

SILK ROADS

A

Human beings have always moved from place to place and traded with their neighbors, exchanging goods, skills and ideas. Throughout history, Eurasia was crisscrossed 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. Travelers 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.

B

Silk is a textile of ancient Chinese origin, woven from the protein fiber 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 capital punishment 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. The Chinese monopoly on silk production however did not mean that the product was restricted to the Chinese Empire – on the contrary, silk was used as a diplomatic gift, and was also traded extensively, first of all with China's immediate neighbors, and subsequently further afield, becoming one of China's chief exports under the Han dynasty (206 BC –220 AD). Indeed, Chinese cloths from this period have been found in Egypt, in northern Mongolia, and elsewhere.

C

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.

D

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 only 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. These routes developed over time and according to shifting geopolitical contexts throughout history. For example, merchants from the Roman Empire would try to avoid crossing the territory of the Parthians, Rome's enemies, and therefore took routes to the north, across the Caucasus region and over the Caspian Sea. Similarly, whilst extensive trade took place over the network of rivers that crossed the Central Asian steppes in the early Middle Ages, their water levels rose and fell, and sometimes dried up altogether, and trade routes shifted accordingly.

E

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 travelers, and in doing so, to exchange cultures, languages and ideas. As trade routes developed and became more lucrative, caravanserais became more of a necessity, and their construction intensified across Central Asia from the 10th century onwards, and continued until as late as the 19th century. This resulted in a network of caravanserais that stretched from China to the Indian subcontinent, Iran, the Caucasus, Turkey, and as far as North Africa, Russia and Eastern Europe, many of which still stand today. Caravanserais were ideally positioned within a day's journey of each other, so as to prevent merchants (and more particularly, their precious cargos) from spending days or nights exposed to the dangers of the road. On average, this resulted in a caravanseraï every 30 to 40 kilometers in well-maintained areas.

F

Maritime traders had different challenges to face on their lengthy journeys. The development of sailing technology, and in particular of ship-building knowledge, increased the safety of sea travel throughout the Middle Ages. Ports grew up on coasts along these maritime trading routes, providing vital opportunities for merchants not only to trade and disembark, but also to take on fresh water supplies, with one of the greatest threats to sailors in the Middle Ages being a lack of drinking water. Pirates were another risk faced by all merchant ships along the maritime Silk Roads, as their lucrative cargos made them attractive targets.

Source: Silk Roads, Dialogue, Diversity and Development. About the Silk Road. Retrieved from

<https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road>

Questions 1 – 6

The reading passage has six paragraphs, A–F.

Choose the best heading for paragraphs A-F from the list of headings below.

- i) The maintenance of caravanserais
- ii) The impact of the Romans in the establishment of trade routes
- iii) The role of the Silk Roads in science and literature
- iv) The diversity of the Silk Roads
- v) The advent and expansion of caravanserais
- vi) The purposes the Silk Roads served
- vii) The problems of maritime travelers
- viii) The production and trade of silk
- ix) The extensive production of silk in the Roman Empire

- 1) Paragraph A:
- 2) Paragraph B:
- 3) Paragraph C:
- 4) Paragraph D:
- 5) Paragraph E:
- 6) Paragraph F:

Questions 7 – 10

Choose the appropriate letters A, B, C or D.

7) When the ways of producing silk were protected in China from other countries, anyone leaking this secret to a foreigner would be punished by ...

- A) imprisonment
- B) death
- C) exile
- D) financial fines

8) The trade across Central Asia ...

- A) was confined to silk
- B) followed one trail
- C) was ended by pirates
- D) was far from monolithic

9) For the purpose of making the journey safer for traders, caravanserais were located ...

- A) close to one another
- B) in city centers
- C) near imperial buildings
- D) in local markets

10) Which of the following problems did ports mainly help sea traders overcome?

- A) pirates
- B) hunger
- C) thirst
- D) enemies

Questions 11 – 13

Choose THREE letters.

Which THREE of the following are true about silk?

- A) Silk originated in Egypt
- B) Some people were buried with silk
- C) The trade of silk was initially geographically restricted
- D) In Rome, silk prices were determined by merchants
- E) Silk reached common people in Rome
- F) Silk was used for religious clothes

11)

12)

13)

ANSWER KEY

1- vi

2- viii

3- ii

4- iv

5- v

6- vii

7- B

8- D

9- A

10- C

11- B

12- C

13- F