

ACTIVITY 7.1

Introduction to the Silk Road

During the Han Dynasty in China, 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E., a period of stability was established across China. One result of this stability was an increase in trade between the cities of the dynasty's region. This trade spread to regions that are now India, Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, and as far as the Mediterranean Sea to Rome.

Commodities such as silk had become known to people in Rome through regional trade within their empire as it spread west. Silk was highly desired in cities like Rome, where people wanted it for clothing and decoration. Silk was very profitable for producers in China.

The Silk Road connected the West with the East through cities like Alexandria Eschate (Alexandria the Furthest) founded by Alexander the Great in 329 B.C.E. The Han Dynasty's capital Chang'an (now spelled Xi'an) in central China was the main city at the eastern end of the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was actually a series of roads extending north and south. People used these roads to carry goods between Rome and Chang'an. At times, sea routes carried this trade, as maritime technologies improved or when violence threatened land traders. When pirates and other perils faced the merchants on the sea routes, trade increased on the land routes.

Along the routes of the Silk Road, different regions offered goods such as dates, copper, herbs, and finished products. Goods such as the magnetic compass, silk, gunpowder and ceramics were traded from Chinese cities to the west. All along the trade routes, gold was a common form of money for trading. The Silk Road also spread cultures: ideas, languages, customs, and scientific knowledge. One additional impact was the spread of diseases such as the bubonic plague that spread across Central Asia into China and resulted in the Black Death in Europe.

Over its history, the Silk Road saw periods of increase and decrease in trade. The amount of trade depended on conflict or stability along the road as well as new technologies, changing consumer wants, and competitive forces. The price of goods changed along the Silk Road, depending on consumer wants and the cost of transporting the goods over long distances.

ACTIVITY 7.2

Map of the Silk Roads



ACTIVITY 7.3

Bartering

ACTIVITY 7.4

Bartering along the Silk Road

The table below shows six cities and six goods. The cities listed across the top of the table are the cities you would visit if you traveled the Silk Road from west to east.

Good	West ← Cities → East					
	Rome	Damascus	Alexandria Eschate	Kashgar	Khotan	Chang'an
Gold (coins)			4			
Dates (baskets)			8			
Copper (coins)						
Herbs (baskets)			16			
Jade (boxes)			8			
Silk (bolts)			4			

In this example, each good is made in only one city: gold is made in Rome; dates are grown in Damascus; copper is produced in Alexandria Eschate; herbs are grown in Kashgar; jade is produced in Khotan; and silk is made in Chang'an. (You can see where each product is from by using the shaded squares.)

If you read up and down the columns, the table shows what amount of one good it takes to barter for units of another good. For example, in Alexandria Eschate, it takes four gold coins to buy eight baskets of dates. It takes four gold coins to buy four bolts of silk.

It costs a lot to transport goods along the Silk Road. The path is rough and traders demand payment for the time and trouble of taking goods along the road. Many obstacles stand in traders' way, such as taxes and thieves.

In this example, as a good is moved from city to city, half of the goods are lost to pay traders as well as to encounters with thieves and paying taxes. For example, if 32 silk bolts begin in Chang'an and are sent west, only 16 bolts arrive in Khotan. If the 16 bolts are sent farther west from Khotan, only 8 bolts arrive in Kashgar.

Part I: Trading along the Silk Road

1. Fill in the rest of the table using the information above. (Hint: Be sure to know which way the goods are traveling along the road.) If 16 baskets of herbs arrive in Alexandria Eschate, where did they come from? _____ How many baskets of herbs were originally shipped from that city to Alexandria Eschate? _____
2. In Rome, how many gold coins does it take to buy one bolt of silk? _____
3. In Alexandria Eschate, how many gold coins does it take to buy one bolt of silk? _____
4. Are bolts of silk worth more in gold coins in Rome or Alexandria Eschate? Why is this true?

5. In which city does a gold coin buy the most silk? _____ How much silk will a gold coin buy in this city? _____

Part II: Good Trade?

For each of the following, determine whether the trade is a good trade or a bad trade, based on information in the table. Check the appropriate column.

The trade:	Good Trade	Bad Trade
1. A man in Damascus offers to sell you three baskets of herbs for one copper coin.		
2. A woman in Kashgar offers to sell you three boxes of jade for one basket of dates.		
3. A small child in Rome offers to sell you one copper coin for 6 gold coins.		
4. An old man in Chang'an offers to sell you 12 baskets of herbs for one gold coin.		

Part III: What Would You Do?

You are an ambitious young person living in Rome. You have 16 gold coins in your pocket. An odd ship captain approaches you and offers to take you to Chang'an along a new oversea route. The total cost of travel to Chang'an will be 14 gold coins—one way. Once in Chang'an, the only way to travel back to Rome is along the Silk Road. Would you go to Chang'an with the captain? (Assume information in the table still applies.) Explain what you would do to return to Rome and become a rich person.
