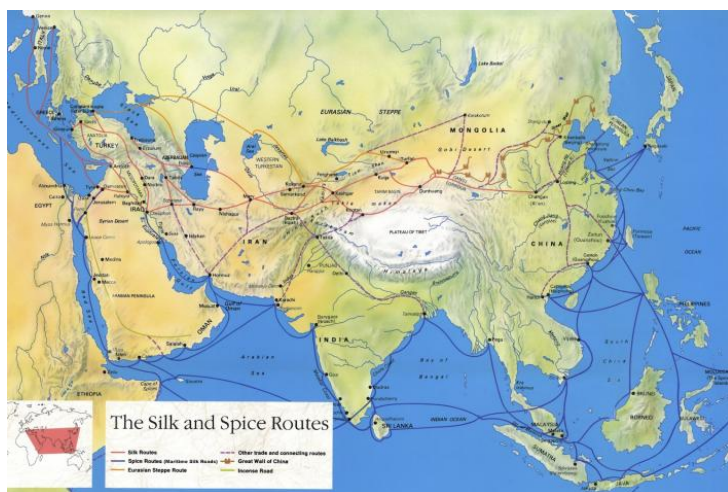


About the Silk Road



Introduction

Human beings have always moved from place to place and traded with their neighbours, exchanging goods, skills and ideas. Throughout history, Eurasia was criss-crossed with communication routes and paths of trade, which gradually linked up to form what are known today as the Silk Roads; routes across both land and sea, along which silk and many other goods were exchanged between people from across the world. Maritime routes were an important part of this network, linking East and West by sea,

and were used for the trade of spices in particular, thus becoming known as the Spice Routes.

These vast networks carried more than just merchandise and precious commodities however: the constant movement and mixing of populations also brought about the transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures and beliefs, which had a profound impact on the history and civilizations of the Eurasian peoples.

Travellers along the Silk Roads were attracted not only by trade but also by the intellectual and cultural exchange that was taking place in cities along the Silk Roads, many of which developed into hubs of culture and learning. Science, arts and literature, as well as crafts and technologies were thus shared and disseminated into societies along the lengths of these routes, and in this way, languages, religions and cultures developed and influenced each other.

Silk Production and the Silk Trade

Silk is a textile of ancient Chinese origin, woven from the protein fibre produced by the silkworm to make its cocoon, and was developed, according to Chinese tradition, sometime around the year 2,700 BC. Regarded as an extremely high value product, it was reserved for the exclusive usage of the Chinese imperial court for the making of cloths, drapes, banners, and other items of prestige. Its production was kept a fiercely guarded secret within China for some 3,000 years, with imperial decrees sentencing to death anyone who revealed to a foreigner the process of its production. Tombs in the Hubei province dating from the 4th and 3rd centuries BC contain outstanding examples of silk work, including brocade, gauze and embroidered silk, and the first complete silk garments.

At some point during the 1st century BC, silk was introduced to the Roman Empire, where it was considered an exotic luxury and became extremely popular, with imperial edicts being issued to control prices. Its popularity continued throughout the Middle Ages, with detailed Byzantine regulations for the manufacture of silk clothes, illustrating its importance as a quintessentially royal fabric and an important source of revenue for the crown. Additionally, the needs of the Byzantine Church for silk garments and hangings were substantial. This luxury item was thus one of the early impetuses in the development of trading routes from Europe to the Far East.

Beyond Silk; a diversity of routes and cargos

However, whilst the silk trade was one of the earliest catalysts for the trade routes across Central Asia, it was only one of a wide range of products that was traded between east and west, and which included textiles, spices, grain, vegetables and fruit, animal hides, tools, wood work, metal work, religious objects,

art work, precious stones and much more. Indeed, the Silk Roads became more popular and increasingly well-travelled over the course of the Middle Ages, and were still in use in the 19th century, a testimony not only to their usefulness but also to their flexibility and adaptability to the changing demands of society. Nor did these trading paths follow any one trail – merchants had a wide choice of different routes crossing a variety of regions of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Far East, as well as the maritime routes, which transported goods from China and South East Asia through the Indian Ocean to Africa, India and the Near East.

Routes of Dialogue

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of the Silk Roads has been their role in bringing cultures and peoples in contact with each other, and facilitating exchange between them. On a practical level, merchants had to learn the languages and customs of the countries they travelled through, in order to negotiate successfully. Cultural interaction was a vital aspect of material exchange. Moreover, many travellers ventured onto the Silk Roads in order to partake in this process of intellectual and cultural exchange that was taking place in cities along the routes. Knowledge about science, arts and literature, as well as crafts and technologies was shared across the Silk Roads, and in this way, languages, religions and cultures developed and influenced each other. One of the most famous technical advances to have been propagated worldwide by the Silk Roads was the technique of making paper, as well as the development of printing press technology. Similarly, irrigation systems across Central Asia share features that were spread by travellers who not only carried their own cultural knowledge, but also absorbed that of the societies in which they found themselves.

The routes were also fundamental in the dissemination of religions throughout Eurasia. Buddhism is one example of a religion that travelled the Silk Roads, with Buddhist art and shrines being found as far apart as Bamiyan in Afghanistan, Mount Wutai in China, and Borobudur in Indonesia. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Manicheism spread in the same way, as travellers absorbed the cultures they encountered and then carried them back to their homelands with them. Thus, for example, Hinduism and subsequently Islam were introduced into Indonesia and Malaysia by Silk Road merchants travelling the maritime trade routes from India and Arabia.

Travelling the Silk Roads

The process of travelling the Silk Roads developed along with the roads themselves. In the Middle Ages, caravans consisting of horses or camels were the standard means of transporting goods across land. Caravanserais, large guest houses or inns designed to welcome travelling merchants, played a vital role in facilitating the passage of people and goods along these routes. Found along the Silk Roads from Turkey to China, they provided not only a regular opportunity for merchants to eat well, rest and prepare themselves in safety for their onward journey, and also to exchange goods, trade with local markets and buy local products, and to meet other merchant travellers, and in doing so, to exchange cultures, languages and ideas.

The legacy of the Silk Roads

In the nineteenth century, a new type of traveller ventured onto the Silk Roads: archaeologists and geographers, enthusiastic explorers looking for adventure. Coming from France, England, Germany, Russia and Japan, these researchers traversed the Taklamakan desert in western China, in what is now Xinjiang, to explore ancient sites along the Silk Roads, leading to many archaeological discoveries, numerous academic studies, and most of all, a renewed interest in the history of these routes.

Today, many historic buildings and monuments still stand, marking the passage of the Silk Roads through

caravanserais, ports and cities. However, the long-standing and ongoing legacy of this remarkable network is reflected in the many distinct but interconnected cultures, languages, customs and religions that have developed over millennia along these routes. The passage of merchants and travellers of many different nationalities resulted not only in commercial exchange but in a continuous and widespread process of cultural interaction. As such, from their early, exploratory origins, the Silk Roads developed to become a driving force in the formation of diverse societies across Eurasia and far beyond.