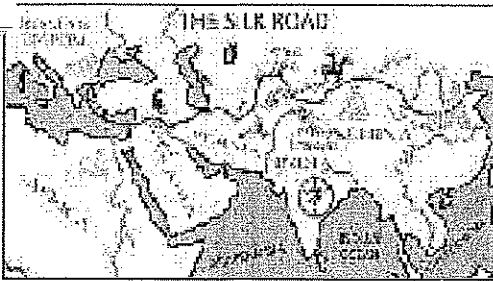


# Silk Roads - Era 3 1000 BCE - 500 CE

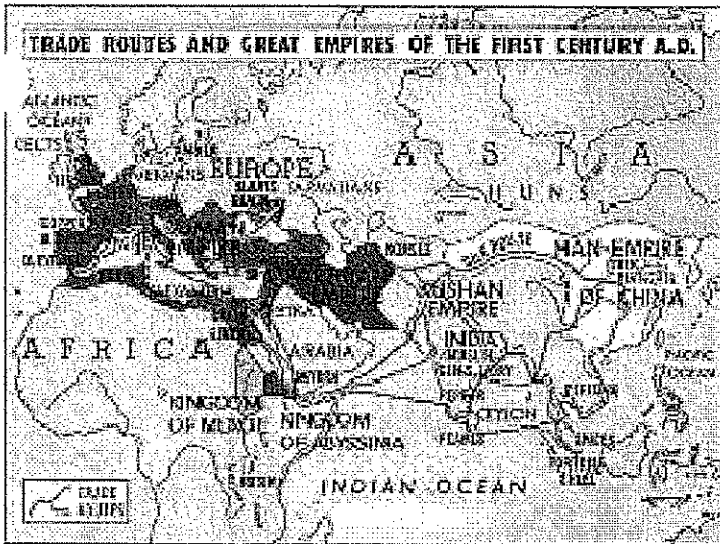


## THE SILK ROADS: CONNECTING AFROEURASIA

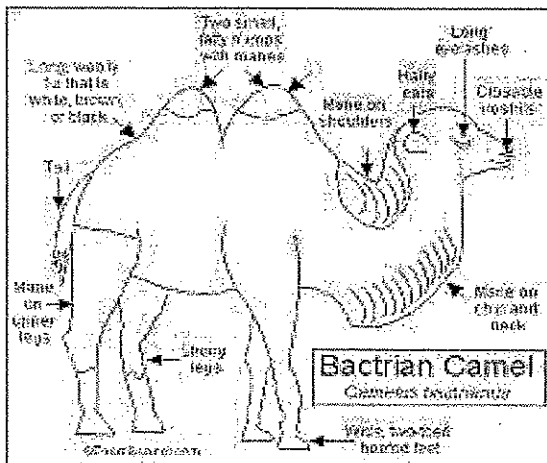
The Silk Roads were an elaborate system of land and water routes that connected all different kinds of people from a variety of cultures, civilizations, and climates. **Notice in the map below** that this trade across central Asia was not only across land, but also across water, like the Indian Ocean.

Along the Silk Roads people not only exchanged goods (like silk, for which the network is named), but also ended up trading cultural, religious and technological ideas like languages, Buddhism and iron-working techniques. It is important to remember that during Era 3 the only "instant" communication was one person communicating with another face to face. There were no telephones, of course, and while people could write letters, someone still had to carry the letter in person, and printed books didn't even exist yet. Even so, because the Silk Roads connected people all across Afroeurasia, it was now possible for ideas to travel faster and farther than ever before in history.

A variety of goods, technologies and ideas traveled from east to west and west to east along the Silk Roads. Some of the most popular goods desired from China included silk, ceramics, furs and ironware while the Chinese longed for olive oil, wine, perfumes and animals from the West.



Exchanges did not just happen between civilizations, they also happened between pastoral nomads and empires. For example, pastoral nomads of the steppes interacted with settled agricultural people in China along these networks. These interactions were not always friendly. Just as in the previous era, sometimes the interactions were cooperative and sometimes they were full of conflict.



The Bactrian Camel: The animal that made trade along the Silk Roads possible.

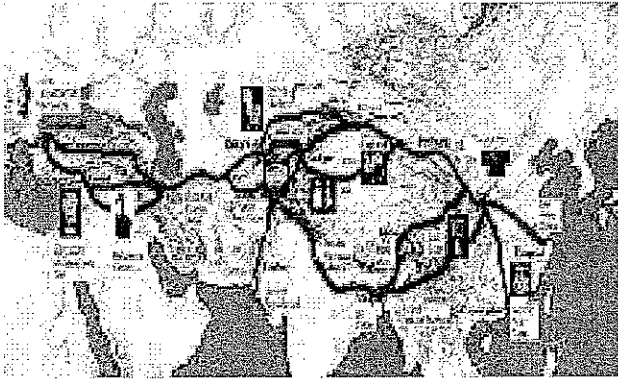
The Bactrian camel was critical in moving goods along the Silk Roads. These animals would carry up to 300 pounds of goods on their backs through mountains and desert regions.

Considering the difficult journey, what features of the Bactrian made it well adapted for the long treks along the Silk Roads?

## **CULTURE, IDEAS AND THE SILK ROADS**

Almost more important than the goods that traveled along the Silk Road were the ideas and inventions that it carried from East to West and vice versa. It is believed that the Chinese were first introduced to grapes and wine, products of the Middle East, via the Silk Road.

Music, songs, and stories traveled along the Silk Road, and were shared around the campfires where the camel caravans stopped. So did broad ideas that changed the course of human history. Buddhism first developed in India in the sixth century BCE, and the Silk Road helped carry the faith's teachings to China and elsewhere, until eventually it became the dominant religion of much of Asian.



## **EMPIRES AND THE SILK ROADS**

The trip from Rome to China is over 4000 miles, and during Era 3 it would have taken over a year for one person to travel that distance. It should be no surprise then that traders along the Silk Roads did not travel the entire distance. Instead, trade happened in segments like a relay, which allowed any one trader to only have to go a short distance, make a trade, and then return home. The next trader would then move the goods along the next segment and so on until the goods reached their destination. So while wealthy Romans wore Chinese silk and the elite Chinese ate exotic Mediterranean foods, the Romans and Chinese did not typically meet in this era.

Trade along the Silk Roads was dangerous -- merchants faced mountains, deserts, brutal winds, poisonous snakes, bandits and pirates. Merchants needed all the help they could get to make trade successful, and empires did just that.

While trade certainly happened before empires emerged, large-scale exchanges became possible only after the small early agrarian civilizations of Afroeurasia became huge and powerful empires. By Era 3, just four ruling groups - those of the Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Han Empires - controlled much of the Afroeurasian landmass, from the China Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. These empires were able to establish some order and stability over Afroeurasia, which was home to a great diversity of people, cultures and civilizations. The empires were able to reduce the costs of long-distance trade to merchants, which encouraged even more trade and exchange.

One major way that empires facilitate long-distance trade was by constructing massive road networks, something that individuals or small villages could not do by themselves. Empires also invested in technology surrounding metallurgy, agriculture and transportation. Another way that empires contributed to making trade easier was by issuing standardized coinage (money) so that people would not have to rely on bartering for products.

While empires could not remove all the obstacles that made trade dangerous, they did what they could. For instance, to help protect merchants from bandits coming from the north, the Chinese constructed sections of a large wall, now known as the Great Wall of China.

**THINKING LIKE AN HISTORIAN:** *Historians today believe that the ideas exchanged along the Silk Roads were more important to world history than the actual goods that traveled the same network. Why might this be the case? What do you think is the evidence for this claim?*



