The Importance Of The Silk Road In The Middle Ages

What we know today as The Silk Road, is said to be first travelled as such, by Marco Polo in the 12th century, but many of the routs within the silk road were used much before. Since the ancient times merchants used them, and the rout in use shifted depending on the political context of the era, meaning that many roads lead to the same cities, and that's probably because of wars and bandits that inhabited certain areas were merchants didn't feel safe going through.

Marco Polo went from Venice all the way to Mongolia in a travel that lasted approximately 24 years. Later many travellers, and most importantly; Merchants would follow Marco's steps. The rout didn't only server the purpose of goods exchange but much more, it enriched populations with culture, knowledge, ideas and beliefs, which had a great impact in the development of the countries which the rout went through, many of the cities along the route, such as Baghdad, Samarkand, Aleppo, Dunhuang and Antioch became the main culture and learning hubs, bringing together with the travellers and merchants huge riches.

Silk trade became one of the main catalysts for the creation of the route, the commodity was very coveted in Europe, and it was a mainly Chinese product, for that matter if Europeans wanted it, they had to travel thousands of kilometres in order to purchase it in Asia. Thanks to the hugely demanded silk other items also got discovered and traded widely east to west, those included textiles, spices, grain, vegetables, fruit, animal hides, precious stones and much more.

The route became very popular in Europe in the Middle ages, where trade as such (for profit trade) began to thrive, thanks to the technology of the time many more routes within the Silk Road were created, most of them through the sea, which was considered safer and faster when it comes to trade.

In the 15th century a new route within the silk road was found thanks to Vasco da Gama, who navigated from Portugal round the Cape of good hope, finding a way to connect

Europe and the South East Asian countries through a maritime route. In the next centuries there would be a huge rivalry between Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain and their monopolies in order to control those maritime routes. Those countries then resorted to conquer many of the lands in South East Asia, such as what we now know as India, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and many more, with those conquests they achieved safe harbour passages through the maritime route which at the same time receives huge amounts of riches due to tolls and other taxes as well as the markets they ran.

At the same time, since those countries tried to achieve a high hegemony status they resorted to import huge amounts of exotic materials from their conquered lands (colonies) in South East Asia to the metropolis, thus making it a lot richer meanwhile the colonies got impoverished due to the bad living conditions, and many times due to a high level of slavery.

Until the 15th-16th century no country controlled or tried to control the trade routes. in older times, merchants, guilds and cities simply had control of specific sections, that way there was

no clear hegemonic state; although at the same time that made it so the routes were more dangerous since there was more of a chance for conflicts to happen between different states and neighbouring cities.