

The Beginning of the Silk Road

“Even before the discovery of silk, there was a vast amount of trade already taking place in Central Asia and China. Salt, used as a meat preservative, gemstones from Afghanistan and copper and tin from Iran were commonly traded commodities some 5000 years ago. Since no recognized monetary system existed, trade in the early days was done through the careful bartering and exchange of goods by caravan traders. Their trade would be carried out in mutual places, near water and green patches of land used for animal grazing. These sites are the locations where towns and cities developed, many of which can be visited today.”

- Silk Road Encyclopedia

The “branches” of the Silk Road

Because luxury items were transported and most traders could not afford large armed escorts to fight off robbers, merchants often travelled together in large caravans for increased safety. It is for this reason that the Silk Road expanded into a vast network of roads as individual traders searched for less inhabited territory to cross, so as to minimize the chance of attacks. Furthermore, as local governments realized the wealth of trade passing through their territory, attempts were made to charge heavy taxes along checkpoints, and so routes would change. The weather would also alter routes seasonally. Political circumstances would also determine routes; it was common for tribal chiefs to wage war with neighboring tribes to control the routes, money and power.

There are no records of Roman traders being seen in Chinese cities, nor Chinese merchants in Rome, though their goods reached both destinations. As goods changed hands, many middlemen along the routes made rewarding profits from the change of hands. The sheer distances that would need to be covered meant that the time to complete the whole journey individually would take several years, so trade on the Silk Road took place in small bundles of goods being carried over short distances, from one city to the next. Each of the merchants keeping within their own well-known territories would meet and exchange or sell their items and if lucky return home.

The Middlemen benefited the most

The great beneficiaries of Europe's need were the Arabs. Spices could change hands a dozen times between their source and Europe, soaring in value with each transaction, and the Arabs were the greatest of the middlemen. Keen to keep it that way, they did everything possible to confuse consumers about the spices' origins. As early as the 5th century BC an Arab cover story fooled the Greeks into believing that cinnamon was found only on a mountain range somewhere in Arabia, and that the spices were only found in the nests of massive birds of prey. Arab traders even claimed to leave out large chunks of fresh donkey meat for the birds to take back to their nests, which would crash to the ground under the weight. Then the brave Arabs grabbed the nests, from under the dangerous talons of their previous owners and collected the rare spices.

Many of these stories were created originally by the traders who, wishing to protect their profits, tried to hide the sources of the spices they were trading. The profits to be made from the spice routes were huge. Because they were so small and dried, they were easy to transport, but they were literally worth their weight in gold. The wealth of the spice routes brought great power and influence and, over the centuries, bloody battles were fought to win control of it and the routes along which it took place.”

- The Economist, “A Taste of Adventure”

The “Spice Islands”

Today, it seems strange that the demand for spices should be one of the central causes for such large scale trade across such massive distances. We probably think of them simply as a flavoring for food. Yet the great distances are easy to explain: many of the important spices grew only in the eastern tropics. In particular, they grew in the

Moluccas or, as they are better known, the *Spice Islands*. These are a chain of nearly 1000 mountainous islands strung out like jewels in the Pacific Ocean between Sulawesi (Celebes) and New Guinea. From here came the fragrant spices of allspice, cloves, cinnamon, mace and nutmeg which grew nowhere else in the world. To reach the spice markets found all over Afro Eurasia, the spices **had** to be transported thousands of miles over the seas.

Why were spices so valuable? From the dawn of civilization, spices were burned in religious ceremonies. Burning incense was considered a way to both purify the air and carry the prayers of the people heavenward to their god(s). They were also added to healing ointments and to potions drunk as antidotes to poisons. To hide the many household smells, people burned spices daily in their homes. They were used as cooking ingredients very early on – not only to add flavor but also to make the food, which was often far from fresh (and even rotten), edible, particularly in hot climates.

The Goods – region by region

In addition to silk, the route carried many other precious commodities. The caravan route that started in the Mediterranean brought to China many goods such as: dates, furs, skins, honey, slaves, rice [from what is now Eastern Europe], cotton and wool. From Persia [modern day Iran] came saffron, pistachio nuts, furs, tree bark [used to process the fur], cattle, silver products and slaves. From Northern and Eastern Africa came gold, frankincense and myrrh [used in natural perfumes and embalming]. Ivory, turtle shells and glass bottles from Egypt. India was famous for fabrics, cotton, spices, pepper, sandalwood, semi-precious stones, dyes, ginger and ivory.

Various woolen goods, carpets, curtains, blankets, incense and rugs came to China from Central Asia. These items were valued by the Chinese who were unfamiliar with methods for making wool, fabric processing, and carpet weaving. Central Asia exported camels which were also appreciated in China, arms and military equipment, gold and silver, semi-precious stones and glass items. Samarkand [an ancient city in Uzbekistan] made glass was especially valued due to its high quality, and was considered a luxury good. Other goods that originated in Central Asia were skins, cotton fabrics, wool, gold embroidery, exotic fruits (primarily watermelons and peaches) fat-tailed sheep and hunting dogs, leopards and lions.

From China caravans carried its famous Chinese porcelains, ceramic bowls, vases, glasses and dishes with sophisticated and beautiful patterns. It was solely the Chinese who knew the secret of making the thinnest and strongest porcelain, making it very expensive in European markets. China also specialized in both raw silk fabric and finished silk goods. Silk, in fact, was the most eagerly traded and mysterious item. Romans tried to find an alternative route and method to acquire the expensive silk for centuries. Bronze ornaments, bronze mirrors, umbrellas, medicines and perfumes were also popular. Chinese paper was highly appreciated too. Gold, skins and other raw materials were traded from China as well. Chinese merchants also carried tea and rice, corals, and amber. Sacks leaving China were filled with ivory, rhino horns, turtle shells, spices, iron items, ginger, and bronze weapons.