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Introduction



Silk Road. The name itself invokes adventure, danger, and a hint of the exotic. The historic Silk Road resides in Central Asia, surrounded by numerous mountain ranges and unforgiving deserts, but in a fantasy world, it can reside wherever you wish.

A Magical Society: Silk Road explores networks of land-based trade routes that span continents. Like its predecessors (*A Magical Society: Western Europe* and *A Magical Society: Ecology and Culture*), *A Magical Society: Silk Road* synthesizes information from the historic silk road and presents trends and information for role-playing and world-building. Unlike its predecessors, we provide information on the historic silk road due to the general unfamiliarity of Central Asia.

Although the Silk Road covers a vast area (Arabia, India, China, and the nomadic people of the Steppes and the Tibetan Plateau), this supplement only covers aspects of these cultures as they are applicable to the workings of the Silk Road. *A Magical Society: Silk Road* discusses the crossroads where all these cultures and their political structures interact while offering tools to simulate a great overland trade route in your own campaign. Our mechanical representation of the historic Silk Road is not rooted in a specific time, rather it is a representation of the Silk Road, its tumultuous history, and its flare for the exotic.

In *Chapter 1: Components of Silk Roads*, we address what is the Silk Road, what conditions produce silk roads and common features found in conjunction with silk roads. *Chapter 2: Traveling on Silk Roads* gives guidelines for plotting a silk road, keys points in navigating through the silk road, and who travels along great overland trade routes. *Chapter 3: Types of Caravans* explores the traditional desert caravan as well as alternative types of caravans. In *Chapter 4: Money Matters*, we talk about how goods move along silk roads as well as an economic trade simulator. *Chapter 5: Trade Goods* contains over 1000 commodities. In *Chapter 6: The Historic Silk Road*, we apply all the design principles of the preceding chapters to give you a holistic picture of the historic Silk Road.

What is the Silk Road?

Strictly speaking, the term “Silk Road” is a 19th century European invention describing the overland trade routes that connect China to the West (i.e. Europe). The Silk Road derived its name from the demand for Chinese silk by China’s western neighbors, to which people attribute the existence of such overland trade routes.

The Silk Road encompasses a large geographical area. The most conservative boundaries attributed to the Silk Road are from Xi’an (Chang’an) to Kashgar (between which lies the edge of the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Desert), with a northern border of the Tien Shan Mountains and a southern border of the Kunlun Mountains. The most liberal boundaries expand north of the Tien Shan Mountains, northwest to transoxiana, west into west Asia (aka the Middle East), and south through the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush into the Indian Subcontinent. Despite efforts to focus the Silk Road on China or “The West” (whether that be Greeks, Persians, Parthians, Romans, or medieval Italian merchants), the real story lies in Central Asia, a unique landscape with its own tumultuous past. The people and places of Central Asia are the heart of the Silk Road, although its arteries and veins carry Chinese silks, Roman glass, Khotanese jade, Mongolian horses, Indian incense, and steppe raiders.

There are many popular misconceptions concerning the Silk Road. First, the Silk Road was not a single trade route from one end of the compass to another. In reality the Silk Road was a network of smaller trade routes that facilitated localized networks of trading as well as vast overland endeavors. There were many beginnings and ends along the breadth of the Silk Road. Second, the silk trade was not the only mercantile value of these overland trade routes. Many other luxury goods and more mundane commodities changed hands along the Silk Road, and traders were not the only people moving along this artery of the desert. Diplomats, pilgrims, refugees, scouts, and normal everyday travelers found their way through the treacherous terrain. And lastly, goods were not the only things exchanged along the Silk Road. In many ways, Central Asia was a marketplace of ideas, religions, and technology as they and their neighbors to the east and west explored, experimented, created, conquered, lost, and rediscovered a number of technological advances, cosmologies, religions, and philosophies.

What do you mean by Silk Roads?

Throughout the supplement, we use the term “silk roads” analogous to vast overland trade routes in the vein of the historic Silk Road. To avoid confusion, we use the plural silk roads to denote general observations on overland trade routes. When we are discussing the historic Silk Road, we make a point to capitalize and mention “historic” or “real life.”

Chapter 1: Components of Silk Roads



Laying the Foundation

Constructing a silk road in your world can be a daunting task, but the trick is creating all the foundational components before figuring out how many camels you need to carry a thousand bolts of silk. The basic considerations when creating great overland trade routes in your world are geography, cultural groups, and trade goods from afar.

Geography

As with any business venture, the key is location, location, location. Geography is one of the most important considerations in placing silk roads. The development of a great overland trade route begins with isolation due to physical barriers that make migration more difficult.

Although it seems counter intuitive (how can isolation promote the establishment of a great overland trade route?), physical barriers are a vital part of the process. As populations of intelligent species expand (be it humans, elves, gnomes, etc.), they migrate into new areas, often displacing earlier migrants. Daunting physical barriers (such as deserts, mountains, dense jungles, or expansive swamps) are effective boundaries to the expanding population.

Such places are less desirable to new or displaced emigrants because other locales have less-difficult geography. This relative isolation gives populations a chance to develop unique cultures, technologies, religions, and ways of life.

To borrow an example from Earth, consider the historic Silk Road. The Taklamakan Desert is 600 miles east-west and 250 miles north-south. Along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert is the Tien Shan Mountains stretching 800 miles alongside the desert from Turfan to Kashgar. Along the southern edge of the desert is the Kunlun mountain range. To the east are the Gobi Desert and some smaller mountain chains. To the southwest are the Pamirs and Hindu Kush, and to the northwest is transoxiana followed by more deserts.

The area that is to become the infamous Silk Road looks barren and foreboding indeed, but such deterring geography increased the isolation of developing societies in the region. Chinese society develops east of the Silk Road. Tibetan society develops south of the Kunlun Mountains. The Persians (with their Hellenistic influences) and other Iranian groups develop west of the Silk Road, while the Mongols and numerous steppe nomads and pastoralists develop north of the Tien Shan Mountains.

