The Silk Road and Ancient Trade: Crash Course World History #9

Crash Course: World History
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Hi there, I'm John Green; you're watching Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about the Silk Road, so called because it was not a road and not made of silk.

So this is a t-shirt. It was designed in Belgium and contains cotton from both Brazil and the Texas, which was turned into cloth in China, stitched in Haiti, screen-printed in the Washington, sold to me in Indiana, and now that I am too fat to wear it, it will soon make its way to Cameroon or Honduras or possibly even back to Haiti. Can we just pause for a moment to consider the astonishing fact that most t-shirts see more of the world than most of us do—

Mr. Green, Mr. Green, the t-shirt can't see the world because they don't have eyes—

Look, Me from the Past, it's difficult for me to isolate what I hate most about you because there is so much to hate. But very near the top is your relentless talent for ignoring everything that is interesting and beautiful about our species in favor of pedantic sniveling in which no one loses or gains anything of value. I'm gonna go put on a collared shirt because we're here to tackle the big picture.

(Intro)

So the Silk Road didn't begin trade, but it did radically expand its scope, and the connections that were formed by mostly unknown merchants arguably changed the world more than any political or religious leaders.

It was especially cool If you were rich, because you finally had something to spend your money on other than temples. But even if you weren't rich, the Silk Road reshaped the lives of everyone living in Africa and Eurasia, as we will see today. Let's go straight to the Thought Bubble.

As previously mentioned, the Silk Road was not a road. It's not like archaeologists working in Uzbekistan have uncovered a bunch of yield signs and baby on board stickers. It was an overland route where merchants carried goods for trade. But it was really two routes: One that connected the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia and one that went from Central Asia to China.

Further complicating things, the Silk Road involved sea routes: Many goods reached Rome via the Mediterranean, and goods from Central Asia found their way across the Pacific to Japan and even Java. So we shouldn't think of the Silk Road as a road but rather as a network of trade routes.

But just as now, the goods traveled more than the people who traded them: Very few traders traversed the entire Silk Road: Instead, they'd move back and forth between towns, selling to traders who'd take the goods further toward their destination, with everybody marking up prices along the way.

So what'd they trade? Well silk, for starters. For millennia, silk was only produced in China. It is spun from the cocoons of mulberry tree-eating worms and the process of silk making as well as the techniques for raising the worms were closely guarded secrets, since the lion's share of China's wealth came from silk production.

The Chinese used silk as fishing line, to buy off nomadic raiders to keep things peaceful, and to write before they invented paper. But as an export, silk was mostly used for clothes: Silk clothing feels light in the summer and warm in the winter, and until we invented $700 pre-distressed designer jeans, decking yourself out in silk was the #1 way to show people that you were wealthy. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

But the Silk Road wasn't all about silk. The Mediterranean exported such cliched goods as olives, olive oil, wine, and mustachioed plumbers. China exported raw materials like jade, silver, and iron. India exported fine cotton textiles; the ivory that originated in East Africa made its way across the Silk Road; and Arabia exported incense and spices and tortoise shells. Oh, god, it's a red one, isn't it? It's just gonna chase me, I just – Ow.

Up until now on Crash Course, we've been focused on city-dwelling civilizational types, but with the growth of the Silk Road, the nomadic people of Central Asia suddenly become much more important to world history. Much of Central Asia isn't great for agriculture, but it's difficult to conquer, unless you are, wait for it – the Mongols.

It also lends itself fairly well to herding, and since nomads are definitionally good at moving around, they're also good at moving stuff from Point A to Point B, which makes them good traders. Plus all their travel made them more resistant to diseases.

One group of such nomads, the YuèzhÄ«, were humiliated in battle in the 2nd century BCE by their bitter rivals the Xiongnu, who turned the YuèzhÄ« king's skull into a drinking cup, in fact. And in the wake of that, the YuèzhÄ« migrated to Bactria and started the Kushan Empire in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although Silk Road trading began more than a century before the birth of Jesus, it really took off in the second and third centuries CE, and the Kushan Empire became a huge hub for that Silk Road trade. By then, nomads were being eclipsed by professional merchants who traveled the Silk Roads, often making huge profits, but those cities that had been founded by nomadic peoples became hugely important.

They continued to grow, because most of the trade on the Silk Road was by caravan, and those caravans had to stop frequently, you know, for like food and water and prostitutes. These towns became fantastically wealthy: one, Palmyra, was particularly important, because all of the incense and silk that traveled to Rome had to go through Palmyra. Silk was so popular among the Roman elite that the Roman senate repeatedly tried to ban it, complaining about trade imbalances caused by the silk trade and also that silk was inadequately modest.

To quote Seneca the Younger, "I see clothes of silk, if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one's decency, can be called clothes." He also said of the woman who wears silk, "her husband has no more acquaintance than any outsider or foreigner with his wife's body."

And yet all attempts to ban silk failed, which speaks to how much, even in the ancient world, wealth shaped governance. And with trade, there was a way to become wealthy without being a king or lord who takes part of what your citizens produce.

The merchant class that grew along with the Silk Road came to have a lot of political clout, and in some ways that began the tension that we still see today between wealth and politics. Whether it's, you know, corporations making large donations or Vladimir Putin periodically jailing billionaires. Mr. Putin, I just want to state for the record that I did not mean that in any way, I was – Stan wrote that joke. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter.

An Open Letter to Billionaires. But first, let's see what's in the Secret Compartment today. Oh, it's some fake silk; the stuff that put real silk out of business.

Dear Billionaires,

I've wrapped myself in the finest of polyester so that you will take

my message seriously. Here at Crash Course we've done a lot of research into our demographics and our show is watched primarily by Grammar Nazis, Muggle Quidditch Players, People Who Have a Test Tomorrow, and Billionaires.

I have a message for you Billionaires: It will never be enough. Your relentless yearning is going to kill us all.

Best wishes, John Green

Speaking of billionaires, the goods that traveled on the Silk Road really only changed the lives of rich people. Did the Silk Road affect the rest of us? Yes, for three reasons.

First, wider economic impact. Relatively few people could afford silk, but a lot of people devoted their lives to making that silk. And as the market for silk grew, more and more people chose to go into silk production rather than doing something else with their lives.

Second, the Silk Road didn't just trade luxury goods. In fact, arguably the most important thing traded along the Silk Road: ideas. For example, the Silk Road was the primary route for the spread of Buddhism. When we last saw the Buddha's Eightfold Path to escaping the cycle of suffering and desire that's inherent to humans, it was beginning to dwindle in India.

But through contacts with other cultures and traditions, Buddhism grew and flourished and became one of the great religious traditions of the world. The variation of Buddhism that took root in China, Korea, Japan, and Central Asia is known as Mahayana Buddhism, and it differed from the original teachings of the Buddha in many ways, but one that was fundamental.

For Mahayana Buddhists, the Buddha was divine. (I mean, we can — and religious historians do — fight over the exact definition of divine, but in Mahayana Buddhism, there's no question that the Buddha is venerated to a greater degree. The idea of Nirvana also transformed from a release from that cycle of suffering and desire to something much more heavenly and frankly more fun, and in some versions of Mahayana Buddhism, there are lots of different heavens, each more awesome than the last.

Rather than focusing on the fundamental fact of suffering, Mahayana Buddhism offered the hope that through worship of the Buddha, or one of the many Bodhisattvas – holy people who could have achieved nirvana but chose to hang out on Earth with us because they're super nice – one could attain a good afterlife.

Many merchants on the Silk Road became strong supporters of monasteries which in turn became convenient weigh stations for caravans. And by endowing the monasteries, rich merchants were buying a form of supernatural insurance; monks who lived in the monasteries would pray for the success of trade missions and the health of their patrons. It was win-win, especially when you consider that one of the central materials used in Mahayana Buddhist rituals is … silk.

And a third reason the Silk Road changed all our lives: worldwide interconnectedness of populations led to the spread of disease. Measles and Smallpox traveled along it, as did bubonic plague, which came from the East to the West in 534, 750, and — most devastatingly — in 1346. This last plague — known as the Black Death — resulted in the largest population decimation in human history, with nearly half of Europeans dying in a four-year period. A sizable majority of people living in Italy died as did two-thirds of Londoners. And it quite possibly wouldn't have happened without the Silk Road.

If you were living in London during the fourteenth century, you probably didn't blame the Silk Road for your community's devastation, but it played a role. If you look at it that way, the interconnectedness fostered by Silk Road affected way, way more people than just those rich enough to buy silk, just as today's globalization offers both promise and threat to each of us.

Next week we'll talk about Julius Caesar and in what situation, if any, it's okay to stab your friend in the gut. Until then, thanks for watching.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble and the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself.

Last week's Phrase of the Week was "Kim Kardashian". If you didn't like it, suggest better phrases of the week in comments. Every week I take one of your suggestions and find a way to squeeze it into the new episode.

If you liked today's episode of Crash Course, please click the "like" button and consider sharing the show with your friends. You can also follow us on Twitter @THECRASHCOURSE or on Facebook, links below. Raoul also has a Twitter where he tweets Crash Course pop quizzes. As do I. All of those links can be found below. Also, the beloved and not fictitious, Stan, has agreed to start tweeting. So that's exciting!

Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.

Oh, hey. Remember that Mongols shirt from the beginning of the episode? In addition to being a joke, it's a shirt! So many of you requested Mongols shirts that we are giving them to you! They are now available for pre-order at dftba.com, link in the video info below, so you can show your love for Crash Course or Mongols or exceptions.