

Topic 2.1

The Silk Roads

You Will Learn To:

- Explain how caravanserais and money economies helped the international trade of luxury goods.
- Describe the source of increased demand for luxury goods, which encouraged increased production in East Asia.
- Describe how improved commercial practices encouraged the Silk Roads' expansion and trading cities' growth and prosperity.

Ancient powers created some of Eurasia's first road systems and caravanserais. Often coinciding with routes that became the Silk Roads, the network facilitated trade that benefited later empires as foreign merchants traveled greater distances with fewer difficulties.



After the Mongols expanded across Central Asia, they rebuilt caravanserais and revived Silk Road trade. The Mongols also instituted a money-based economy and encouraged artisans' production, which helped meet increased demand from West Asia and Europe.

Causes of increased interregional trade

Money economies encouraged trade

Government-issued paper money made trade more efficient by serving as a common unit for valuing goods and preventing traders from having to barter with specific items another merchant desired. As nomadic pastoralists, the Mongols relied on neighbors for manufactured goods and found that in interregional trade, money exchanges were more versatile than bartering.

In the early 1200s, the Mongols adopted elements of earlier money economies and issued their own copper coins and paper money, backed by valuable commodities like silk, gold, and silver.



Source: Wikipedia, PHGCOM; CC 3.0 unported (tinyurl.com/4puz4836)

Yuan dynasty banknote and coinage, 1200s

In 1279, Kubilai Khan ordered the issuance of paper money. In the following years, Mongol coins and paper currency facilitated exchanges between buyers and sellers in China and along the Silk Roads. Many merchants preferred paper money to coins because it weighed less and held the same exchange value. As a result, the Yuan Dynasty's money economy helped increase trade and Mongol wealth.

Revival of caravanserais encouraged trade

In the 13th century, trade along the Silk Roads experienced a revival after the Mongol Empire conquered Central Asia and protected merchants from bandits. With these land routes secured, the spread of caravanserais increased the growth of trade networks from Central Asia to the Middle East.



Source: Wikipedia, Diego Delso; CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://tinyurl.com/jjyjtn9>)

Fortified caravanserai's inner courtyard and merchant stalls, Baku, Azerbaijan

Positioned along trade routes, caravanserais were fortified inns, providing shelter and protection for merchants and other travelers undertaking the long overland journeys typical of Silk Road travel.



Caravanserais made traveling easier and increased commerce by becoming hubs where merchants could buy, sell, or trade new goods that made their way to major commercial cities.

Demand and supply of Eurasia's luxury goods

Increased demand for luxury goods

The Silk Roads' development promised travelers great wealth, encouraging merchants across Afro-Eurasia. Western merchants fulfilled European demand for various products, primarily luxury goods, which generated the greatest profits. Asian luxury goods included:

- pepper, brazilwood, and cinnamon from India.
- spices, jade, and gold from East and Southeast Asia.
- Persia's gold and silver jewelry and intricate carpets.
- Chinese porcelain and silk.

Along the Silk Roads, such luxury goods traveled from the East to the West to meet increased demand. Fortunes were built by reselling those goods in European markets where the demand was highest. To satisfy Europeans' desires for luxury items, the Mongols shifted some overland silk routes northward to the Black Sea, which provided a more direct connection to Italy.



There was also increased demand for Western luxury goods in Mongol-dominated China. Middle Eastern steel and glassware, for example, were highly prized by Eastern elites. Mongol elites also paid high prices for Mediterranean wines, another luxury good that traveled from the West to the East.

Consequently, the increased demand for luxury goods throughout Eurasia invigorated commerce along the Silk Roads as merchants invested in these products.

Increased production of exported textiles and porcelain

Given the increased demand for Chinese products along the Silk Roads, the Mongols enacted policies incentivizing Yuan-era artisans to increase their production of porcelain, silk, and golden cloth.



Yuan-era cloth of gold

For example, Mongol leaders supported artisans by raising their social status, decreasing their taxes, and exempting them from unpaid labor owed to lords. Such Yuan support led to better craftsmanship and higher production of luxury textiles by the country's growing artisan class.

Impacts of improved commercial practices

Increased trade and expanded trade routes

As mentioned above, the Mongols were initially nomadic pastoralists with a history of trading with their neighbors for manufactured goods. After the Mongols defeated the Song in 1276, they began trading along the Silk Roads.

Due to their familiarity with the benefits of local trade and recognizing the commercial achievements of the Song Dynasty, the Mongols embraced international trade. Like the Song, the Mongols expanded the Silk Roads and promoted trade with European merchants, expanding their global market in the 13th and 14th centuries.



Before the Mongols' rise to power, travel along the Silk Roads had slowed due to decades of warfare and bandit attacks. However, early Mongol khans revitalized trade among traveling merchants by:

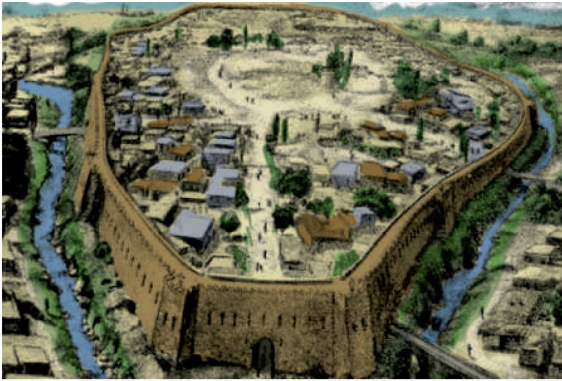
- using Mongol cavalry to subdue bandits.
- expanding the network, including a postal relay system.

Within this system, the Mongols created new and faster routes into Tibet, India, and Russia, making those geographic regions part of their trade network. By expanding existing trade routes to have a wider geographic reach, the Mongols vastly increased commerce in cities foreign merchants frequented.

The growth of trading cities

As Eurasia's trade networks expanded, cities along the overland trade routes provided vital support for merchants. Typically, merchants did not travel entire trade routes like the Silk Roads; instead, they usually traveled between cities to meet other merchants to conduct trade. Consequently, the increase in trade along the Silk Roads boosted the growth of powerful trading cities in Central Asia.

Cities such as Samarkand became important trading hubs due to their favorable locations along established trade routes. Such cities were typically filled with caravanserais that provided merchants with protection, sleeping accommodations, stables, and areas for trade.



Depictions of Samarkand, a major Central Asian city along the Silk Road

Many large trading cities in Central Asia also became centers of cultural exchange due to their locations between the East and West. By expanding existing trade routes, the Mongols also increased commerce in East Asian cities such as Cambalec and Cassay (present-day Beijing and Hangzhou).



Source: Gary Todd, CC 1.0 (tinyurl.com/53658mxh)

Model of medieval Hangzhou's street markets, Zhejiang Provincial Museum

Ibn Battuta witnessed such economic growth when visiting Guangzhou, which connected to the Maritime Silk Roads. Aided by the Mongols' money economy, Mongol trading cities became prosperous, transforming them into what Ibn Battuta described as the greatest cities in the world.



Chinese junk setting out for the Maritime Silk Route

Things to remember

From 1200 to 1450, international trade in luxury goods was aided by important developments, including the Mongols':

- expansion of the Silk Road's western routes, which had been neglected for centuries.
- revival of caravanserais, which made traveling on the routes safer.
- development of a postal relay system, expanding the Silk Roads in the East.
- money economy, facilitating an easier exchange of goods.

Increased demand for luxury goods across Eurasia encouraged increased production, including for:

- Mediterranean wines and Middle Eastern steel and glassware, purchased by East Asian elites.
- Chinese porcelain, silk, and golden cloths, in high demand in Europe.
- gold and silver items and intricate carpets from Persia.
- Indian pepper, brazilwood, and cinnamon.

The Mongols' money economy and policy for expanding and protecting trade routes helped the growth of Eurasian trading cities, such as:

- Samarkand, which grew wealthy through its rest stops hosting Eurasian merchants.
- Chinese trading cities, which enjoyed an economic boom largely due to the Mongols' money economy and expansion of existing trade routes.

2.1 Check for Understanding

- 1. In the Mongol period, government-issued paper money, which was typically backed by precious metals, facilitated the trade of luxury goods because**
 - A. money exchanges were more versatile than bartering.
 - B. nearly everyone had large quantities of precious metals.
 - C. money economies prevented merchants' relocating to other khanates.
- 2. Which of the following describes an important function of caravanserais?**
 - A. As producers of silk cloth, they increased the volume of trade in East Asia.
 - B. As scepters that symbolized Mongol strength, they legitimized the Great Khan's rule.
 - C. As fortified inns along trade routes, they protected merchants from bandits and increased trade.
- 3. Eurasia's luxury goods that were in demand included**
 - A. Champa rice produced in present-day Vietnam.
 - B. spices, jade, and gold from East and Southeast Asia.
 - C. pepper, brazilwood, and cinnamon from southern Europe.
- 4. Why did the Mongols shift some overland trade routes northward to the Black Sea?**
 - A. To avoid warfare with the Yuan Dynasty
 - B. To obtain a more direct connection to Italy
 - C. To gain political favors from Russian princes
- 5. Trade in luxury goods along the Silk Roads was increased by the Mongols'**
 - A. retiring foreign trade routes in the northern khanates.
 - B. prohibiting the overland transfer of bulky staple crops.
 - C. using their cavalry to protect merchants from bandit attacks.
- 6. Which of the following was a Central Asian trade city that grew because of increased trade along the Silk Roads?**
 - A. Baghdad
 - B. Hangzhou
 - C. Samarkand