



# The Silk Road

*By Rosie Friedland and David Rheinstrom for Khan Academy. Revised by Eman M. Elshaikh.*

Heavenly horses, see-through clothing, camel-shaped gravestones. The ancient, vast trade network we call the Silk Road connected Eurasia and North Africa. And it was about a lot more than silk.

## 980L



## Introduction

Silk. Today we know it as a soft, shiny, fabric used for expensive clothes and many other things. Back in the first century CE, during the rule of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, silk was a much bigger deal. The luxury fabric, imported at great cost from China, had become a symbol of excess and wealth among Romans. With greater demand than supply, merchants figured out a way to unravel the silk they bought from China. They re-wove it into more silk, but now it was much thinner. As in, you could see through it. Since silk was used for clothing, this became a bit of a problem on the streets of Rome.

Seneca the Younger, a writer and emperor's adviser, 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," he said. At one point, in the year 14 CE, the Imperial Senate made it illegal for men to wear silk.

This ban on silk did not last. The demand for silk among wealthy Romans continued to drive trade among 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 empires. Near the end of the second century BCE, the Han dynasty, led by Emperor Wu, was in conflict with roaming communities, called the Xiongnu. Xiongnu horsemen had raided Chinese settlements along the northern border for many years. Emperor Wu had mounted many military campaigns against the Xiongnu. Soon he decided it was time to find a new source of horses if they were ever going to win this fight.



*"Heavenly Horse" of Ferghana, depicted in a 2nd century CE bronze sculpture from Han China. By G41rn8, CC BY-SA 4.0.*

He sent a representative named Zhang Qian to find allies who could help fight the Xiongnu. Zhang returned to China, eager to discuss the wonders he had seen in Ferghana (modern-day Uzbekistan, in Central Asia). This region produced rice, wheat, and grapes. However, it was best known for its strong, “heavenly” horses.

As a tradable item, these “heavenly horses” of Ferghana were as desired in China as silk was in Rome. China imported so many horses that the Dayuan people who controlled the Ferghana valley eventually said “no more!” Han China decided if they couldn’t buy the horses, they would take the land. That led to a three-year conflict known as the War of the Heavenly Horses. By 101 BCE, the Ferghana valley belonged to Han China. But here is the interesting side effect: Control of the Ferghana valley also opened a route to the West.

With a new supply of horses, Han China had increased its military strength throughout Asia. The growth of Han control led to the first Pax Sinica—or Chinese Peace. During this time, people in China were living better and cities grew in size. Economic growth and stable government led to increased demand for luxury goods from far-off places.

Meanwhile, the Roman Empire was also expanding. 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. For about 200 years there were hardly any wars. As with Han China, a stable government brought more trade. Rome began to trade regularly on overseas trade routes to India, going through Egypt.

Although Rome and Han China expanded greatly, they were still very far apart. Central Asia is covered with mountains, deserts, and vast grasslands, so it’s not as if people traveled through it for fun. Traders had a good business reason to take these difficult trips. They provided an important link in creating networks between the Roman and Han empires.



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

## Travel on the Silk Road

Traders had to find ways to move their goods efficiently. This is where camels come in. They were the best way to travel. Roaming 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 were tough. They could handle the harsh desert conditions of Central Asia. Camels also could carry up to 500 pounds! Without pack animals—especially camels—transporting goods over land on the Silk Road would not have been worth the trouble.



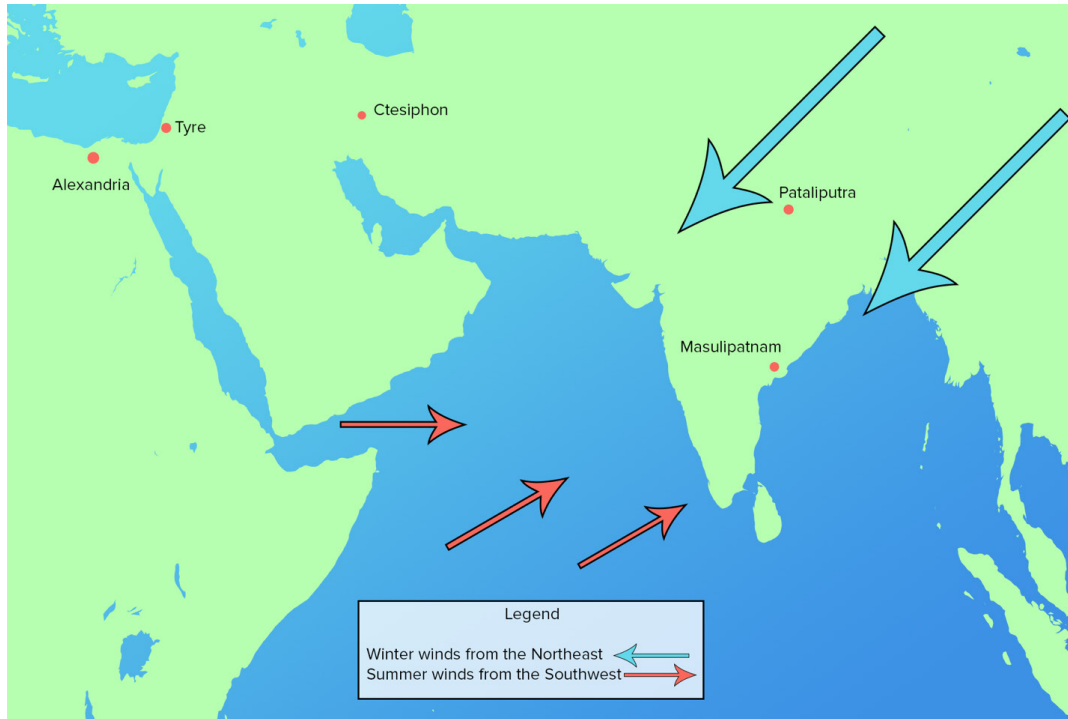
*Relief with camel, Persepolis, Iran. By Nick Taylor, CC BY 2.0.*

Land wasn't the only way to travel. Traders made use of the ocean, too. Sailors didn't need camels. However, they did need a strong understanding of wind patterns and storm systems to successfully navigate the dangerous waters. Take the Indian Ocean for example. 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. Then they would go back to the Red Sea in the winter. This essential information was exchanged among sailors and made its way beyond the Indian Ocean.

## The effects of exchange

There was one obvious effect of trade along the Silk Road and for any long-distance trade: more goods were available in more places. Silk became so hotly desired that it was used as money in Central Asia. What was so special about it? Unlike other fabrics, it was unusually soft and always had an appealing shimmer. This is because silk is a protein fabric made from the cocoons of silkworms, not from plants. The Romans surely would have made their own silk if they could. But how to get from cocoon to fabric was a process the Chinese kept secret all the way until the sixth century CE. The fact that China remained the only producer of silk meant that trade goods continued to travel across Asia.

Women were in charge of silk harvesting and weaving. Their production of silk generated much money from both the trading on the Silk Road networks and through the payment of taxes to the government. Women taking on this role became very important to the benefit of the Han dynasty and its economy.



*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.*

Chinese silk was not the only item traded along these routes. China also exported ginger and lacquerware, a kind of glazed pottery. Spices came from the East Indies, and glass beads from Rome. Furs arrived from animals of the Caucasian steppe, or grasslands. Unfortunately, the Silk Road also made it easier for enslaved peoples from many locations to be transported along the way.

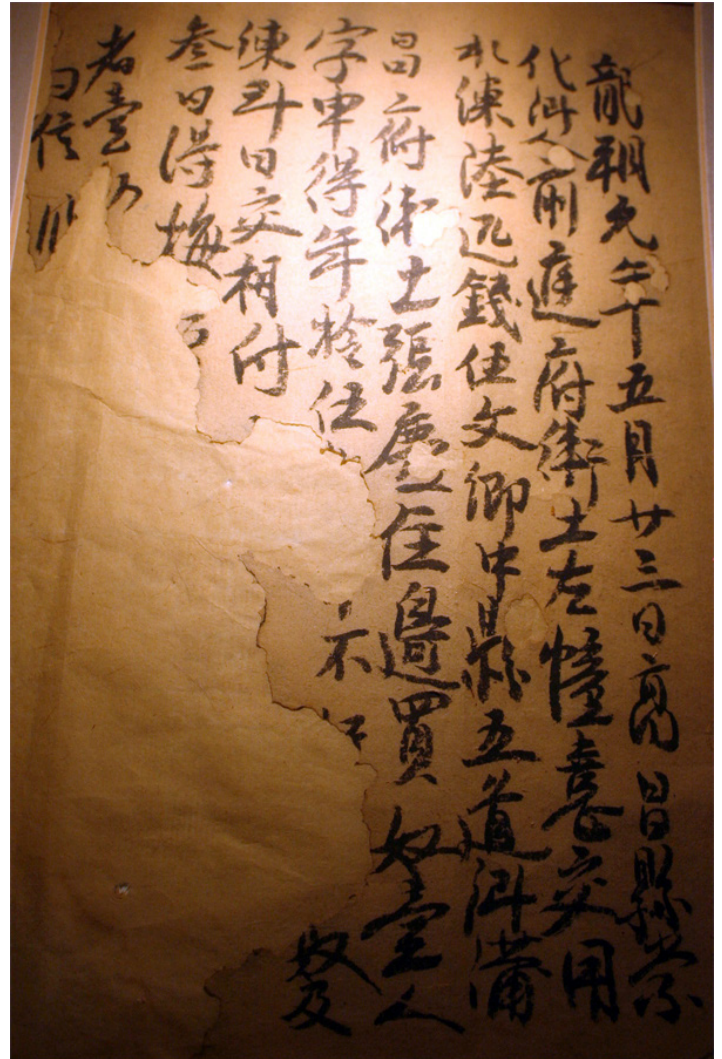
This massive movement of goods, people, and ideas had some major effects, including cultural developments. During the rule of China's Tang dynasty, for example, sculptures of camels from the caravans that frequently traded in China were placed in graves. Clearly the animals made an impression!

There are two other things that new trade routes tend to spread without even trying: ideas and diseases. Both would have large effects on the communities along the sea lanes and camel routes of Silk Road networks. Toward the end of the second century, a plague tore through the Roman Empire, killing 10 percent of the population. Historians think this plague first appeared in China before following the trade routes to the Near East, where Roman soldiers were campaigning.

As for the exchange of ideas, Buddhism arrived in China through trade with India. The Sogdians of Central Asia often acted as traders between India and China. Sogdians also translated Sanskrit sutras (short holy scriptures) into Chinese and spread the Buddhist faith as they traded. Other faiths, such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity also traveled along the sea and land routes. These religions developed and changed as they were introduced and became accepted in new areas.

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, roaming traders carried goods farther west or south.

Trade brought new belief systems, new ideas, new diseases, and new goods to places that would be forever changed by the Silk Road.



*Part of a seventh-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. By Discott, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

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## Image credits

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**Part of a seventh-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. By Discott, CC BY-SA 3.0. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery\\_in\\_China#/media/File:Chinese\\_Slave\\_trade.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_China#/media/File:Chinese_Slave_trade.jpg)

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