

Topic 2.1 Part 1 (Networks of Exchange: Silk Roads, 1200–1450) (Student)

Thematic Focus: Economics Systems (ECN)

Standards

Component	Description
Theme	ECN — Economic Systems
Learning Objective (Unit 2:A)	Explain the causes and effects of growth of networks of exchange after 1200.
KC-3.1.I.A.i	Improved commercial practices → increased trade & new trading cities (Silk Roads).
KC-3.1.I.C.i	Innovations: caravanserais, credit systems, money economies.
KC-3.3.I.B	Demand for luxury goods increased → expanded production (textiles, porcelain, iron, steel).

Lesson Overview

Between 1200 and 1450, the Silk Roads connected China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean in a massive interregional trading system. The growth of trade was driven by new commercial practices, stable empires such as the Mongols, and increasing demand for luxury goods.

Caravanserais, improved road security, new forms of credit, and standardized money systems made long-distance trade easier than ever before. As luxury goods like silk, porcelain, spices, and precious metals circulated, cities expanded, artisans increased production, and cultures blended across continents.

While the Silk Roads dominated land-based Eurasian exchange, similar patterns appeared in the Indian Ocean and Trans-Saharan routes. Together, these networks reshaped economies, cities, and societies across Afro-Eurasia.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Identify the major causes of Silk Roads expansion after 1200.
2. Explain how commercial innovations increased trade volume.
3. Describe how growth of trade transformed cities and production.
4. Compare the Silk Roads to other major networks (Indian Ocean, Trans-Saharan).
5. Analyze primary sources that describe Silk Road commerce.

Essential Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Caravanserai	A roadside inn where travelers and merchants could rest, eat, and trade along major land routes.
Money Economy	An economic system based on currency instead of bartering goods.
Credit / Bills of Exchange	Early forms of banking that let merchants borrow money or pay without carrying coins.
Luxury Goods	Expensive items like silk, porcelain, gold, and spices that were traded long distances.
Commercial Practices	Business methods (credit, banking, recordkeeping) that make trade easier and safer.

Background Reading (2–3 paragraphs)

After 1200, long-distance trade expanded dramatically across Eurasia. The Mongol Empire, which united large regions of China, Central Asia, and Persia, provided political stability that made travel safer for merchants. The Silk Roads thrived because caravans could move more easily between cities controlled by a single political authority.

New commercial practices also encouraged growth. Money economies reduced the need to carry heavy metal coins across long distances. Paper money in China, bills of exchange in the Islamic world, and credit systems developed by merchants improved the speed and safety of transactions. Caravanserais along major routes offered shelter, food, and a place to exchange goods and information.

Demand for luxury goods increased in Afro-Eurasia, especially among wealthy elites. Chinese artisans expanded production of silk and porcelain, Indian and Persian craftsmen produced high-quality textiles, and Chinese iron and steel manufacturing reached new levels. As trade grew, cities like Kashgar, Samarkand, and Hangzhou flourished as commercial hubs.

Primary Sources

Primary Source 1: Marco Polo on Silk Road Commerce (c. 1298)

Source: “*The Travels of Marco Polo*,” *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University.

Link: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/mpolo-hanseong.asp>

“In the city of Hangzhou, there are countless merchants and craftsmen. The markets are filled with goods from all parts of the world. The people buy and sell using paper money issued by the Great Khan, and this is accepted everywhere in his dominions. The merchants benefit greatly from this, for they are not forced to carry heavy coins. There are also great warehouses where goods are stored, and officials who record all transactions. The Great Khan gains immense revenue from these markets and uses it to maintain order. No city in the world is more magnificent or more prosperous in commerce.”

Primary Source 2: Ibn Battuta on Caravan Trade (c. 1325–1354)

Source: “*Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa*,” *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University.

Link: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp>

“On the roads of Central Asia, the caravans are large and well protected. Travelers journey in great companies for safety against thieves, and in each caravan there are guides who know the route and the watering places. The inns along the way provide lodging and supplies to the merchants and their animals.

In the cities of the Silk Roads, I saw merchants from Turkey, India, China, and distant lands. All bring their goods here to trade: silk, cloth, spices, metals, and furs. The markets are orderly, the roads safe, and the rulers take great care that no traveler is harmed, for trade is their lifeblood.”

Guided Source Analysis Questions

For Marco Polo:

1. What commercial innovations does Marco Polo describe in Hangzhou?
2. How does the Great Khan benefit from expanded trade?
3. Why is paper money important for Silk Road commerce?

For Ibn Battuta:

1. What does this source reveal about the security of Silk Road travel?
2. How did caravanserai and caravan organization support trade?
3. What does Ibn Battuta's description suggest about cultural interactions?

Major Trade Networks After 1200 – Comparative Overview

Network	Goods Traded	Key Innovations	Major Cities
Silk Roads	Silk, porcelain, spices, metals, horses	Paper money, credit, caravanserai	Samarkand, Kashgar, Chang'an
Indian Ocean	Pepper, cotton, ivory, timber	Monsoon navigation, lateen sail	Calicut, Malacca, Kilwa
Trans-Saharan	Gold, salt, slaves, textiles	Camel caravans, oasis systems	Timbuktu, Gao, Marrakesh

Change / Continuity / Comparison

Causes of Growth (Causation)

- Mongol protection along routes
- Innovations: credit, paper money, caravanserai
- Increased demand for luxury goods
- Rising urbanization

Continuities

- Silk and porcelain always in high demand
- Intermediary merchants remained essential
- Cities served as cultural and commercial hubs

Changes

- New technologies in navigation and credit
- Growth of new trading cities (Samarkand, Kashgar)
- Expanded geographic range of trade
- Increasing cross-cultural exchanges

Comparison

Silk Roads relied on **land-based caravans**, while Indian Ocean trade relied on **ships and monsoon winds**. Trans-Saharan routes depended on **camels** and control of desert oases.

Student Reflection

Write a short paragraph (5–6 sentences):

Explain one cause and one effect of Silk Roads growth after 1200, and compare the Silk Roads to one other trade network (Indian Ocean OR Trans-Saharan) in terms of economic or technological innovation.

Key Takeaways

- Trade expanded rapidly after 1200 due to safer routes and new commercial practices.
- Silk Roads cities became wealthy centers of culture, production, and exchange.
- Demand for luxury goods led to increased artisan and manufacturing activity.
- Trade patterns across Afro-Eurasia show both continuity and change.
- Economic networks created interconnected societies long before European exploration.

Source Citations

- Marco Polo, *The Travels*, Fordham Internet Medieval Sourcebook.
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/mpolo-hanseong.asp>
- Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, Fordham Internet Medieval Sourcebook.
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp>