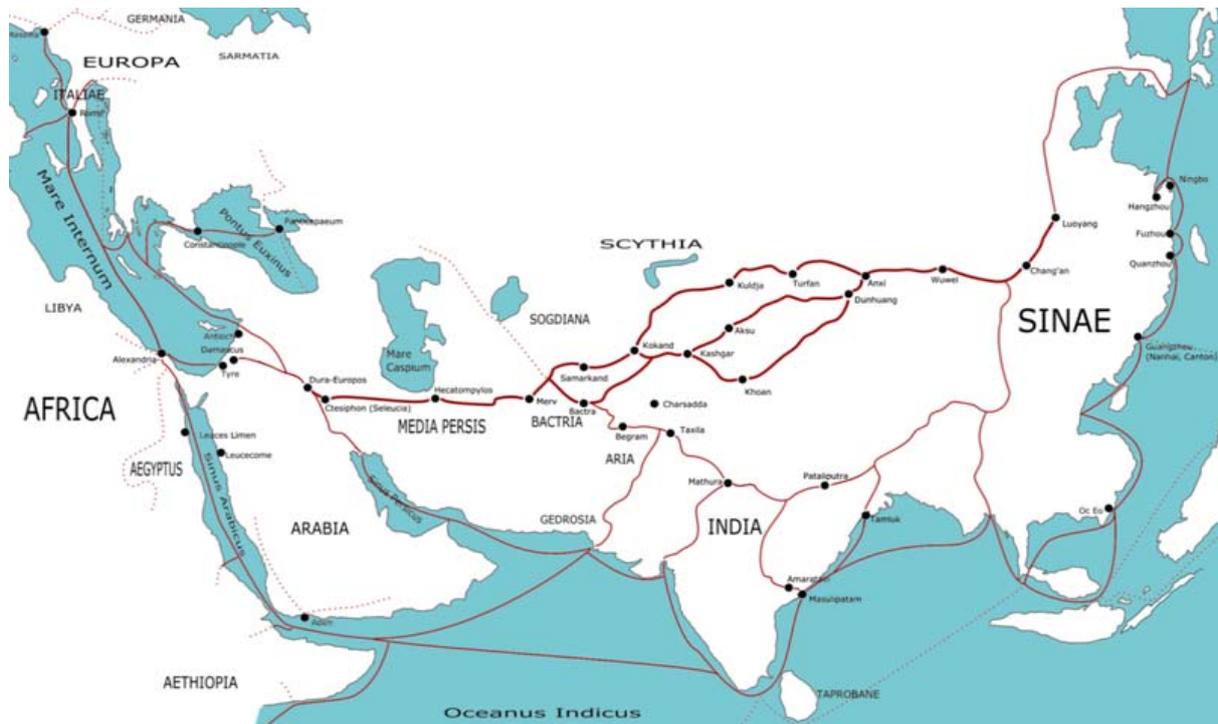


# The Silk Road

## History of the Silk Road



Silk Road - 1st century AD.

Silk Road, is the name given to a collection of trade routes which linked the Chinese and Roman Empires. The Chinese end of it in northwest China has a history of more than two thousand years. This ancient route started from the old capitals of Luoyang and Xi'an Provinces and reached the Yellow River at Lanzhou and then followed along the "Gansu Corridor" and stretched along the edge of Gobi deserts and Taklamkan mountains.

Extending about 5000 miles, the Silk Road gets its name from the lucrative Chinese silk trade along it, which began during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). The central Asian sections of the trade routes were expanded around 114 BCE by the Han dynasty, but earlier trade routes especially across the Persian Empire already existed linking Asia to Europe.

Although the route traversed many Nations during its early days most of the merchants working along its routes were at the Chinese end mostly Chinese, in the middle sections mostly Persians and at the Western end towards Europe mostly Jews and Arabs. The land routes were also supplemented by sea routes, which extended from the Red Sea to coastal India, China and Southeast Asia.

These trade routes were also linked to local routes extending them to South East Asia, India, Russia, the Arabic Peninsula and North Africa. For many centuries, by far the largest volume of world trade was being carried along these routes.



During the Islamic Empire Arab merchants began to dominate the most Western parts of the route and thus its extension to North African trade routes linking it to South West Europe gained a lot more importance relative to the Northern link between China and Persia. With the breakup of the Islamic Empire this Northern section fell into disuse. It was not until the Mongol conquests of the 12th century that trade revived along the ancient route.

During the period in which the Safavids were ruling Iran, volume of trade along this route was at its highest levels. The Safavid Empire dominated the middle sections of the route. However, with the establishment of transcontinental sea routes dominated by European nations, trade over the land routes of the Silk Road gradually declined.

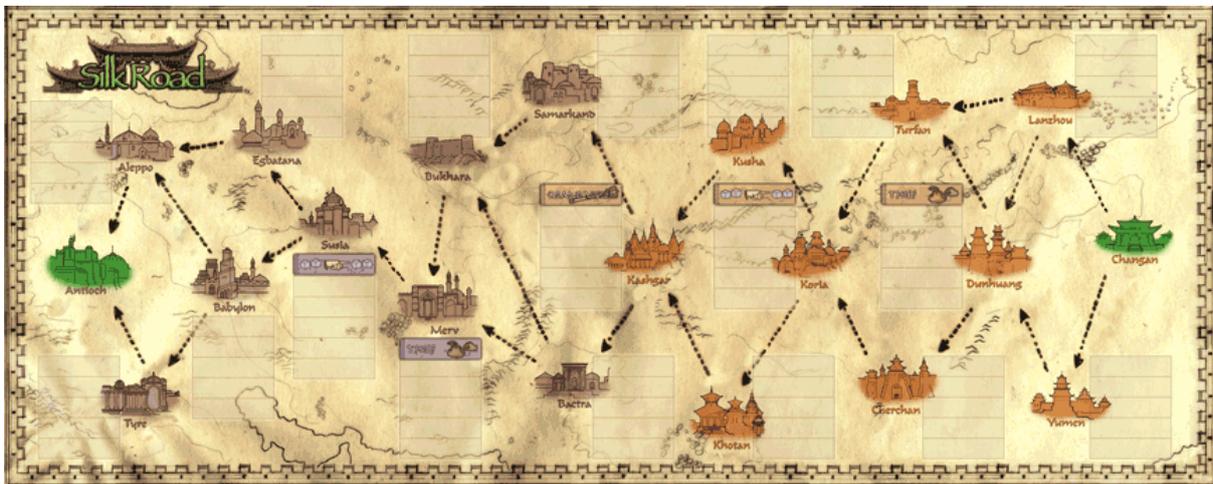
In recent years, both the maritime and overland Silk Routes are again being used, often closely following the ancient routes. These are however mostly confined to Asia and attempts at the establishment of a common market type of arrangement between Asian states.

## Cities of the Silk Road

The combination of the main Silk Roads and Local trade routes linked together many cities across many different nations and was the most significant factor in the development of early civilization in Asia and Eastern Europe.

Some of the more important cities, either along its main routes or linked to it by secondary or local routes were (from West to East):

Venice, Rome, Alexandria, Tyre, Damascus, Antioch, Baghdad, Istanbul, Konya, Kermanshah, Hamedan, Rey, Damghan, Sabzevar, Nishapur, Yazd, Merv, Samarghand, Bukhara, Herat, Kabul, Kashgar, Hotan, Dunhuang, Lanzhou, Changan.



These cities represent some of the most ancient cities in the world. Their role as part of the Silk Road has probably been a major factor in their continuity and survival through the ancient times.

## Trade on the Silk Road



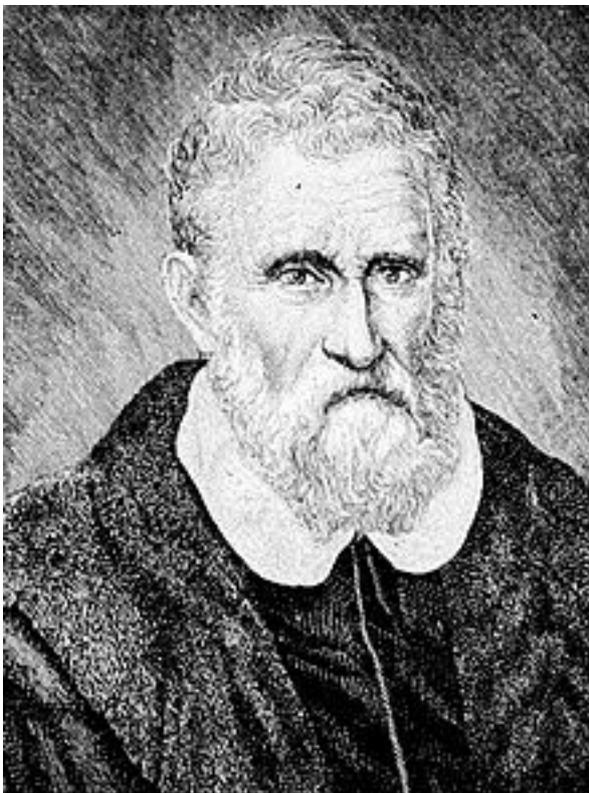
The Silk Road was used from about 200 years BC to the time of Renaissance in the 15th century to trade silks, satin, cotton, paper, furs, glassware, lacquer ware, porcelain, rich textiles, carpets, jewels, gems, gold, silver, ivory, perfumes, frankincense, hemp, musk, rhubarb, sandalwood, black pepper, medicines, herbs, spices, dates, saffron powder, pistachio, cinnamon, sugar...

People all along the route soon started producing the goods themselves. By the 400s AD the Chinese were blowing their own glass. In the 500s AD, West Asians began to produce their own cotton (and sell it to the Romans and around the Mediterranean). By about 550 AD, the Persians and by 650 AD, the Romans had learned how to produce silk. And in the late 700s AD, people in the Islamic Empire began to produce their own paper. But trade continued to grow all along the Silk Road.

This trade not only brought goods and services to people everywhere but was instrumental in the global exchange culture and of human knowledge and understanding. Even most of today's major religions owe their globalization to the Silk Road.

## Marco Polo Travels

Marco Polo was a Venetian merchant about whose birth and early life not much is known. He died a wealthy merchant in San Lorenzo in 1324. His book of travels (known in Italy as *Il Millione*) was written in Old French by Rustichello da Pisa, a romance writer of the time, who was reportedly working from accounts which he had heard from Marco Polo when they were imprisoned in Genoa. There are no authoritative versions of the original and the authenticities of none of the main claims of the author can be verified but it was nevertheless a book which did much to introduce Europeans to Central Asia and China.



Recent research shows that he probably never travelled further than the shores of the Black Sea. His father and uncle were travelling traders who had travelled through Asia and apparently met Kublai Khan. Some of the stories recounted in the book are also not unique and had appeared before in Persian, Indian, and Turkish stories. There are also other Roman travellers accounts of similar stories that they had heard along the shores of the Black Sea from Persian merchants. Whatever the origin of Marco Polo's Travels it should really be treated as the stories of the Silk Road.

## Silk Production

Silk was invented in China about 5000 years ago. Fancy silk textiles were worn or displayed by the wealthy as symbols of status from the Han Dynasty onward. Women played a major role in the production of this vital product. In many peasant household the laborious task of raising the silk worms originally was restricted to women.



The use of silk was confined to China until the opening of the Silk Road. Starting in the 4th century BCE, silk began to reach the Persians and then Europe. By 300 AD, women in central and western Asia were using Chinese silk thread with most woven silk fabrics. Though silk was exported to foreign countries in great amounts, sericulture (the raising of silkworms in order to obtain raw silk) remained a secret that the Chinese guarded carefully, letting the empire maintain its virtual monopoly. Shortly after 300 CE, however, the secret of making silk reached the Persians through a number of different channels.

After the knowledge of making silk spread, women from almost every household raised their own silkworms, and sold the best quality cocoons in the bazaar to make silk cloth. By the sixth century the Persians, too, had mastered the art of silk weaving, developing their own rich patterns and techniques.



Persian traders brought the secret of silk cultivation also to Byzantium sometime in the 6th century, during the reign of Justinian. Eventually the Byzantines perfected their own silk-making techniques, transforming cities like Damascus, Beirut, Aleppo, Tyre and Sidon into famous centres of silk production. Even after the coming of Islam, these remained as major cities from which medieval Europe obtained its luxury fabrics.



Like the Chinese, the Byzantines tried to maintain a monopoly on silk. To do this they created state owned imperial workshops. Both male and females were employed in these silk workshops. Some were staffed entirely by women, who were not allowed to leave and thus spread their skills to rival nations. This did not always work. Tales tell of women silk weavers in the Byzantium city of Thebes being carried off to work in the Sicilian silk workshops when the Normans sacked the city in 1147.