

# The Silk Roads

Existing Trade Networks

600 – 1450 CE

Key Concept 3.1

# Growth of the Silk Roads

- Eurasian landmass has long been home to the majority of humankind as well as the world's most productive agriculture, largest civilizations, and greatest concentration of pastoral peoples.
- It also gave rise to one of the world's most extensive and sustained networks of exchange among its diverse peoples.
- Eurasia is often divided into inner and outer zones with different ecologies
  - outer Eurasia: relatively warm, well-watered (China, India, Middle East, Mediterranean)
  - inner Eurasia: harsher, drier climate, much of it pastoral (eastern Russia, Central Asia)
  - steppe (forest and grasslands) products were exchanged for agricultural products and manufactured goods
  - Movement of pastoralists in and out of these zones served to diffuse Indo-European languages, bronze metallurgy, horse-based technologies and more.

# Physical Map of Eurasia

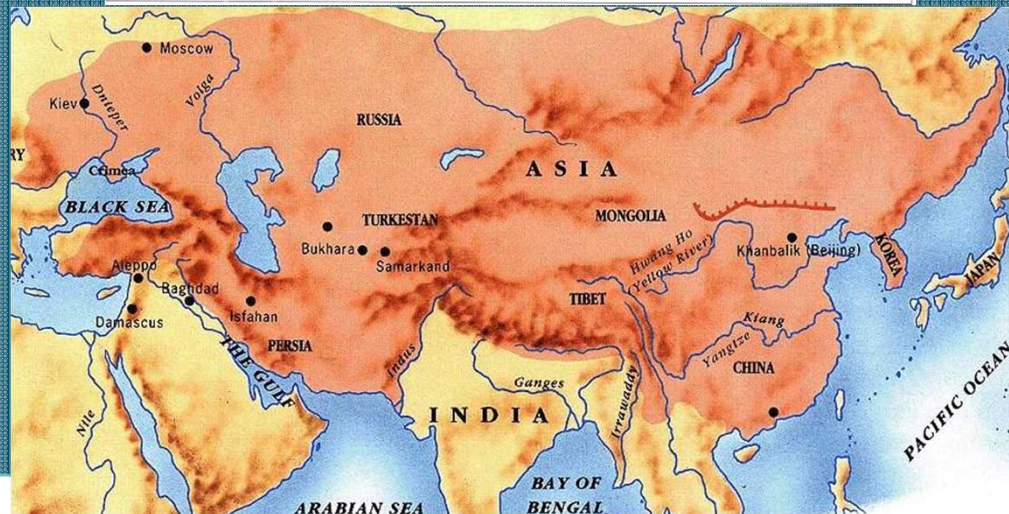
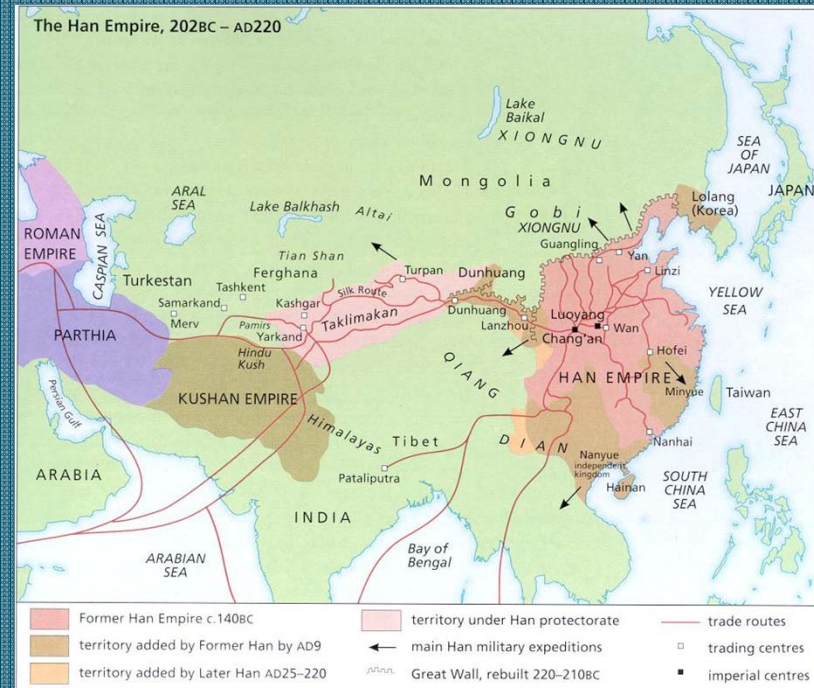


## Growth of the Silk Roads

- The creation of classical civilizations and imperial states in 500–0 BCE included efforts to control pastoral peoples (Persian Empire, Alexander the Great, Han China's efforts to control the Xiongnu)
- by the early centuries of the Common Era, there was a network of transcontinental exchange, often brokered by pastoral peoples (relay system of trade)

# Growth of the Silk Roads

- Trading networks did best when large states provided security for trade (3 phases)
  1. In the classical era when Roman and Chinese empires anchored commerce
  2. In the seventh and eighth centuries, the Byzantine Empire, Abbasid dynasty, and Tang dynasty created a belt of strong states
  3. in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongol Empire controlled almost the entirety of the Silk Roads



# Goods in Transit

- A vast array of goods traveled along the Silk Roads, often by camel
- mostly luxury goods for the elite
- high cost of transport did not allow movement of staple goods



# Silk Roads

Region	Products Contributed to Silk Road Commerce
China	Silk, bamboo, mirrors, gunpowder, paper, rhubarb, ginger, lacquerware, chrysanthemums
Forest lands of Siberia and grasslands of Central Asia	Furs, walrus tusks, amber, livestock, horses, falcons, hides, copper vessels, tents, saddles, slaves
India	Cotton textiles, herbal medicine, precious stones, spices
Middle East	Dates, nuts, almonds, dried fruit, dyes, lapis lazuli, swords
Mediterranean Basin	Gold coins, glassware, glazes, grapevines, jewelry, artworks, perfume, wool and linen textiles, olive oil

# Goods in Transit

- Silk symbolized the Eurasian exchange system
  - At first, China had a monopoly on silk technology
    - Silk from China and cotton textiles from India led to a drain of resources from the Roman Empire to the east
    - Romans regarded silk as morally decadent
  - By the sixth century c.e., other peoples produced silk
    - Stories of industrial espionage led to silk being produced in the Byzantine Empire, Korea, Japan, India, and Persia



# Goods in Transit

- Silk was used as currency and a means of accumulating wealth in Central Asia
- Silk was a symbol of high status
  - Sumptuary laws restricted silk clothing to the elite in China and the Byzantine Empire
  - Silk was linked to the sacred in Buddhism and Christianity
    - Gifts to monasteries as a sign of honor and respect
    - Christianity – silk wall hangings and altar covers were signs of devotion and piety
- Silk industry only developed in Western Europe in twelfth century
  - Irony of splendid Christian churches depending on silks manufactured in the Islamic world



## Goods in Transit

- Volume of trade was small, but of economic and social importance
- peasants in the Yangzi River delta of southern China produced market goods (silk, paper, porcelain, etc.) instead of crops
- well-placed individuals could make enormous profits

# Cultures in Transit

- Cultural transmission was more important than exchange of goods
- The case of Buddhism (a cultural product of Indian civilization in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE)
  - spread along Silk Roads through Central and East Asia
  - had always appealed to merchants because of its universal message rather than Hinduism that favored the higher castes
  - Zoroastrianism blocked the spread of Buddhism to the west
  - conversion was heavy in the oasis cities of Central Asia (Merv, Samarkand, Khotan, Dunhuang)
- Cities became cosmopolitan centers of learning and commerce
  - e.g., Buddhist texts and cave temples of Dunhuang
- conversion was voluntary rather than being linked to conquest or foreign rule
  - Inhabitants of Central Asian cities found a link to the larger, wealthier, and more prestigious civilization of India
  - winning religious merit by founding monasteries
  - monasteries provided rest stops for merchants

# Buddhism on the Silk Roads



# Cultures in Transit

- spread much more slowly among Central Asian pastoralists
  - pastoralists didn't have a written language
  - monasticism is central to Buddhism, but pastoralists are nomads
  - Shi Le, ruler of the nomadic Jie people (ruled northern China after collapse of Han), accepted conversion along with thousands of others, thanks to the monk Fotudeng
- in China, was the religion of foreign merchants or rulers for centuries before it became popular among the Chinese themselves
- Buddhism was transformed during its spread
  - the original faith shunned the material world, however, monasteries became rich and involved in secular affairs
    - Begging bowls became a symbol rather than a daily activity
    - Sculptures and murals show musicians and acrobats as well as women applying makeup and drink parties
- Mahayana form of Buddhism flourished
- picked up Greek influences
- the gods of many peoples along the Silk Roads were incorporated into Buddhist practice as bodhisattvas

# Disease in Transit

- The major population centers of the Afro-Eurasian world developed characteristic disease patterns and ways to deal with them
- Long-distance trade meant exposure to unfamiliar diseases
  - early case: great epidemic in Athens in 430–429 BCE that killed up to 25% of its army
  - during the Roman and Han empires, smallpox and measles devastated both populations
    - Although the diseases probably strengthened the appeal of Christianity and Buddhism because they offered compassion in the face of immense suffering
  - in 534–750 CE, bubonic plague from India ravaged Mediterranean world
    - Traveled by rats that carried the disease on ships
    - kept the Byzantine Empire from regaining Italy and renewing the Roman empire (10,000 people a day died over a 40-day period in 534)
    - made it harder for Christendom to resist spread of Islam

# Disease in Transit

- The Black Death spread thanks to the Mongol Empire's unification of much of Eurasia (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries)
  - could have been bubonic plague, anthrax, or collection of epidemic diseases
  - killed one-third of European population between 1346 and 1350
    - not all bad, tenant farmers and urban workers who were now in short supply could now demand higher wages and better terms
  - similar death toll in China and parts of the Islamic world
  - Central Asian steppes were badly affected (undermined Mongol power)
- Disease exchange gave Europeans an advantage when they reached the Western Hemisphere after 1500
  - Less issue with disease in the Americas – absence of domesticated animals, less interaction among centers of population, and isolation from the Eastern Hemisphere
  - peoples of the Americas had little immunity to European and African diseases