
The Silk Road: Recording the Journey

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Statues depicting an ancient caravan in the city of Samarkand, formerly Marakanda, an important stop on the Silk Road.

Overview: The Silk Road was the world's first superhighway. Not literally a single road, it consisted of a network of trade routes connecting China with Central Asia and lands beyond, all the way to Rome. Goods were usually transported by large caravans made up of guides, soldiers, religious pilgrims, merchants and hundreds of freight-bearing camels. The Silk Road flourished for more than 3,000 years and had a major influence on the cultures of Asia, Europe, and Africa. This Mini-Q asks you to become a traveler on the Silk Road and to record your experiences at different points on the journey.

The Documents:

- Document A: The Silk Road Route (map)
- Document B: The Dunhuang Caves
- Document C: Crossing the Taklimakan Desert
- Document D: The City of Marakanda
- Document E: Silk Road Ledger (chart)

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Traveling the Silk Road

In this Mini-Q, you will examine several documents and then write five journal entries in the voice of a fictitious person traveling the Silk Road. First, choose the type of traveler you wish to be from the collection of descriptions on the following page. Give your traveler a name from the list below. Then fill out the profile of this person using the biographical information and your historical imagination.

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Qi Na (Chinese, f)	Pi Lin (Chinese, m)
Xin Qian (Chinese, f)	Yul (Sogdian, m)
Chen (Chinese, m)	Chuluun (Mongolian, m)

Profile Sheet

Name _____

Age at the time of the journey _____

Occupation _____

Place of birth _____

Marital status/spouse's name (if married) _____

Children (if any) _____

Reason for going on the Silk Road _____

Other personal information _____

Hook Exercise: Traveling the Silk Road (continued)

Silk Road Travelers

Caravan Leader

Many caravan leaders were Sogdians, who came from the region of Marakanda in the Kushan Empire of northern Asia. The caravan leader was basically a trail boss. He determined how long the caravan should travel each day and where it should stop to rest. In addition, he was aware of possible dangers, like bandits lurking along the northern edge of the Taklimakan Desert.

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Caravan Guide

Caravan guides made sure that the caravan was heading in the right direction. Since compasses were not used during the Silk Road period, guides had to rely on the stars for their bearings. Indeed, many caravan guides were trained at nautical schools in India, where they learned how to read the stars. Also, guides might know the best paths to take through difficult terrain, such as the rugged Pamir Mountains in Central Asia.

Han Official

Han emperors liked to keep tabs on the western lands. To do this, they sent officials along the Silk Road to gather information. Some of these officials made it as far as the Parthian Empire (see map on page 407). However, the Parthians did not want an alliance to form between China and Rome, so they stopped Han officials at the border. For a Han official to reach the Roman Empire, he had to travel incognito, or in secret.

Merchant

Merchants interested in trading their goods at cities along the Silk Road often traveled with caravans. Some of them wrote itineraries that listed cities and oases on the Silk Road and mentioned the pros and cons of these places. In this way, the itineraries acted as travel guides. Successful merchants often became very wealthy and were respected in their home cities.

Soldier

Bandits were a constant threat along the Silk Road. During the Han period, some parts of the Silk Road were protected by military outposts. However, bandits sometimes attacked caravans in areas that were far away from these outposts. Also, the region west of the Pamirs was not controlled by the Han and so did not have military protection. To protect caravans from bandits, soldiers often traveled with the caravans.

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*The Heavenly Horses are coming
Across the pastureless wilds
A thousand legs at a stretch
Following the eastern road.*

– Poem by Han Emperor Wu-Ti, circa 140 BC. He wrote as he waited for the arrival of new horses on the Silk Road.

When you sit down to a bowl of spaghetti at home or a math problem in school, you probably aren't thinking about history. Yet it is a fact that noodles from China and a number system from Persia and India first made their way into the European world along ancient trade routes called the **Silk Road**.

The Silk Road was actually a series of roads and routes that together made up a huge trade network. It stretched from China to Rome with many side branches leading to the north and the south. The Silk Road began as far back as 4,000 years ago and got its name from the luxurious, brightly colored cloth that was China's biggest **export**. The Silk Road owes an important part of its success to the **domestication** of the camel – an animal that could carry heavy loads over long distances and required little water while doing so. Camels were the fuel-efficient mini vans of the ancient world.

As is true with international trade today, politics made business on the Silk Road difficult, and often dangerous. **Caravans** had to travel through many kingdoms and city-states that fought each other. When conflict broke out, trade was interrupted. Between about 200 BCE and 250 CE, the growth of four stable empires helped ease this problem and keep the Silk Road humming. The empires were the Han, the Kushan, the Parthian, and the Roman.

From 202 BCE to 220 CE, the Han **dynasty** ruled over China. The Han were especially eager to trade silk for magnificent horses from Ferghana in Central Asia. To protect this trade, the Han cracked down on bandits who preyed on Silk Road travelers.

Starting in 50 CE, another Asian empire took shape and began profiting from the Silk Road. This was the Kushan Empire, which stretched

from western China into northern India. The Kushans established themselves as a kind of toll booth that collected taxes on goods moving back and forth between China and points west.

Beyond Kush was the powerful empire of Parthia, which covered much of modern-day Iran and Iraq. The Parthians became skilled middlemen, buying up goods flowing into their country and reselling them at a higher price to traders who carried them further along the Silk Road.

Meanwhile, the Roman Empire had come to dominate the west, eventually controlling much of the land that rimmed the Mediterranean Sea. As the empire got richer, Romans

demanding more and more luxury goods, especially that wonderful Chinese fabric, silk.

In time these four empires collapsed, but for hundreds of years, the Silk Road continued on without them. Then, around 1400 CE, exploration and new sea routes brought an end to much of the overland trade.

In its **heyday**, tens of thousands of traders traveled the Silk Road. Now it's your turn. Using the voice of the person you chose in the Hook Exercise, record what you learn about trade and the spread of ideas on the Silk Road. The documents that follow will provide material for the five journal entries you will write. Be creative, but be factual, too.

It is just past dawn on a brisk, early spring day in Chang'an, China. After days of preparation, your caravan is fully assembled and ready to head west. Rolled bolts of silk are strapped tightly to camel backs. The dust builds as these humped beasts struggle to their feet. Dogs bark. Children race. Your caravan leader, speaking Chinese with a thick Sogdian accent, barks out, "We go!" You touch the journal tucked into your tunic. You are off.

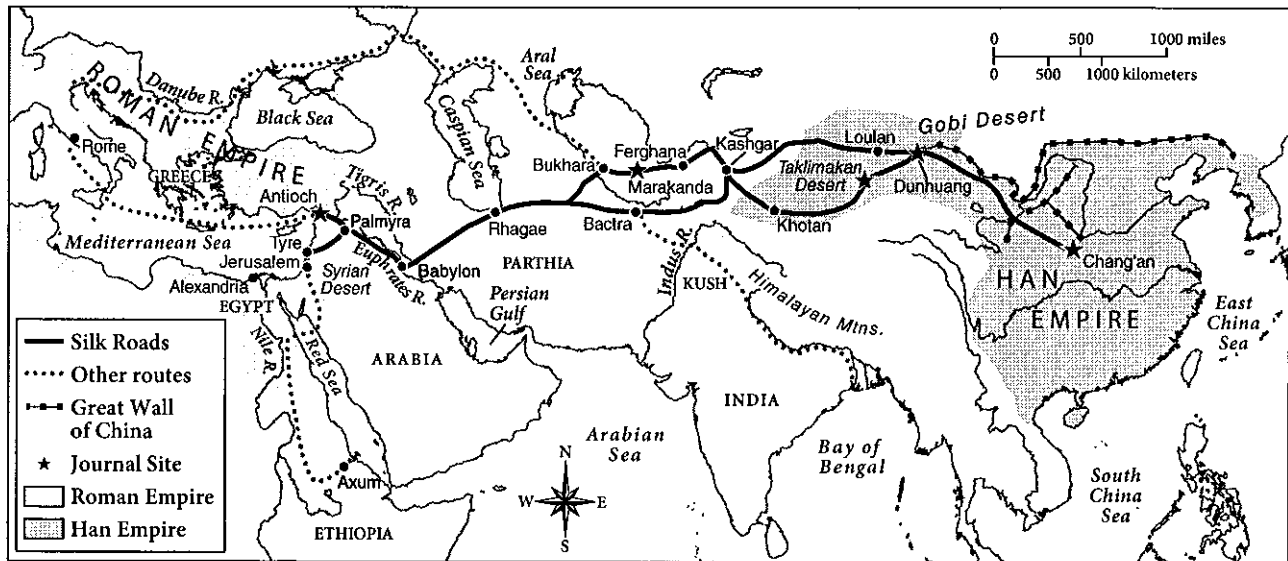


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Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

The Silk Roads in Han-Roman Times



Note: Goods and ideas spread across the Silk Road for centuries. This process of sharing is called “cultural diffusion” by historians. Below are a few examples of goods and ideas that moved by way of the Silk Roads.

- From China: silk, iron, bronze, ceramics, orange trees, paper, gunpowder, Confucianism
- From Central Asia: Ferghana horses
- From Africa: ivory, rhinoceros horn
- From India: spices, Buddhism
- From Europe: music, glassware

Document Analysis

1. How far was it along the Silk Road from Chang'an to Dunhuang? To Marakanda? To Antioch? To Rome?
2. The Silk Road crossed many types of terrain. What two deserts did the Silk Road cross?
3. What goods and ideas came from China? Central Asia? Africa? India?
4. What is the meaning of “cultural diffusion”?

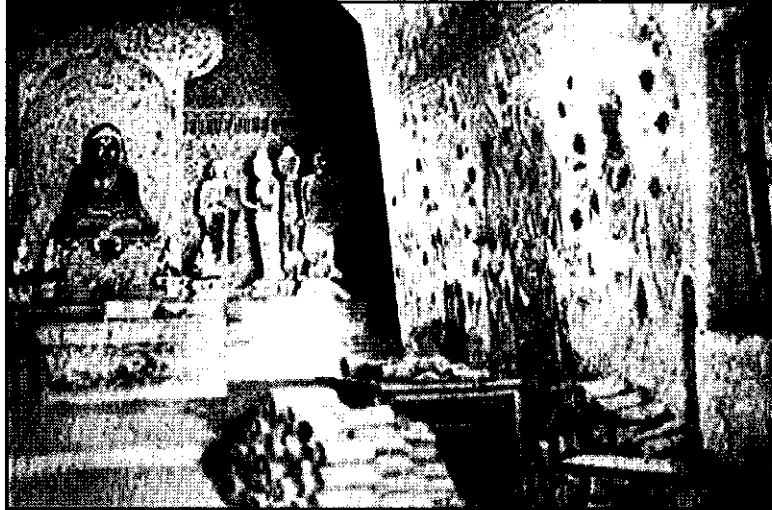
Writing Journal Entry #1: Label your entry “Chang'an, April 5, 200, Dawn.” You are ready to head west from Chang'an, the easternmost city on The Silk Road. You look over the map to get a sense of what lies ahead of you. You will be taking the main Silk Road route, towards Dunhuang. What difficulties do you think you will face? What else are you thinking as you wait to leave?

Document B

Source: Photo of the Dunhuang caves courtesy of the British Library, London, England.

Note: For travelers heading west, the oasis town of Dunhuang (“dun-wong”) was a place to rest and resupply before braving the western Gobi and the Taklimakan deserts. Soon after the fall of the Han Dynasty, Buddhist monks began to dig caves just ten miles outside of Dunhuang. In many of the caves, they built Buddhist shrines. Over the centuries, these caves also became storage vaults for many items brought to Dunhuang by Silk Road travelers.

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The interior of a cave shrine at Dunhuang.

Source: Description of the Dunhuang caves in *Shadow of the Silk Road* by Colin Thubron, Harper Collins, 2007.

... [The cave] walls were carpeted with hundreds of miniature Buddhas.... In several shrines the ceiling teemed with Hindu angels and lotus flowers.

...[Rolls of manuscripts] revealed a multicultural world, which had barely been suspected ... inventories, wills, legal deeds, private letters. Chinese ballads and poems came to light..., even a funeral address for a dead donkey.... And beside the mass of Chinese prayers are documents in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Uighur, Sogdian, Khotanese, Turki in a mélange of scripts: a letter in Judeo-Persian, a Parthian fragment in Manichean script, a Turkic tantric tract in the Uighur alphabet.

Document Analysis

1. Describe the interior of the cave shrine shown in the photograph.
2. What do the manuscripts found in the cave tell you about the concerns and interests of the travelers along the Silk Road?
3. What do the manuscripts tell you about the homeland of the various Silk Road travelers?

Writing Journal Entry #2: Label your entry “Dunhuang, June 1, 200, Evening.” You have traveled more than 1,000 miles with the caravan. Around the campfire at Dunhuang, you listen to fellow travelers discussing the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. You sit down to record your thoughts about Dunhuang, the conversation around the campfire, and your visit to a cave shrine. What effect do you think the Silk Road has had on the spread of religion and ideas?

Document C

Source: An excerpt describing the Taklimakan Desert in *Encyclopedia*, a natural history of Asia written in the early 1300s by Chinese historian Ma Twan-lin.

Note: Today, as then, the temperature in the Taklimakan Desert reaches over 100° F and rainfall is minimal.

... you have to cross a plain of sand, extending for more than 100 leagues [about 300 miles]. You see nothing in any direction but the sky and the sands, without the slightest trace of road; and travelers find nothing to guide them but the bones of men and beasts and the droppings of camels. During the passage of this wilderness you hear sounds, sometimes of singing, sometimes of wailing; and it has often happened that travelers going aside to see what these sounds might be have strayed from their course and been entirely lost; for they were voices of spirits and goblins.

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Source: The Hedin Foundation, National Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, Sweden.



A horse-skeleton road marker in the Taklimakan Desert.

Document Analysis

1. Describe the climate of the Taklimakan Desert.
2. According to Ma Twan-lin, what guided Silk Road travelers through the Taklimakan Desert?
What caused many travelers to get lost there?
3. Why do you think road markers, such as the one in the photograph above, were set up in the desert?

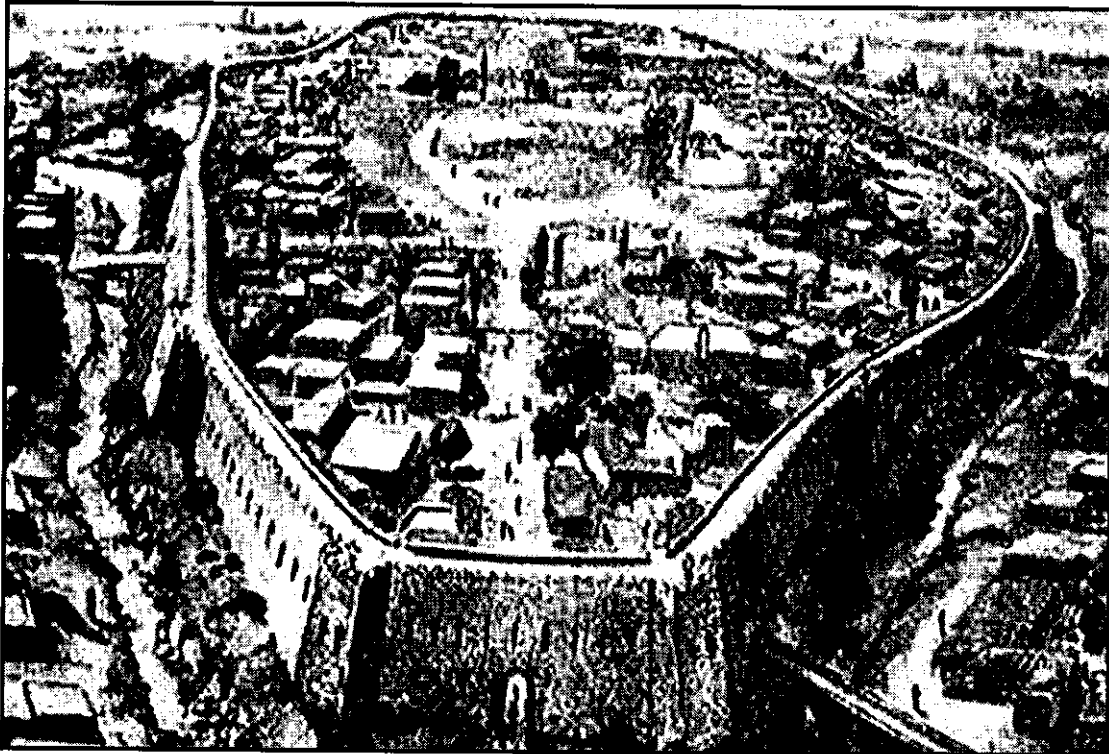
Writing Journal Entry #3: Label your entry “Taklimakan Desert, June 12, 200, Midday.” You have been traveling all day through the desert. The relentless sun and heat have made you sleepy as you trudge on. You have heard that travelers through the desert sometimes faint and, as a result, are accidentally left behind by the caravan. To stay alert, you decide to write in your journal. What are your thoughts as you make your way through the Taklimakan Desert? What is your impression of this land?

Document D

Source: A description of the Kushan Empire city of Marakanda in *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, a book about the Silk Road written by Xuanzang ("shweng-zang"), a Buddhist pilgrim, in 646 CE. Artist unknown.

Note: After crossing the Gobi and Taklimakan deserts, travelers on the Silk Road's northern route had to traverse the rugged Pamir Mountains in Central Asia before arriving at this bustling city. Today, Marakanda is called Samarkand, a city in Uzbekistan.

The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored here. The soil is rich and productive and yields abundant harvests. The forest trees afford a thick vegetation and flowers and fruit are plentiful.... Horses are bred there. The inhabitants' skill in the arts and trades exceeds that of other countries. The climate is agreeable and temperate and the people brave and energetic.



Document Analysis

1. What mountains did westbound Silk Road travelers have to cross before reaching Marakanda?
2. According to Xuanzang, Marakanda was a prosperous city. Cite evidence from the document that supports this observation.
3. Judging from the picture, how was Marakanda protected? Assuming that the drawing is accurate, about how high is the wall? Explain how you got your answer.

Writing Journal Entry #4: Label your journal entry "Marakanda, September 23, 200, Afternoon." You arrived in the thriving city of Marakanda this morning. Once you leave, you will be on the long journey to Antioch, the western end of the Silk Road. What is your impression of Marakanda? How do you plan to spend your time there? Review the map of the Silk Road in Document A. What do you expect from the rest of your journey? Take a few moments to write your thoughts and concerns in your journal.

Document E

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

Note: After leaving Marakanda, a traveler heading west on the Silk Road traveled through modern-day Iran and Iraq, eventually arriving in Antioch. Antioch was a major city at the eastern edge of the Roman Empire, not far from the Mediterranean Sea. The Chinese viewed this city as Rome itself. Caravans approached Antioch via a 30-foot-wide paved roadway that led to the huge gates of the city. At Antioch, a trader might record transactions made over the past year along the Silk Road.

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Location	Goods Given	Goods Received
Dunhuang	1 book of Confucian lessons	1 book of Buddhist prayers
Ferghana	100 bolts of silk	200 Ferghana horses (pick up on return)
Marakanda	10 ceramic vases 10 bolts of silk	20 bags of Indian pepper (1 pound each) 20 skeins of wool (from eastern Europe)
Rhagae	500 seeds for orange trees	500 seeds for grape vines
Palmyra	50 sheets of paper	5 rhinoceros horns (from Ethiopia)
Antioch	500 bolts of silk 50 bars of iron	Unspecified amounts of gold 30 Roman colored glass vases
Lost in Taklimakan Desert: 1 camel and driver carrying 30 bolts of Chang'an silk		

Document Analysis

1. Look at the map in Document A again. Through which cities would you have to travel to get from Marakanda to Antioch?
2. Which of the silk road cities in this chart offered silk in exchange for other goods?
3. According to the chart what seeds did our traveller trade in Rhagae?
4. Consider the goods traded in these six cities. Would you say they were luxury items for the wealthy or everyday items for the common people? Give examples.

Writing Journal Entry #5: Label your journal entry “Antioch, April 22, 201, Evening.” The caravan has reached its final destination – Antioch, the western end of the Silk Road. You are one of the few people to travel the entire length of the route! Reflect on this once-in-a-lifetime achievement. Also, review the ledger, which lists some of the trade transactions that took place during your journey. Has the journey turned out the way you hoped? Was the long journey worth the difficulties you endured? How do you feel about the return journey? Record your thoughts in your journal.