What was the Silk Road?

KS2 KS3 Ages 7-14 ⏰ 3 min read

Imagine trading something made in China with someone in Rome — but without planes, phones, or the internet, and without a single person ever making the whole journey themselves. For over a thousand years, that's exactly what happened along a network of routes known as the **Silk Road**.

What it actually was

The Silk Road wasn't one road, and it wasn't only about silk. It was a web of overland and sea routes stretching from China in the East to the Mediterranean in the West — roughly 6,400 kilometres at its widest — passing through Central Asia, Persia, India, and the Middle East. Goods, ideas, religions, and diseases all travelled along it.

It got its name from Chinese silk, which was one of the most prized commodities in the ancient world. The Romans were fascinated by it — a fabric so light and smooth it seemed almost magical. China guarded the secret of its production fiercely; the penalty for smuggling silkworm eggs out of the country was death.

Think of the Silk Road like a game of Chinese Whispers played across an entire continent. A merchant in China sells silk to a merchant in Central Asia, who sells it (with a markup) to a Persian trader, who sells it to a Syrian merchant, who eventually gets it to a Roman buyer. No single person makes the whole journey — the goods are passed along the chain, and each link in the chain makes a profit. What reaches Rome costs many times what it cost in China.

What was traded

It wasn't just silk flowing westward. China also exported porcelain, tea, and spices. In return, West and Central Asia sent glass, gold, silver, horses, and wool. India contributed cotton, pepper, and precious stones. Ideas also travelled: **Buddhism** spread from India into China along the Silk Road. Islam spread westward and eastward. Mathematical concepts, papermaking, and gunpowder all spread via these routes.

The plague connection

Not all the cargo was welcome. The **Black Death** — the devastating plague that killed a third of Europe's population in the 14th century — is thought to have travelled westward along Silk Road trade routes from Central Asia, carried by fleas on rats that hitched rides with trading caravans.

Decline and legacy

The Silk Road declined from the 15th century onwards as European powers developed sea routes to Asia, which were cheaper and more reliable than overland travel. The Ottoman Empire's control of key routes also made trade harder and more expensive for European merchants — which was partly what motivated the voyages of exploration that led to Europeans arriving in the Americas.

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