NO PREP

The Silk Road

Trading Cultures Across Continents

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

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Name: Period: Date:

The Silk Road: Trading Cultures Across Continents

Not a Road — A Network

The name 'Silk Road' conjures images of camel caravans crossing endless desert, laden with bolts of shimmering fabric. The reality was more complex and more interesting. The Silk Road was not a single road but a shifting network of overland and maritime trade routes connecting China to Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and ultimately the Mediterranean world. It was not paved or marked in any consistent way. Different merchants traveled different sections at different times. The name itself was invented by a German geographer in 1877 — ancient travelers simply called it 'the road west' or 'the road to Rome' depending on which direction they were heading. The network first became significant during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), when Chinese silk — a luxury fabric produced through a jealously guarded secret

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Archaeological Evidence Along the Route

How do archaeologists know what traveled along the Silk Road? The evidence comes from many sources. In China, Roman coins and glassware have been found in Han Dynasty tombs. In Rome, silk garments and fragments of Chinese lacquerware have been recovered. Along the desert routes of Central Asia, preserved campsites, abandoned caravanserais (roadside inns), and ruined trading towns have yielded physical evidence of the goods that moved between East and West. The most spectacular finds come from the Tarim Basin in what is now Xinjiang, China, where

the extreme aridity of the desert has preserved organic materials (textiles, leather, wood, paper, even human bodies) in extraordinary condition. The 'Tarim Mummies,' some dating to 2000 BCE, wore plaid woolen textiles and had distinctly non-Chinese physical features, suggesting that the western reaches of China had contact with Central Asian and possibly European populations long before the Han Dynasty formalized trade routes.

The Dunhuang Caves: A Library in the Desert

One of the most important Silk Road archaeological discoveries came in 1900 when a Taoist monk named Wang Yuanlu discovered a sealed cave at Dunhuang containing tens of thousands of manuscripts, paintings, and religious objects. The Dunhuang caves, a complex of Buddhist temples carved into sandstone cliffs, had been an important oasis stop on the Silk Road for centuries. The sealed cave, apparently walled up around 1000 CE, preserved a library of documents in multiple languages: Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Uyghur, and others. Among the documents was the Diamond Sutra, printed in 868 CE using woodblock printing: the earliest dated printed book in the world, predating Gutenberg by nearly 600 years. The Dunhuang manuscripts revealed the cultural and religious diversity of the Silk Road: Buddhist sutras, Confucian classics, Taoist texts, business contracts, personal letters, and medical recipes all found in the same archive, reflecting a trading community where multiple cultures and belief systems coexisted in close proximity.

The Sogdian Merchants: Middlemen of the Ancient World

The most active traders along the Silk Road's Central Asian sections were not Chinese but Sogdians — an Iranian-speaking people based in cities like Samarkand and Bukhara (in modern Uzbekistan). Archaeological evidence from sites across the route shows Sogdian merchants traveling as far east as China and as far west as Byzantium. A remarkable archive of Sogdian letters discovered near Dunhuang in 1907 provides a vivid picture of these merchants' lives: one letter from around 313 CE describes devastating attacks by Huns on trading communities and the writer's desperate situation. The Sogdians were cultural brokers as well as traders. They carried Buddhism eastward into China and Central Asia, transmitted Chinese paper-making technology westward, and introduced musical instruments, artistic styles, and foods that transformed the cultures they passed through. Their silver bowls, decorated with hunting scenes and mythological figures, have been found from Spain

to China — physical evidence of a people who lived between civilizations and made themselves indispensable to all of them.

Plague, Disease, and the Dark Side of Connection

The Silk Road connected East and West in ways that were not always welcome. The same routes that carried silk, spices, and Buddhism also carried infectious diseases between populations that had no prior immunity to them. The Antonine Plague that swept the Roman Empire in the 160s CE, killing millions, is believed by some historians to have originated in Central Asia and reached Rome partly through Silk Road commercial networks. The Plague of Justinian in the 6th century CE, one of the first great bubonic plague pandemics, spread from Central Asian reservoir populations along the same trade routes that carried textiles and horses. The Black Death of the 14th century — the most devastating pandemic in European history, killing perhaps a third of Europe's population — also followed Silk Road routes westward from Central Asian origins. Archaeological evidence of plague mortality appears at sites along the route in the decades before the epidemic reached Europe: cemeteries in Central Asian trading towns show unusual mass burials dating to the early 14th century, consistent with a disease outbreak moving westward along established trade networks. The connectivity that made the Silk Road commercially revolutionary also made it epidemiologically dangerous, creating channels through which diseases could travel far faster than they could in a world of isolated communities. The story of the Silk Road is inseparable from the history of pandemic disease. The physical evidence for Silk Road trade also includes objects that moved in directions historians once overlooked. Chinese historians traditionally emphasized what China exported — silk, porcelain, lacquerware — and what it received in return — horses, glass, gold. But the Silk Road also carried Chinese cultural forms outward in ways that permanently shaped the receiving cultures. Chinese musical instruments reached Central Asia and Persia, where they were adapted into local traditions. Chinese papermaking techniques transformed Islamic scholarship and bureaucracy when they reached Baghdad in the 8th century. Chinese porcelain manufacturing techniques, transmitted through Islamic intermediaries, eventually influenced the development of European ceramics. The physical archaeological evidence — Chinese-style objects found in distant contexts, hybrid objects that blend Chinese and local artistic traditions — maps a cultural exchange that operated in multiple directions

simultaneously. Archaeological evidence from the Dunhuang region also documents the role of women in Silk Road commerce, a dimension of the trade network that written sources tend to underemphasize. Contracts, letters, and inventory records recovered from the Dunhuang caves include documents in which women appear as independent economic actors: property owners, creditors, business partners, and in some cases heads of trading households. The legal documents show women filing suits, enforcing contracts, and managing estates in ways that suggest significant economic agency within the Silk Road's commercial culture. The physical archaeological record — women's clothing, personal ornaments, tools associated with textile production — confirms that women were central to silk production itself, the trade network's core commodity.

Key Information: The Silk Road

Detail	Information
What It Was	Network of overland and maritime trade routes connecting China to the Mediterranean
Peak Period	Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) through Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE)
Primary Chinese Export	Silk — worth its weight in gold in the Roman world
Key Imports to China	Horses, glass, wool, spices, Buddhism
Sogdian Merchants	Iranian-speaking middlemen based in Samarkand; carried goods and culture between East and West
Dunhuang Caves	Discovered 1900; sealed library of 40,000+ manuscripts in multiple languages
Diamond Sutra	Printed 868 CE at Dunhuang — earliest dated printed book in the world
Tarim Mummies	Preserved bodies in Xinjiang showing early contact between East and West

Case Study: The Merchant Who Crossed Three Empires

Nanaivandak was three months out of Samarkand when the bandits hit the caravan outside Kashgar. He lost two camels and a bolt of purple silk that he had been planning to sell in Dunhuang. He had been lucky; the merchant in front of him lost his horse and everything loaded on it. He was Sogdian, which meant he was neither Chinese nor Persian nor anything else that the border officials could fit into their standard categories. At every checkpoint — and there were many between Samarkand and Dunhuang — he produced his worn leather document pouch and explained himself again: a trader, carrying silk west and bronze east, paying the required duties at each border crossing. At Dunhuang he stayed for three weeks, selling, buying, and waiting for a more reliable caravan to form for the eastern leg. He visited the great cave temples with their painted Buddhas, made an offering of incense, and dictated a letter to a scribe: a report home about current prices, the state of the roads, the behavior of the border guards. He mentioned the bandits near Kashgar and noted that Chinese glassmaking was improving. The letter was carried by courier toward Samarkand. Whether it arrived, he never knew. But a copy, made automatically by the scribe as part of the archive's standard practice, remained sealed in a Dunhuang cave for the next 900 years.

1. Nanaivandak describes border officials who could not categorize him easily. What does this reveal about how Sogdian merchants occupied a unique position in the ancient world?

2. The case study shows Nanaivandak noting that Chinese merchants were now making their own glass. How does this detail illustrate the broader historical point the reading makes about what the Silk Road carried?

Multiple Choice

1. Why was Chinese silk so valuable in the ancient Mediterranean world?

   a) It was produced through a jealously guarded secret process and was a luxury worth enormous sums

   b) It was the only fabric that could survive the cold winters of Rome and harsh climate conditions

   c) It had magical healing properties according to Roman physicians

   d) It was stronger than iron and used for making armor

2. What is the Diamond Sutra, and why is it archaeologically significant?

   a) A Buddhist text printed in 868 CE; significant as the earliest dated printed book in the world

   b) A map of the Silk Road; significant as the first record of the trade routes

   c) A Roman treaty with China; significant as the first diplomatic contact between the two empires

   d) A Chinese legal code; significant because it is the oldest surviving Chinese law

3. Who were the Sogdians, and what role did they play on the Silk Road?

   a) Roman soldiers stationed along the western roads to protect traders

   b) Chinese merchants who controlled the eastern section of the trade routes and also managed all commerce

   c) Buddhist monks who traveled the routes to spread their religion

   d) Iranian-speaking middlemen based in Central Asia who carried goods and culture between East and West

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Caravanserai	A) An oasis city in western China; site of famous cave temples and a sealed library of ancient manuscripts
2. ___ Sogdian	B) A printed Buddhist text from 868 CE discovered at Dunhuang; the world's oldest dated printed book
3. ___ Dunhuang	C) An Iranian-speaking Central Asian merchant people who dominated Silk Road trade between East and West
4. ___ Diamond Sutra	D) Preserved human bodies from Xinjiang showing non-Chinese physical features dating back to 2000 BCE
5. ___ Tarim Mummies	E) A roadside inn providing shelter and food for merchants and their animals along trade routes

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Silk Road's name was invented by a German _____ in 1877 — ancient travelers did not use this term.

2. The Dunhuang caves were sealed around 1000 CE, preserving a library of documents in multiple languages including Chinese, Tibetan, and _____.

3. The most active merchants along the Central Asian sections of the Silk Road were _____, an Iranian-speaking people based in cities like Samarkand.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading says the Silk Road carried 'diseases, ideas, technologies, religions, and people' as well as goods. Give two specific examples from the reading of non-material things that traveled the route.

2. Why are the Sogdian letters found near Dunhuang considered especially valuable historical sources?

3. How does the discovery of Roman coins in Chinese tombs and Chinese silk in Roman contexts prove that the Silk Road actually worked as a long-distance trade network?