

CHAPTER 12-CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE ON THE SILK ROADS

One of the constants of human culture is trade, and since the Hellenistic period there has been trade between Europe and Asia. The major routes that facilitated this trade were the silk roads, one land based and one sea based. Because of the money and other benefits of trade, local rulers made an effort to both spread and protect the trade routes. The overland routes ran from China to the Roman Empire, and the sea systems linked Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean. The sea-based systems got were enhanced by the regularity of the monsoon winds. Silks and spices traveled west. Central Asia contributed horses and jade, while the Romans provided perfume, glassware, jewelry and textiles. Trade was governed and dominated by various groups, the merchants handling the land routes and different empires dominating the sea routes.

Goods were not the only things traded on the silk roads. Religious ideas and diseases, notably the Black Death, or bubonic plague, also traveled these routes. Buddhism and Hinduism spread into China and Southeast Asia. Christianity spread into Mesopotamia and Iran in the second century C.E. and into southwest Asia until the seventh century C.E. gaining a large number of converts. Manichaeism, preached by the Zoroastrian prophet Mani, was a dualist religion, meaning it taught a cosmic struggle between good and evil. It allowed for personal salvation while dictating an ascetic lifestyle and high ethical standards. It was widely popular in the Roman Empire, Mesopotamia, and central Asia. Unfortunately, epidemic diseases, including smallpox, measles, and Bubonic plague also spread at this time. Due to this spread, between the first and the tenth centuries C.E., the populations of both the Roman Empire and China dropped by 25%. The economies of both areas were reduced, competition appeared, and both empires were weakened.

For a variety of reasons the empires at each end of the silk road, the Roman and Han China collapsed after 200 C.E. Land reform continued to be a problem in China, leading to rebellions and then a military takeover. The generals abolished the dynasty and split the empire. The divided parts could not defend against various nomadic invaders and China was divided for 350 years. Post-Han China saw a reduction of Confucianism and the rise of Buddhism.

Rome fell for similar reasons. The army took control of the government and nomadic invaders began to put pressure on the borders of the empire. In 476 C.E. a German replaced the Roman emperor and that event marks the end of the Roman Empire. The most significant institution to survive the fall of Rome was Christianity, which first became legal in 313 C.E. and was the official religion by 380 C.E.

Key Concept 2.3. Emergence of Transregional Networks of Communication and Exchange

- I. Land and water routes created transregional trade, communication and exchange networks in the Eastern Hemisphere, while separate networks connected the peoples and societies of the Americas somewhat later.

II. New technologies facilitated long-distance communication and exchange.

III. Alongside the trade in goods, the exchange of people, technology, religious and cultural beliefs, food crops, domesticated animals, and disease pathogens developed across far-flung networks of communication and exchange.