

2.1

The Silk Roads

And don't forget that if you treat the custom-house officers with respect, and make them something of a present in goods or money, as well as their clerks and dragomen, they will behave with great civility, and always be ready to appraise your wares below their real value.

—Italian merchant Francesco Balducci Peglotti (1471)

Essential Question: What were the causes and effects of the growth of networks of exchange after 1200?

More than 1,300 years after the first accounts of travel on the Silk Roads, these fabled routes that had fallen into disuse had revived by the 8th and 9th centuries. As described by merchant Peglotti, the land route of the Silk Roads was vibrant and essential to interregional trade in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Demand for luxury goods increased in Europe and Africa. Chinese, Persian, and Indian artisans and merchants expanded their production of textiles and porcelains for export. Caravans made travel safer and more practical, and the Chinese developed a system using paper money to manage increasing trade. Interregional trade on the Silk Roads flourished.

Causes of the Growth of Exchange Networks

The Crusades helped pave the way to expanding networks of exchange, as lords and their armies of knights brought back fabrics and spices from the East. Despite the inroads on the Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman Turks, the Silk Roads trade routes remained in operation, as did sea routes across the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. China was still eager for Europe's gold and silver, and Europe was growing more eager than ever for silk, tea, and rhubarb. Global trade increased. Although Europeans had not yet found a route around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, they had been making overland trips across Europe for many centuries.

Rise of New Empires After the collapse of classical civilizations such as the Roman and Han empires, the first golden age of the Silk Roads came to an end, and activity declined dramatically. However, by the 8th and 9th centuries, Arab merchants from the Abbasid Empire revived the land route of the Silk Roads as well as sea routes in the Indian Ocean. Tang China had much to offer the newly revived global trade network, including the compass,

paper, and gunpowder. China exported porcelain, tea, and silk. From other parts of Asia, China imported cotton, precious stones, pomegranates, dates, horses, and grapes. These luxury goods appealed to the upper class of Chinese society, whose members reveled in their country's newfound affluence. This period marked the second golden age of the Silk Roads.

No other cause, however, had as significant an impact on the expansion of trade as did the rise of the **Mongol Empire**. Mongols conquered the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, and in the 14th century China came under their control as well. Parts of the Silk Roads that were under the authority of different rulers were, for the first time, unified in a system under the control of an authority that respected merchants and enforced laws. The Mongols improved roads and punished bandits, both of which increased the safety of travel on the Silk Roads. New trade channels were also established between Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Those who survived the conquests by the Mongols and their descendants benefited from the reinvigoration of trade routes that had not been heavily used since the days of the Roman and Han Empires. (You will read more about the Mongols in Topic 2.2.)

Improvements in Transportation Technologies Another cause for the expansion of exchange networks was the improvement of transportation. Travelers on the overland Silk Roads learned that traveling with others in caravans was safer than traveling alone. They also learned how to design saddles for camels that greatly increased the weight of the load the animals could carry.

Centuries earlier, China had made advances in naval technology that allowed it to control sea-based trade routes in the South China Sea. During the Han Dynasty, Chinese scientists developed the **magnetic compass** and improved the **rudder**, both of which helped aid navigation and ship control along the seas. The Chinese **junk**, also developed in the Han Dynasty, was a boat similar to the Southwest Asian dhow. It had multiple sails and was as long as 400 feet—at least triple the size of the typical Western European ship of its time. The hull of a junk was divided into compartments. The walls making these divisions strengthened the ship for rough voyages at sea and made sinking less likely.

Effects of the Growth of Exchange Networks

Two significant effects of the expansion and stability of the Silk Roads were the series of oases that developed along the routes, including thriving cities, and commercial innovations that greatly helped to manage the increasing trade.

Cities and Oases Long stretches of the overland Silk Roads passed through inhospitable terrain—hot arid lands where water was scarce. Cities along the routes that were watered by rivers became thriving centers of trade. For example, the city of **Kashgar** is located at the western edge of China where northern and southern routes of the Silk Roads crossed, leading to destinations