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Humanities 7B

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Connections between the Roman trading network,  
the Silk Road, and the life of Jesus



The three kings, or magii that brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts to baby Jeus probably traveled along the Silk Road. (Journey of the Magi, James Tissot, 1898. [Metropolitan Museum](#))

For a thousand years, camel caravans laden with gold, incense, and spices trekked along the deserts and narrow mountain passes of the Silk Road from the Chinese capital of Xi'an, to

Rome. These routes meandered through diverse lands, such as India, Arabia, Africa, and Afghanistan. This trade route overlapped with that of the Roman Empire, where carts clattered along the paved roads which extended all the way to Spain and Britain. The Bible says that Jesus was born during the 1st century, when both the Roman and Silk Road trading networks were active and exchanged goods. Events in the life of Jesus illustrate the connections between the Roman trading network and the Silk Road.



Roman Empire Trading network. Goods from Gaul, Africa and Anatolia converge on Rome.

Ancient History Encyclopedia

The first connection between the Roman Empire and the Silk Road occurs at the birth of Jesus. Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, was part of the Roman Empire, but he was visited by three kings, or magii from lands to the East, who probably traveled along the Silk Road. They

were attracted by a mysterious star (and a column of light stretching from heaven to earth, that led them to travel for two years (Farwell, Anglo-Ethiopian Society)) to the stable where Jesus was born (Matthew 2:2-11). One brought gold, symbolizing kingship. Another presented frankincense to his divinity. One brought the gift of myrrh (“Magi”, Encyclopedia Britannica), which helps to preserve a body after death. According to the western church tradition, the ebony-skinned Balthasar was a king of Ethiopia, Melchior was a king of Persia, and Gaspar was a king of India (Britannica, “Magi”). They would have traveled along the Silk Road to get to the Roman Empire. In addition, the gifts brought to the birth of Jesus were typically imported to the Roman Empire. Myrrh, for example, comes from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan (Fobar, R., *National Geographic*, 2019). The magii visiting the birth of Jesus is one example of one connection between the Silk Road and the Roman Empire.



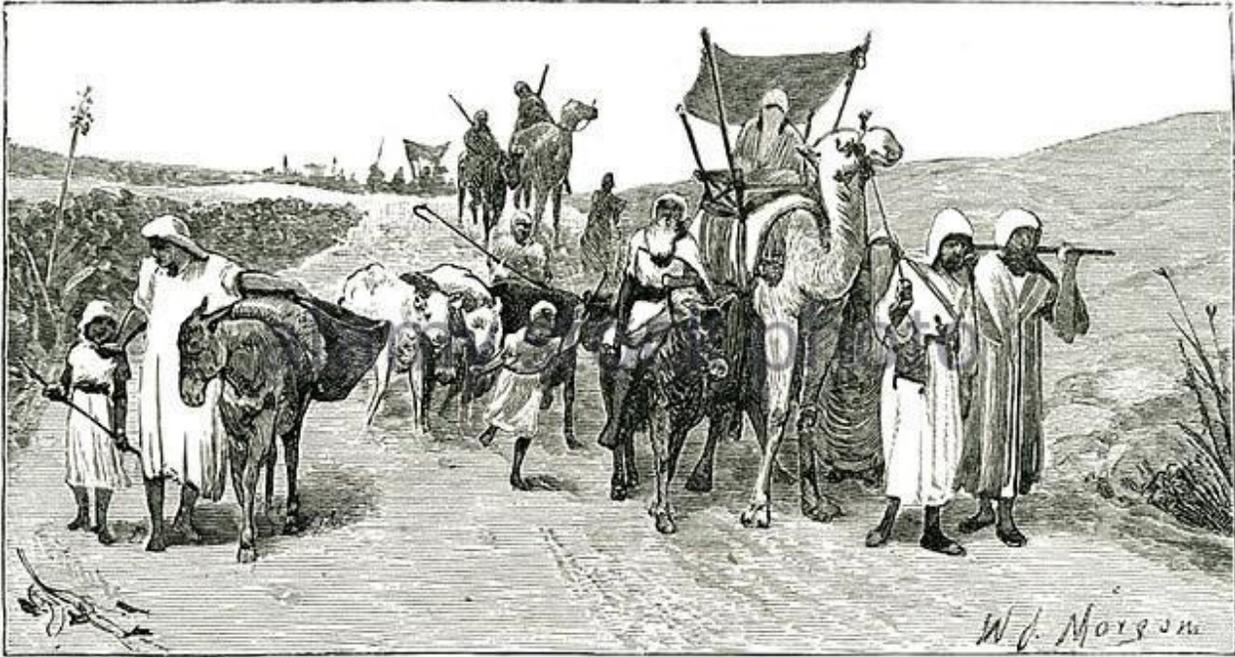
Mosaic from the [Cappella della “Casa incontri cristiani” a Capiago](#)

## National Museum of Wales

A second episode in the life of Jesus which connects to the Silk Road was his anointing. The Bible says that as Jesus was seated at dinner in Bethany, a woman brought an alabaster vase filled with a pound of very expensive spikenard oil (John 12:3). She poured some over his head (Matthew 26:7), then anointed his feet with the oil using her hair (John 12:3, Bible KJV). This caused great astonishment because the value of the oil was “300 denarii” (John 12:5), 300 days wages (Watchtower Online Library), or more than \$20,000 (Pastor Wilco, Immanuel Lutheran Church, 2013)! Jesus explained that his body was being prepared for burial. He was put to death on a cross two days later. The spikenard oil was so astronomically expensive because it had to be imported thousands of miles via the Silk Road from Himalayan regions like India, where it grows as a native plant. The anointing was an important point in the life of Jesus because it filled a prophecy of him becoming the Messiah, which means “anointed one” in Hebrew. This is a second incident in the life of Jesus which shows a connection between the two trading networks.

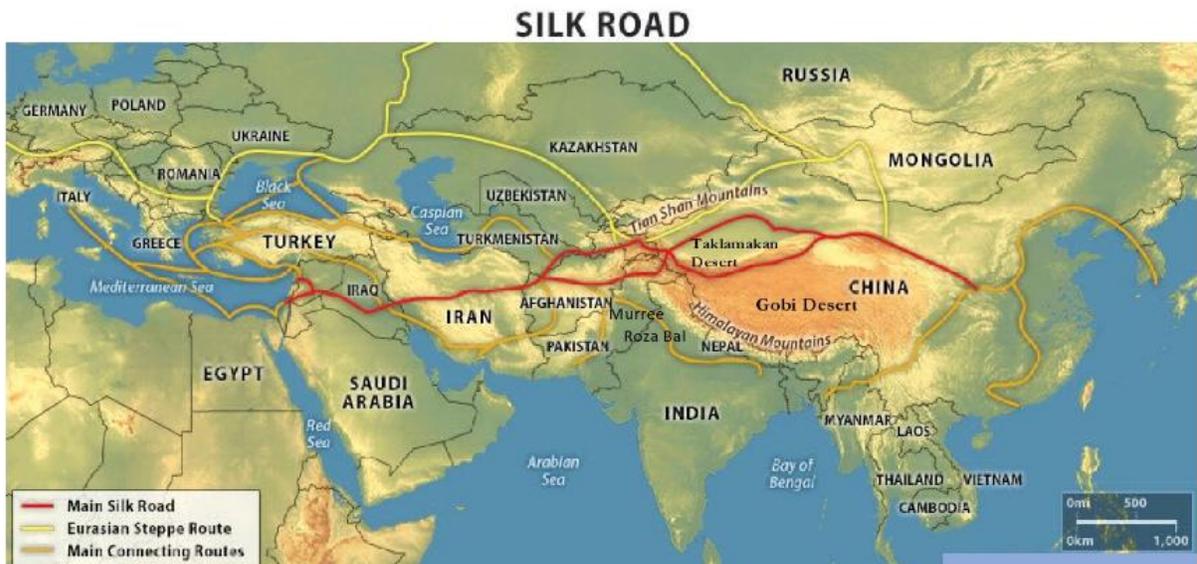


The Biblical Magi. GoodFon.com



AN EASTERN CARAVAN.

A third connection of the life of Jesus with the trade networks in the era of Augustus Caesar's Roman Empire, was to the mining operations in the European frontier. The Roman empire had many mining enterprises. For example, Roman gold mines in Spain produced 20,000 pounds of gold per year (Ancient History Encyclopedia, Newsela). Once Rome conquered Gaul, the tin of Britain became an important resource. Jesus had a great-uncle on his mother's side named Joseph of Arimathea, who had apparently become wealthy (Matthew 27:57) in the trade of tin in Britain ("Joseph", BBC, 2014). When Jesus died, his body was laid in a new rock-hewn tomb owned by his wealthy great-uncle (Matthew 27:57-60). The wealth that made this tomb available for the burial of Jesus was a consequence of the Roman trade network.



<http://author1.yolasite.com/>

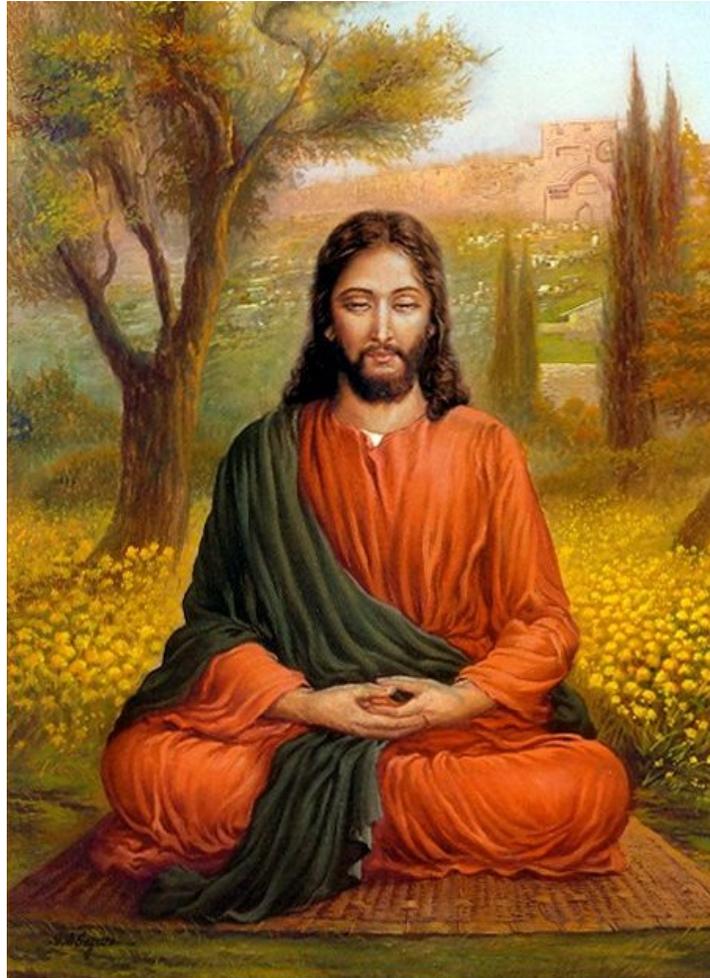
There are more legends that connect Jesus to Roman Trading network and the Silk Road. On the third day after Jesus' death by crucifixion, there was an earthquake. An angel, as bright as

lightning (Matthew 28:2-7) rolled the burial stone away, and announced that Jesus had risen. Jesus appeared to his disciples in his resurrected form. This filled them with joy and courage, so they traveled through the world, enthusiastically spreading the gospel. One legend is that Mary Magdalene went to France, drifting to Sainte Maries-de-Mer on a boat with no oars and no sails (“Mary Magdalene in Provence”, Perfectly Provence). Joseph of Arimathea is said to have journeyed to Britain with both the Holy Grail and a staff made from the crown of thorns which miraculously sprouted when planted, and bloomed with flowers each Christmas (“Joseph”, BBC, 2014)! The places where these disciples went were located in the Roman trading network. Religious ideas also spread via the Silk Road.



▲ The Glastonbury Thorn in a photograph taken in November 2010. Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty Images

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/dec/09/glastonbury-mourns-felling-thorn-tree>



Jesus meditation. Pinterest.com

In conclusion, there are many ways in which the accounts of the life of Jesus relates to the Roman Trade routes and the Silk Road. His birth brought the magii with treasures from the Silk Road. There are legends, such as the Aquarian Gospel of Jesus (Levi, 1909), and Tibetan accounts of St. Issa, that say that the “lost years” of Jesus’ youth, the gap of time that the Bible does not describe prior to age 30, were spent traveling the Silk Road to India and Tibet (Nicholas Roerich, 1925; Nicolas Notovich, 1887), and also to Britain with his great uncle Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus was anointed with oils imported from the s Silk Road. He was buried in a tomb

purchased with funds from Roman mining. His disciples spread the teachings of the new religion along the Roman and Silk Road trade routes. A study of the life of Jesus reveals many connections between the Roman Trade network and the Silk Route which allowed people, goods and ideas to flow back and forth across the ancient world.



Credit: Indo-Roman trade relations, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Roman-trade\\_relations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Roman-trade_relations)



Image 1. A Roman merchant ship being loaded with grain from a wall painting in Ostia, a neighborhood in Rome, around the second century A.D. Photo by CM Dixon/Heritage Images/Getty Images. Via Newsela.



Image 2. Trade in the Roman Empire was widespread and constant. High-value items such as gold and spices were traded, along with cheaper items such as oil lamps. The oil used to fill the lamps was also produced and traded, both within and outside the Roman Empire. Pictured is a Roman terracotta oil lamp with a stylized cockerel on the top, dating from the fourth century A.D. Photo by: Carole Raddato/Wikimedia. Via Newsela.

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