new caravanserais were built. We'll explore why in a moment. But first, let's set the stage.

Hi, I'm John Arthur, and this is Unit 2: Networks of Exchange 1200 to 1450 CE.

The world from 1200 to 1450 was, as you learned in the last unit, a diverse and disconnected world. A rich tapestry of human communities. Yet, every tapestry is connected by long threads. And the world from 1200 to 1450 was also a world of deep interconnections and long-distance exchange.

2:56

Graphic of a world map with international trade routes highlighted.

Despite many barriers, long-distance networks of exchange still linked societies within large regions. Across the Silk Roads, the Indian Ocean, and the Sahara Desert, goods and ideas traveled on merchant caravans and ships. Similar networks stretched across the Americas and the islands of the Pacific Ocean. In some places, these networks overlapped, enabling some luxury goods to travel vast distances.

Illustrations of merchants traveling with and selling goods.

By far the largest and most intense of these networks were on the Silk Roads, a series of overland trade routes stretching from the South China Sea to the Mediterranean. Few merchants actually traveled the entire distance themselves. Rather, the trade resembled a sort of relay race, with most merchants traveling short distances between markets, selling and buying new goods before returning home. In this way, silk, ivory, spices, and other luxury goods crossed thousands of miles.

4:00

Governance theme and Economic Systems theme graphics.

During Unit 2, trade across the Silk Roads expanded to new heights, connecting more societies than ever across Afro-Eurasia. To understand why, you need to think back to Unit 1. You'll remember that we examined the processes of state formation in different world regions using the Governance theme. In this unit, you'll encounter the important linkages among all those different communities using the Economics Systems theme.

Here's the big idea at the start of this unit. It links both of those themes. Ready? Political stability creates economic prosperity. Pretty simple. But don't worry, it gets more complex later.

Graphic of a world map with Abbasid Caliphate, Song Dynasty, and their trade routes highlighted.

The emergence of large, powerful states—such as the Song Dynasty or the Abbasid Caliphate—created periods of peace and political stability. When there's peace, rulers spend money on infrastructure, like roads, bridges, and pitstops.

5:00

Illustrations of combat and war.

When there's war, rulers spend money on soldiers, and those soldiers march around the countryside making travel very difficult. When empires controlled large tracks of land, they could limit the amount of banditry that took place in their territory. So, the formation of large, stable empires permitted long distance trade within their borders, securing merchant routes from the dangers of brigands and war.

Graphic of a world map with the Mongol empire and trade routes highlighted.

And in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there was no larger or more powerful state than the Mongol Empire.

The initial Mongol invasions devastated swathes of Afro-Eurasia, disrupting overland trade. Many merchants chose to send their goods across the more expensive, but safer, Indian Ocean trade.

5:46

Once the Mongols finished their bloody conquest however, they ushered in nearly a century of peace and stability stretching across their massive empire. This period is often called the Pax Mongolica, or "Mongol Peace." During this 100-year period of stability, merchants and other travelers could use the Silk Roads relatively safely.

Illustrations of Mongolian merchants and caravanserais.

Trade brought new wealth and distant luxury goods to the Mongol Khans, and they went to great lengths to protect merchants and make trade easier. They hunted down bandits, and compensated merchants for losses on the road. Stability meant that more trade moved back to the Silk Roads. This inspired the building of new infrastructure, including new caravanserais.

Images of a Motel and toy soldiers.

A caravanserai was like a gas station combined with a Motel 6—if that Motel 6 were also surrounded by fortified walls and protected by soldiers.

6:45

Illustrations of caravanserais.

Caravanserais contained stables, baths, and small markets. During the Pax Mongolica, caravanserais were positioned within a day's travel from each other, meaning merchants didn't have to risk sleeping outdoors with their trade goods.

Graphic of a world map with trade routes and cities highlighted with images.

Cities at crossroads such as Samarkand and Kashgar, where caravanserais sprang up to support the many travelers and merchants, saw wealth pour in and emerged as centers of commerce, culture, and learning.

Illustrations and images of caravanserais.

It's kind of like how in the United States today, many of our largest cities, like Chicago and Los Angeles, grew to prominence after they became railroad hubs.

Text listening new ideas and innovations.

At a typical caravanserai, merchants, traveling scholars, religious leaders, and others mingled. They exchanged news, culture, and goods.

New ideas and innovations, like the printing press, navigation technologies, ship designs, and gunpowder all moved along the Silk Roads to new places. In Units 3 and 4 you'll see some of the dramatic consequences of these new technologies.

7:51

Graphic of a world map highlighting the spread of Black Death.

Later in this unit, you'll also learn about some of the other, less beneficial consequences of long-distance exchange. In the mid-fourteenth century, the prosperous, interconnected world of trade routes and caravanserais made possible by Mongol stability, allowed disease to spread rapidly throughout Afro-Eurasia in the Black Death.

Governance theme and Economic Systems theme graphics.

As you explore this unit, you'll encounter trade routes beyond the Silk Roads, and you'll see the consequences of exchange in many regions. As you travel through this unit, look for other ways that the Governance and Economics Systems themes interacted. Did stability always create prosperity? How did different governments attempt to facilitate trade over long distances?

And how can these linkages and transformations help you to understand our world, today?

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