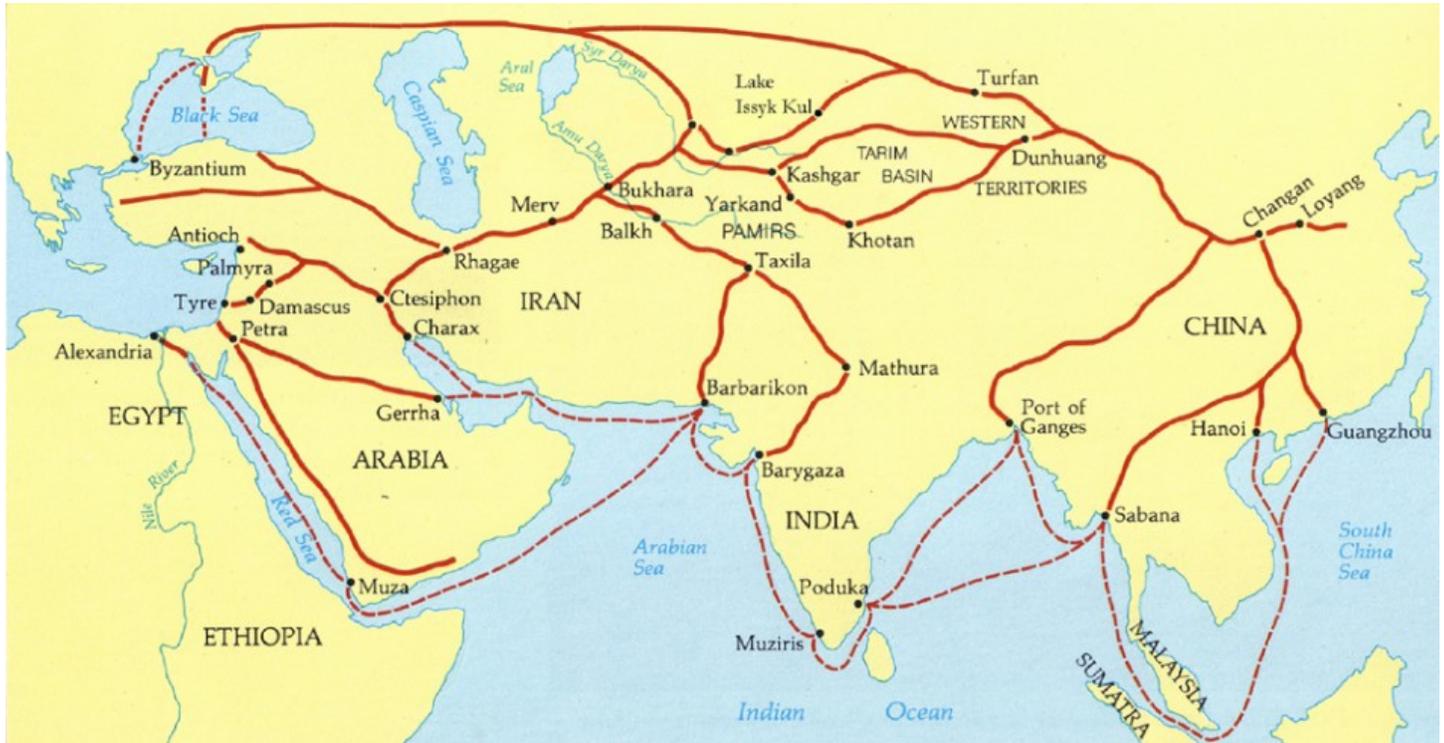


# Silk Road Connections

**Directions:** Travel the Silk Road through documents! Examine each document and answer the questions.



“Silk manufacturing is a state secret in China. No Chinese weaver is to share that knowledge with a foreigner. And so this was something that the Europeans couldn't produce. So, when they discovered silk, they're enraptured. This is the substance that they want, and the ruling class back in Rome clamored to be able to address in silk. If you lived your life wearing nothing but sackcloth and wool, to be able to put on a silk garment is just the most extraordinary thing... If you're packing these on the backs of mules and camels it's a very slow and expensive process. You need high-value per volume, and this is what spices, gems, and silks are. They are very high-value goods in terms of their weight.”

**Source:** Dr. Timothy Brook, University of British Columbia

1. Why do you think the Chinese would want to keep the technology of silk making a secret?
2. Do you think traders would want to trade goods like wheat or rice along the Silk Road? Why or why not?



“How do you get the goods from one place to another?... One of the great breakthroughs by the 2nd century BCE is the extensive use of camels. Camels were domesticated both in Arabia, and that would be the Dromedary, the one humped camel, and the Bactrian, the two humped camel, in Central Asia, which is more resistant to the cold... Camels offered several advantages. First, they could go a lot farther and longer than horses, mules, and donkeys. Furthermore, by using packs of camels you would increase carrying capacity by at least fifty percent... Above all, camels conserve food and water in their systems and they're extremely efficient animals... And so... They become the main beast of burden, and that makes possible the trade on the Silk Road.”

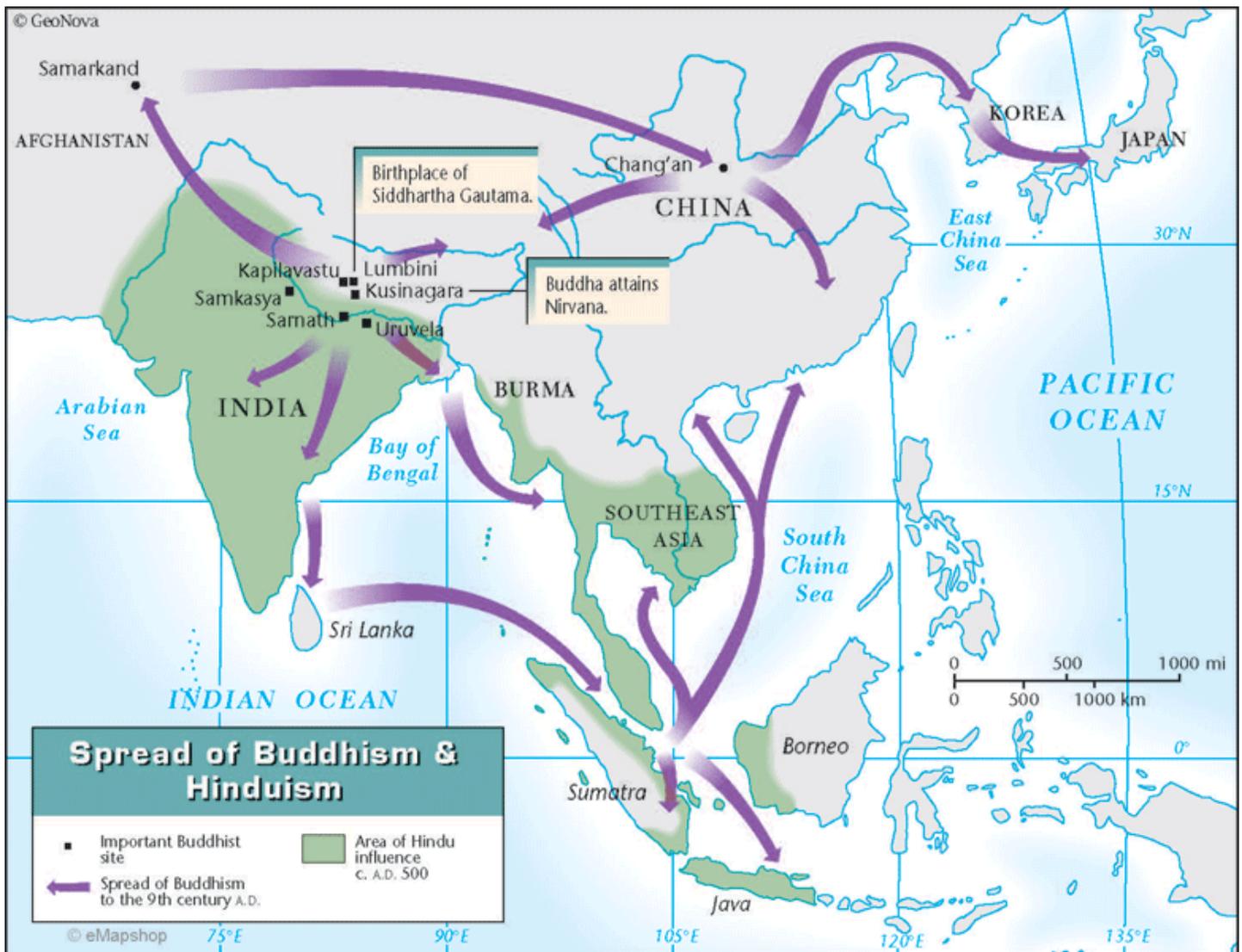
**Source:** Professor Kenneth W. Harl Ph.D., Tulane University, *Barbarian Empires of the Steppes*

3. What were the benefits of the camel to the Silk Road trade network?

“...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... 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. One group of such nomads, the Yuezhi, ...started the Kushan Empire in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan... In the second and third centuries CE... the Kushan Empire became a huge hub for that Silk Road trade. By then, nomads were being eclipsed by professional merchants who travelled 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 travelled to Rome had to go through Palmyra.”

**Source:** John Green, *Crash Course World History*

4. What were two ways that Central Asian Nomads contributed to the growth of the Silk Road trade?



“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. [By the beginning of the Gupta Empire, Buddhism] was beginning to dwindle in India. But through [Silk Road] 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 (status of a god). 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...one could attain a good afterlife. [By no coincidence,] one of the central materials used in Mahayana Buddhist rituals... is silk.”

**Source:** John Green, *Crash Course World History*

5. How was Mahayana Buddhism different than the earlier Theravada Buddhism?

6. “The Silk Road saved the teachings of the Buddha!” Based on the above document, would you agree or disagree with that statement? Explain.

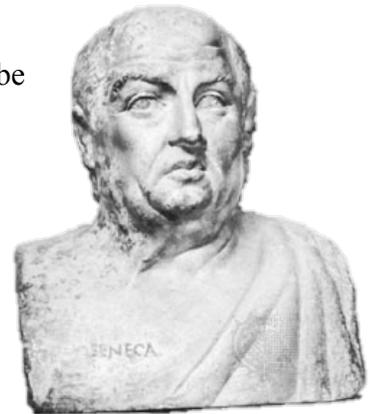
Silk was so popular among the Roman elite that the Roman senate repeatedly tried to ban it, complaining about trade imbalances caused by the silk trade and also that silk was inadequately modest.

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.

Source: John Green, *Crash Course World History*

7. Why did some Romans want to ban silk? Why do you think this proved to be impossible?



## Summary Questions

8. How and where did the Silk Road lead to social and cultural change? Discuss **at least two** specific examples.
9. What lessons can we learn from the Silk Road about trade and cultural diffusion that can help us better understand the world today? Develop at least one conclusion that can apply across time.