***Silk Roads Items and Products of Trade***

*Caravans heading towards China were laden with gold, silver, ivory, gems and glass. Foods such as pomegranates and carrots also were traded. While from the opposite direction came lacquer ware, porcelain, jade, bronze, fur and, of course, silk.*

**Even before the discovery of silk, there was a vast amount of trade already taking place in Central Asia and China. Salt, a meat preservative, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan and copper and tin from Iran were commonly traded commodities some 5000 years ago. Since no recognized monetary system existed, trade in the early days was done through the careful bartering and exchange of goods by caravan traders. Their trade would be carried out in mutual places, near water and green patches of land used for animal grazing. These sites are the locations where towns and cities developed, many of which can be visited today.**

**It is impossible to say when silk, the product that lends its name to the trade route, came to be traded (starting with the Han Dynasty, c. 206 BC - 220 AD, silk was the major commodity being exported along these roads). And while the main object of travelling the early caravan routes was to buy or sell goods to or from faraway places, silk ended up the most eagerly traded and mysterious item. It was so rare that the Romans could only afford to sew a thin strip onto their togas.**

**The silk routes were not trade routes that existed solely for the purpose of trading in silk. Many other commodities were also traded, from gold and ivory to exotic animals and plants. But of all the precious goods crossing these routes, silk was perhaps the most remarkable for the people of the West. It is often thought that the Romans had first encountered silk in one of their campaigns against the Parthians in 53 B.C, and realized that it could not have been produced by this relatively unsophisticated people. They reputedly learnt from Parthian prisoners that it came from a mysterious tribe in the east, who they came to refer to as the silk people, 'Seres'. In practice, it is likely that silk and other goods were beginning to filter into Europe before this time, though only in very small quantities. The Romans obtained samples of this new material, and it quickly became very popular in Rome, for its soft texture and attractiveness. It was considered a luxury item that only the very wealthy could afford to wear. The Parthians quickly realized that there was money to be made from trading the material, and sent trade missions towards the east. The Romans also sent their own agents out to explore the Silk Routes, and to try to obtain silk at a lower price than that set by the Parthians. For this reason, the trade route to the East was seen by the Romans as a route for silk rather than a route for the trade of other goods.  The goods carried on the Silk Road moved basically from the East to the West.**

**In addition to silk, the route carried many other precious commodities. Caravans heading towards China that traversed this ancient trade route carried gold and other metals, ivory, gems and stones, and glass (which was not manufactured in China until the fifth century). The northern caravan route brought to China many goods such as: dates, saffron powder and pistachio nuts from Persia; frankincense and myrrh from Somalia; sandalwood from India; and glass bottles from Egypt.**

**In the opposite direction furs, ceramics, jade, bronze objects, lacquer and iron were carried. Many of these goods were bartered for others along the way, and objects often changed hands several times. There are no records of Roman traders being seen in Chang'an, nor Chinese merchants in Rome, though their goods reached both destinations. As goods changed hands, many middlemen (such as the Parthians who became very effective -- in c. 50 BC it appears that they prevented the Roman empire’s expansion at the battle of Carrhae, and thereby kept Rome almost entirely ignorant of China with whom it effectively did much of its trade. ) Traders and merchants along the routes made rewarding profits from the change of hands.**

**During this period described above, a small tribe, the Kushans, grew independent from the Parthians. The Kushans placed their capital at Bactria and expanded forming another at Peshawar. Their interest was purely financial rather than political. They built cities and connecting canals and before long caravans began to arrive in their hundreds. These middlemen were extremely effective at what they did and at preserving the idea that all trade had to go through them by exaggerating the distances involved in the travel. Consequently goods exchanged hands several times during their travels and the price rose accordingly, allowing the middlemen to also profit handsomely.**

**At the initial stage of  the development of the silk road, China received expensive horses, and the seeds of lucerne and grapes. The ancient world had cultivated grapevines and made wine, but for the Chinese grapes were a novelty. Moreover, Chinese envoys were very surprised when they found that it was possible to make wine not only from rice but also from berries unknown to them. Later, the Chinese also discovered other agricultural crops, such as string beans, onions, cucumbers, carrots, pomegranates, and figs.**

**Various woolen goods, carpets, curtains, blankets and rugs, came to China from Central Asia and the East Mediterranean. These items were valued by the Chinese who were unfamiliar with methods for making wool, flax fabric processing, carpet manufacture and weaving. Highly appreciated in Ancient China were Parthian tapestries and carpets. Central Asia exported camels which were also appreciated in China, arms and military equipment, gold and silver, semi-precious stones and glass items. Samarkand made glass was especially valued due to its high quality, and was considered a luxury good. Other goods were skins, cotton fabrics, wool, gold embroidery, exotic fruits (water-melons, melons and peaches) fat-tailed sheep and hunting dogs, leopards and lions.**

**From China caravans carried its famous Chinese porcelains, ceramic lusterware, lacquerware – snow-white vases, bowls, glasses, and dishes with sophisticated patterns. It was solely the Chinese who knew the secret of making the thinnest and resonant porcelain, making it very expensive in European markets. Bronze ornaments and other products from this metal, ornate bronze mirrors, umbrellas, products from the well-known Chinese varnish, medicines, and perfumes were also popular. Chinese paper, one of the most remarkable inventions of Chinese technical genius, was highly appreciated too. Gold, skins and many other things were exported as well. Merchants also carried tea and rice, corals, and amber. Merchants carried sacks filled with ivory, rhino horns, turtle shells, spices, ceramics, iron items, glaze, cinnamon, ginger, bronze weapons and mirrors.**

**India was famous for its fabrics, spices and semi-precious stones, dyes, and ivory. Iran was known for its silver products. Rome received spices, fragrances, jewels, ivory, and sugar. Eastern Europe imported rice, cotton, woolen and silk fabrics from Central Asia and exported considerable volumes of skins, furs, fur animals, bark for skin processing, cattle and slaves to Khoresm. Northern Europe was the source of furs, skins, honey and slaves.**

**Because luxury items were transported, and most traders could not afford large armed escorts to fight off robbers, merchants often travelled together in large caravans for increased safety. It is for this reason that the Silk Road expanded into a vast network of roads as individual traders searched for less inhabited territory to cross, so as to minimize the chance of attacks. Furthermore, as local governments realized the wealth of trade passing through their territory, attempts were made to levy heavy taxes along checkpoints, and so routes would change. Not only did the weather determine whether a routes was hospitable or not, tribal chieftains would wage war with neighboring tribes. And thus the political circumstances along the Silk Road would also determine on how routes would be taken and developed. Thus many routes merged with other already established trade routes, such as the spice routes which existed with India (spice routes went from Egypt, north of Oman into the Arabian Gulf, to Karachi, Goa, Malaysia, and up to Korea and Japan).**

**The sheer distances that would need to be covered meant that the time to complete the whole journey would take several years giving an unfeasibly slow turnover of goods. Therefore trade would take place in discrete bundles of goods being carried over short distances, from one city to the next. Each of the merchants keeping within their own well-known territories would meet and exchange or sell their items, and if lucky return home.**