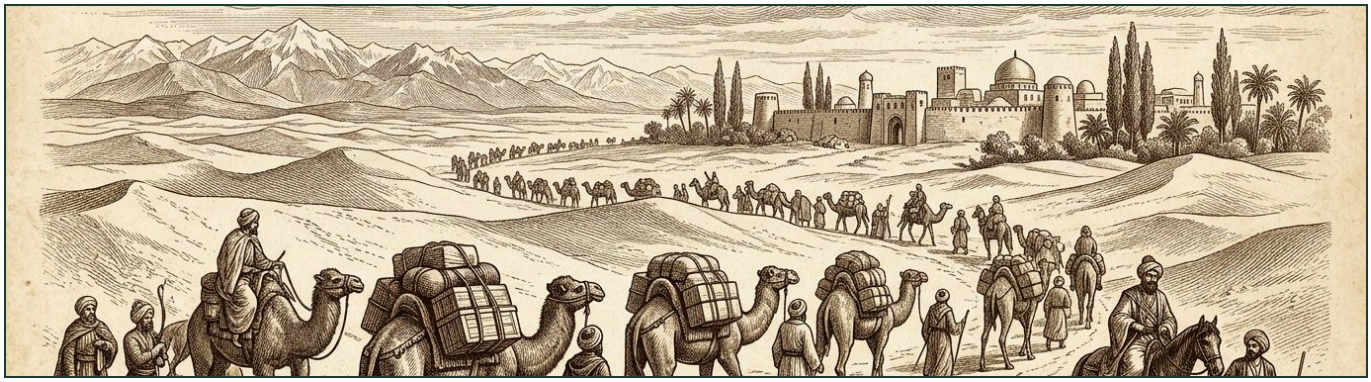


138 BC – AD 1498

Silk Road Timeline

The Silk Road was a network of trade routes linking China with Central Asia, India, the Middle East and Europe for more than 1,500 years, carrying silk, spices, paper, religions and ideas.

138 BC

Zhang Qian Travels West

Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty sends the envoy Zhang Qian to find allies in Central Asia; he is captured and held for about ten years but returns around 126 BC with reports of rich lands and fine horses to the west.

> **Why it mattered:** *Zhang Qian's reports led the Han to push west and protect the trade routes, so he is often called the father of the Silk Road.*

1st century BC

Romans Discover Silk

Chinese silk, passed along by Parthian and other traders, becomes a luxury in the Roman Empire; in the next century the Roman writer Pliny the Elder complains about how much money Romans spend on it.

> **Why it mattered:** *Rome's demand for silk made the trade very profitable, even though Romans and Chinese never knew much about each other.*

1st century AD

Buddhism Comes to China

Monks and merchants from India and Central Asia bring Buddhism along the trade routes into China, where it slowly gains followers.

> **Why it mattered:** *Buddhism became one of China's main religions and spread on to Korea and Japan, showing how the routes carried ideas as well as goods.*

c. AD 552

Silkworms Smuggled West

According to the historian Procopius, monks smuggle silkworm eggs from Central Asia to Constantinople for Emperor Justinian, possibly hidden inside hollow canes.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Byzantine Empire began making its own silk, ending China's long hold on the secret of how silk was made.*

Silk Road Timeline *continued*

629–645 — **Xuanzang's Journey**

The Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang travels the Silk Road to India to study and collect holy texts, returning 16 years later with hundreds of scrolls.

> **Why it mattered:** *His book about the journey is one of the best records of the lands and peoples along the Silk Road in the 600s.*

751 — **Battle of Talas**

An Arab Abbasid army defeats a Chinese Tang army near the Talas River in Central Asia; by about 794 a paper mill was working in Baghdad.

> **Why it mattered:** *Papermaking spread from China across the Islamic world and, centuries later, to Europe, making books and records far cheaper.*

868 — **The Diamond Sutra Is Printed**

A Buddhist text called the Diamond Sutra is printed from carved wooden blocks in China; it was found in 1900 in a sealed cave near the Silk Road town of Dunhuang.

> **Why it mattered:** *It is the oldest printed book that carries a date, made almost 600 years before Gutenberg's printing press.*

1271–1295 — **Marco Polo Travels**

The Venetian merchant Marco Polo travels to China, then ruled by the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan; the Mongol peace makes the routes safer than ever, and his book about the journey becomes famous in Europe.

> **Why it mattered:** *His stories of China's riches made Europeans eager to reach Asia themselves.*

1340s — **The Black Death Spreads**

A deadly plague spreads from Central Asia along trade routes; in 1347 ships from the Black Sea carry it to Mediterranean ports.

> **Why it mattered:** *The plague killed about a third of Europe's people and also hit the Middle East and Asia, showing the dangers of a connected world.*

1498 — **A Sea Route to India**

Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sails around Africa and reaches Calicut in India.

> **Why it mattered:** *Ships could carry far more goods than camels, so trade by sea slowly took over and the old overland routes faded.*