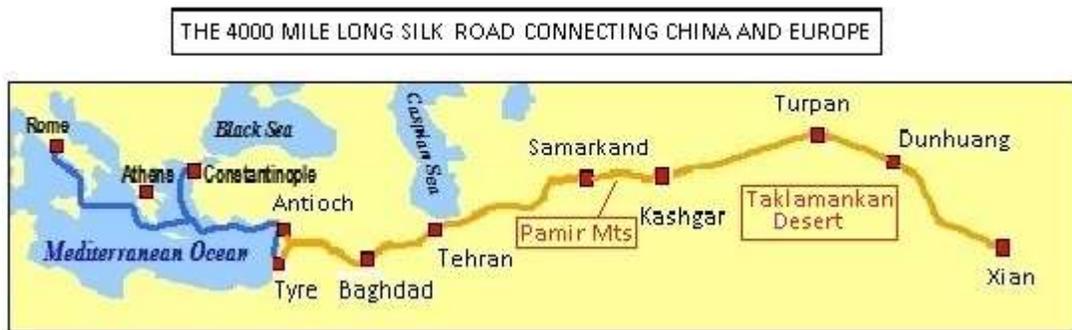


THE SILK ROUTE

By the Silk Route one is referring to an ancient 4000 mile long trade route extending between Xian, China and the Mediterranean Sea at Antioch and Tyre . It was officially started by the Han Dynasty 114 BC and lasted until its shut down by the Ottoman Empire in 1493. Its main trade items were silk, jade, and porcelain from China with eastward flowing items such as wool, glassware, horses, gold and silver. Its shutdown led to the wide expansion of sea routes by European nations, especially, Portugal and Spain, to the far east mainly for spices. Also it led to the discovery of the new world and all its wealth. The shutdown also initiated the decline of Venice as a major world power since its major trading partners were the merchants along the Silk Route. With a few exceptions, such as Marco Polo(1259-1324), few individuals actually transversed the entire route but rather traded between local cities along the route. The trade items however made it for the full journey allowing rich Romans to wear silk clothing and Chinese infantry to have steppe raised horses which would not collapse under an armored soldier's weight.

Although the Silk Route(or Road) had many branches the main route was the following-



It started in Xian, China went north-west to get around the Taklamankan desert via Dunhuang and Turpan ending at the west end of the desert at Kashgar. A picture of the formidable desert looks like this-



Taklamakan Desert

Some of its dunes are sixty foot high. An alternative route was between the Himalayas and the south end of the desert. It was less frequently travelled. The Polo brothers are believed to have taken this alternate route on one of their several trips to Cathay(China). After Kashgar the road leads west through the Pamir Mountains to Samarkand in Uzbekistan . The Pamir mountains are little visited today although they offer spectacular views matching those of the Alps, the Rockies, and the South island of New Zealand. Here is a view-



Pamir Mountains

Samarkand was one of the wealthiest cities along the Silk Road. It still has many existing structure from that time including the following mosque-



Bibi-Khanym Mosque, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

From Samarkand the Silk Road heads south-west to Persia passing close by Tehran. The Silk Road continues on to Bagdad in Iraq and finally west to the Mediterranean locations of Antioch and Tyre. The rest of the goods transport was done by sea reaching Constantinople, Venice and Rome.

Besides the trade of goods, the Silk Road made possible the transfer of hundreds of ideas from China to the West. Examples include paper making, printing, gunpowder, silk, crossbow, porcelain, the compass, and paper currencies. One thing we did not get from China was the making of pasta. This dish was widely known in Italy prior to Marco Polo's travels to China in the twelve hundreds. With all these advances the Chinese had made by Marco Polo's time, it is difficult to understand how they later dropped so far behind the West. It seems like they are finally now re-awakening.

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August 20, 2021
Gainesville, Florida