THE FIRST SILK ROADS

TRADE ROUTES CONNECT THE VAST CONTINENT OF AFRO-EURASIA

By Craig Benjamin, adapted by Newsela
Beginning with early agrarian civilizations, societies started to connect into large networks of exchange. Today, such networks have led to levels of collective learning never seen before in human history.
Making connections

Agrarian civilizations did not exist entirely off on their own. As they grew and stretched their boundaries, they joined up to form larger structures. The linking up of different civilizations was an important process. It guaranteed that collective learning reached further and embraced more people and greater diversity than ever before. Significant exchanges of trade and ideas occurred in the Americas, in Australasia, and in the Pacific. But, by far, the most important exchange networks emerged in Afro-Eurasia. At this time, these four zones were still so isolated from each other that humans living in one remained utterly ignorant of events in the others.

In Afro-Eurasia, all agrarian civilizations were linked together into a vast interconnected network called the Silk Roads by the beginning of the Common Era. This network wasn’t just about the trade of material goods. An exchange of social, religious, and philosophical ideas, languages, and new technologies took place as well. Unfortunately, diseases were also spread. The Silk Roads were the most important exchange system that existed anywhere during the Common Era. Yet, significant smaller connections developed much earlier between many of the agrarian civilizations.

Not all these connections were based on trade. Warfare is common to all agrarian civilizations, so conflict was also a powerful way of connecting civilizations. It was through warfare that the Romans eventually connected most of the peoples of Afro-Eurasia. Centuries later, Muslim armies constructed a vast Islamic realm that stretched from Europe to the borders of the Tang dynasty’s empire, deep in Central Asia. Although these military relationships were important in establishing connections, the most influential connections of the era were built through trade.

Trade was important from the beginning. As early as 2300 BCE, civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley were involved in commercial relationships. The Silk Roads enabled these early small-scale exchanges to expand dramatically, leading to even more significant changes in human history. Collective learning began to snowball.

The first Silk Roads era (50 BCE — 250 CE)

The first major period of Silk Roads trade occurred between about 50 BCE and 250 CE. These first exchanges took place between the Chinese, Indian, Kushan, Iranian, steppe-nomadic, and Mediterranean cultures. A second significant Silk Roads era operated from about 700 to 1200, connecting China, India, Southeast Asia, the Islamic realm, and the Mediterranean. The second era saw a vast web based on busy overland and sea trade. The primary function of the Silk Roads during both periods was to enable commercial trade. But, intellectual, social, and artistic ideas were also exchanged. Historians believe that these exchanges of ideas have the greatest significance for world history.

Large-scale exchanges became possible only after the small early agrarian civilizations were joined into huge and powerful empires. By the time of the first Silk Roads era, just four ruling dynasties controlled much of the Eurasian landmass, from the China Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. These were the powerful Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Han empires. Order and stability...
were established over a vast landmass. Great road networks were constructed and advances were made in metallurgy and transport technology. Agricultural production was intensified, and coinage appeared for the first time. By 50 BCE, conditions in Afro-Eurasia were much different than they had been before the consolidation of empires.

Pastoral nomads formed communities that lived primarily from their domesticated animals like cattle, sheep, camels, or horses. They also played an important role in the exchanges along the Silk Road. Toward the end of the first millennium BCE, large and powerful pastoral nomadic communities appeared — the Scythians, the Xiongnu, and the Yuezhi. The ability of pastoral nomads to thrive in the harsh interior of Inner Asia helped link up all the different civilizations. Travelers depended on these nomadic people when they crossed the sometimes dangerous Silk Roads.

The Han Chinese decided in the first century BCE to interact with their European neighbors to the west. Small-scale regional trade now became a great trans-Afro-Eurasian exchange network. This occurred around the same time that Augustus came to power in Rome. His rise to become emperor ended a century of civil war. A relatively peaceful era ensued. Trade increased and the demand for foreign luxury goods in Rome exploded. The desire for rich goods, like silk, led to a huge expansion of both land-based trade routes connecting the Mediterranean with East Asia, and maritime routes connecting Roman Egypt to India.

The major Chinese export in demand in Rome was silk, an elegant, sensual material formed by silkworms and highly coveted by wealthy women. The Chinese carefully protected the secret of silk. Guards at Chinese borders searched merchants to make sure they weren’t carrying live silkworms out of the country. The Romans also prized Han iron for its exceptional hardness. From Arabia and India, the Romans purchased spices such as nutmeg, cloves, cardamom, and pepper. In turn, the Chinese imported goods from Central Asia, India, and the Mediterranean region. They especially prized agricultural products (such as grapes), glassware, art objects, and horses.

A camel with its rider playing kettledrums, Mughal Empire

The Silk Roads land routes stretched from China’s capital then, Chang’an, through Central Asia and on to the Mediterranean. The animal that made Silk Roads trade possible was the Bactrian camel. This two-humped camel was incredibly well adapted to its environment. The humps on its back contain high quantities of fat (not water) to sustain it for long distances. It has long eyelashes and nostrils that seal shut to guard against dust in the frequent sandstorms of the region. The two broad toes on its feet have undivided soles, which evolved from walking on sand. The bulk of overland Silk Roads trade was literally carried on the backs of these extraordinary animals.

Much Silk Roads trade also took place by sea. The main route was between Roman-controlled Egypt and the west coast of India. Sailors had discovered the “trade winds,” which blow reliably from the southwest in the summer. The strong winds allowed ships carrying heavy cargo to sail across the Indian Ocean from Africa to India. The winds reverse direction in the winter. When that happens, the same ships could bring new cargo on their journey back to Egypt.
Whether by land or by sea, however, few traders ever made their way along the entire length of the Silk Roads. Typically, merchants from both ends of the road took their goods as far as Central Asia. At that point, they would pass them on to a series of middlemen, like the Kushans, the Sogdians, and the Parthians.

During the third century CE, the Silk Roads fell out of use. Both the Chinese and Roman empires withdrew from the network. Silk Roads trade was at least partly responsible for this, because it helped spread disastrous diseases. Smallpox, measles, and bubonic plagues devastated the populations at either end of the routes. Europeans had little resistance to diseases brought from Asia, and vice versa. As a result, the population of the Roman Empire fell from perhaps 60 million to 40 million by 400. China’s population may have dropped from 60 million to 45 million by 600.

These huge losses of life happened at the same time as other civilizations were in decline. The Parthian, Han, and Kushan empires all disintegrated between 220 and 250 CE. The Roman Empire experienced crisis after crisis beginning in the early third century. The decline of these powerful civilizations meant that the political situation in many parts of Afro-Eurasia was no longer favorable to large-scale commercial exchange. But then came the establishment of the Islamic realm in the eighth and ninth centuries. At the same time, the Tang dynasty in China emerged. A revival of Silk Roads exchanges along both land and sea routes commenced.
The second Silk Roads era (700 — 1200)

Both the Tang dynasty (618–907), and the Song dynasty (960–1279) which followed, oversaw a vibrant economy in China. Agriculture and manufacturing was becoming specialized. The Chinese population was growing and cities were springing up. New innovations in technology encouraged high levels of trade. Printed paper money came into use to enable commerce on a grand scale. At the same time, Arab merchants were benefiting from the stable and prosperous Abbasid administration in Baghdad (750–1228). They began to trade with their Chinese counterparts, leading to a revival of the Silk Roads.

The goods exchanged across Afro-Eurasia during this second Silk Roads era were impressive. Ceramics, textiles, foods, spices, and high-value art were traded along the route. But as was the case with the first era, religious exchanges were perhaps of even greater significance to world history. Even before the Tang came to power, many foreign religions had made their way into East Asia, including Christianity, and the Iranian religions, Manichaeanism and Zoroastrianism. Islam was born in the seventh century. In the centuries that followed, substantial Muslim merchant communities were established. Mosques even began to appear in many Chinese cities. But of all the foreign belief systems that reached China, Buddhism made the most substantial inroads.

Exchange shapes culture

The Silk Roads are the supreme example of the interconnectedness of civilizations during the Era of Agrarian Civilizations. Along these often difficult routes, through some of the harshest geography on Earth, merchants and adventurers carried goods and ideas. Diplomats and missionaries brought their political ideas and religious beliefs. Each type of exchange was important. Because of this ancient interaction, Afro-Eurasia has preserved a certain underlying unity. To this day, the zone shares common technologies, artistic styles, cultures and religions. Even diseases and immunity to those diseases are shared.

Other world zones also had their early exchange networks. None, however, were on the scale of the Silk Roads. American trade networks happened over long distances. They crossed diverse geographic regions — from the Andes mountains through Mesoamerica and up into North America. But American networks were much smaller and less varied than those of the Silk Roads. The jungles near the Equator probably prevented the level of connectedness that existed in Afro-Eurasia.

Because of the Silk Roads, Afro-Eurasia was much larger in population, and also much more interlinked through trade and exchange than the other three world zones were. The roads helped the zone develop technologies faster. This is a particularly important distinction. The different zones finally collided after 1492, when Europeans sailed to the Americas. The technologically advanced societies of Afro-Eurasia were quickly able to dominate the rest of the world. And that in turn explains why the modern revolution that followed was destined to be led by Afro-Eurasian peoples, not those from the Americas.
Sources


Image credits

A Scythian/Pazyryk horseman, c. 300 BCE, State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg © Asigang/Xinhua Press/Corbis

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