

PART THREE

# An Age of Accelerating Connections

500–1500



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## THE BIG PICTURE

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### Defining a Millennium

History seldom turns sharp corners, and historians often have difficulty deciding just when one phase of the human story ends and another begins. Between roughly 200 and 850 C.E., many of the classical states and civilizations of the world (Han dynasty China, the Roman Empire, Gupta India, Meroë, Axum, Maya, Teotihuacán, Moche) experienced severe disruption, decline, or collapse. For many historians, this marks the end of the classical era and the start of some new period of world history. Furthermore, almost everyone agrees that the transatlantic voyages of Columbus around 1500 represent yet another new departure in world history. This coupling of the Eastern and Western hemispheres set in motion historical processes that transformed most of the world and signaled the beginning of the modern era.

But how are we to understand the thousand years (roughly 500 to 1500) between the end of the classical era and the beginning of modern world history? Historians, frankly, have had some difficulty in defining a distinct identity for this millennium, and this problem is reflected in the vague terms used to describe it. Many textbooks, including this one on occasion, refer to this 1,000-year period simply as the “postclassical” age, but that, of course, merely indicates that it came after the classical era. Others have termed it “medieval,” a middle or intermediate age, something in between the classical and modern eras. Many historians feel uncomfortable with this term because it derives specifically from European history and thus runs the risk of appearing Eurocentric. It also seems to suggest that this millennium was merely a run-up to modernity, rather than something of significance in its own right. This book sometimes uses the concept of “third-wave civilizations,” distinguishing, at least chronologically, those that emerged after 500 C.E. from both the First Civilizations and those of the classical era (the second-wave civilizations). At best, these terms indicate where this period falls in the larger time frame of world history, but none of them are very descriptive.

#### *Third-Wave Civilizations: Something New, Something Old, Something Blended*

A large part of the problem lies in the rather different trajectories of various regions of the world during this postclassical era. It is not easy to identify clearly defined features that encompass all the major civilizations during this period and distinguish them from what went before, but we can point to several distinct patterns of development among these third-wave societies of the postclassical era.

In some areas, for example, wholly new but smaller civilizations arose where none had existed before. Along the East African coast, Swahili civilization emerged

in a string of thirty or more city-states, very much engaged in the commercial life of the Indian Ocean basin. In the area now encompassed by Ukraine and western Russia, another new civilization, known as Kievan Rus, likewise took shape with a good deal of cultural borrowing from Mediterranean civilization. East and Southeast Asia also witnessed new centers of civilization. Those in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were strongly influenced by China, while Srivijaya on the Indonesian island of Sumatra and later the Angkor kingdom, centered in present-day Cambodia, drew on the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India.

All of these represent a continuation of a well-established pattern in world history—the globalization of civilization. It began with the First Civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and elsewhere about 3000 B.C.E. and then took new and larger forms in the classical era (500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.), when Greco-Roman, Persian, Indian, and Chinese civilizations flourished across Eurasia. Each of the new third-wave civilizations was, of course, culturally unique, but like their predecessors, they too featured states, cities, specialized economic roles, sharp class and gender inequalities, and other elements of “civilized” life. They were certainly distinctive, but not fundamentally different from earlier civilizations. As newcomers to the growing number of civilizations, all of them borrowed heavily from larger or more established centers.

The largest, most expansive, and most widely influential of the new third-wave civilizations was surely that of Islam. It began in Arabia in the seventh century C.E., projecting the Arab peoples into a prominent role as builders of an enormous empire while offering a new, vigorous, and attractive religion. Viewed as a new civilization defined by its religion, the world of Islam came to encompass many other centers of civilization, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, the interior of West Africa and the coast of East Africa, Spain, southeastern Europe, and more. Here was a uniquely cosmopolitan or “umbrella” civilization that, according to one leading scholar, “came closer than any had ever come to uniting all mankind under its ideals.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet another, and quite different, historical pattern during the postclassical millennium involved older or classical civilizations that persisted or were reconstructed. The Byzantine Empire, embracing the eastern half of the old Roman Empire, continued the patterns of Mediterranean Christian civilization and persisted until 1453, when it was overrun by the Ottoman Turks. In China, following almost four centuries of fragmentation, the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties (589–1279) restored China’s imperial unity and reasserted its Confucian tradition. Indian civilization retained its ancient patterns of caste and Hinduism amid vast cultural diversity, even as parts of India fell under the control of Muslim rulers. The West African savanna kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, stimulated and sustained by long-distance trade across the Sahara, built upon the earlier Niger Valley civilization.

Variations on this theme of continuing or renewing older traditions took shape in the Western Hemisphere, where two centers of civilization—in Mesoamerica and in the Andes—had been long established. In Mesoamerica, the collapse of classical Maya civilization and of the great city-state of Teotihuacán by about 900 C.E. opened the way for other peoples to give new shape to this ancient civilization. The most well known of these efforts was associated with the Mexica or Aztec people, who created a powerful

and impressive state in the fifteenth century. About the same time, on the western rim of South America, a Quechua-speaking people, now known as the Inca, incorporated various centers of Andean civilization into a huge bureaucratic empire. Both the Aztecs and the Incas gave a new political expression to much older patterns of civilized life.

Yet another pattern took shape in Western Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire. There would-be kings and church leaders alike sought to maintain links with the older Greco-Roman-Christian traditions of classical Mediterranean civilization. In the absence of empire, though, new and far more decentralized societies emerged, led now by Germanic peoples and centered in Northern and Western Europe, considerably removed from the older centers of Rome and Athens. It was a hybrid civilization, combining old and new, classical and Germanic elements, in a unique blending. For five centuries or more, this region was a relative backwater, compared to the more vibrant, prosperous, and powerful civilizations of the Islamic world and of China. During the centuries after 1000 C.E., however, Western European civilization emerged as a rapidly growing and expansive set of competitive states, willing, like other new civilizations, to borrow quite extensively from their more developed neighbors.

### *The Ties That Bind: Transregional Interaction in the Postclassical Era*

These quite different patterns of development within particular civilizations of the postclassical millennium have made it difficult to define that era in a single, all-encompassing fashion. In another way, though, a common theme emerges, for during this time, the world's various regions, cultures, and peoples interacted with one another far more extensively. More than before, change in human societies was the product of contact with strangers, or at least with their ideas, armies, goods, or diseases. In a variety of places— island Southeast Asia, coastal East Africa, Central Asian cities, parts of Western Europe, the Islamic Middle East, and the Inca Empire— local cosmopolitan regions emerged in which trade, migration, or empire had brought peoples of different cultures together in a restricted space. These “mini-globalizations,” both larger and more common than in the classical era, became a distinctive feature of third-wave civilizations.

“No man is an island, entire of itself,” wrote the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne. “Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” Much the same might be said of every civilization, culture, or region. None of them were wholly isolated or separate from their neighbors, although the range and intensity of cross-cultural interaction certainly varied over time. In limited ways, that was the case for the First Civilizations as well as their classical successors. Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultural influence spread well beyond the core regions of those civilizations. Horseback-riding skills and chariot technology diffused widely across Eurasia. The encounter of the Greeks and Persians changed both of those classical civilizations. Cross-cultural mixing in northern India gave rise to the caste system, while the Silk Road trading networks across Eurasia provided some modest contact among the distant empires of Rome, China, and India.

The scale and pace of such interaction accelerated considerably during the era of third-wave, or postclassical, civilizations. Much of Part Three highlights these intersections and spells out their many and varied consequences. Three major mechanisms of cross-cultural interaction, which we will meet in the chapters that follow, were of particular significance for transforming the lives and societies of those who took part in them.

One such mechanism was trade. The exchange of goods has been everywhere one of the primary means of cross-cultural interaction, and virtually every human society has engaged in it at some level. Although most trade in the premodern world occurred locally among nearby communities, world historians have focused attention especially on long-distance trade, commercial relationships that linked distant human communities. This kind of commerce grew considerably during the postclassical era—along the Silk Roads of Eurasia, within the Indian Ocean basin, across the Sahara, and along the Mississippi and other rivers. Everywhere it acted as an agent of change for all of its participants. In places where long-distance trade was practiced extensively, it required that more people devote their energies to producing for a distant market rather than for the consumption of their own communities. Those who controlled this kind of trade often became extremely wealthy, exciting envy or outrage among those less fortunate. Many societies learned about new products via these trade routes. Europe's knowledge of pepper and other spices, for example, derived from Roman seaborne trade with India beginning in the first century C.E. Many centuries later, Europeans' desire for Asian spices played a part in propelling Western commercial and military expansion into the Indian Ocean.

Such trade also had political consequences as many new states or empires were established on the basis of resources derived from long-distance commerce. The West African kingdoms of Ghana and Mali, the Swahili cities of the East African coast, the early eastern Slavic state known as Rus, and the Indonesian state of Srivijaya are four such examples. Furthermore, far more than goods traveled the trade routes that linked various third-wave civilizations with one another. Religious ideas, technologies, and germs also made their ways along those paths of commerce, bringing significant change to their participants.

Yet another mechanism of cross-cultural interaction lay in large empires. Not only did they incorporate many distinct cultures within a single political system, but their size and stability also provided the security that encouraged travelers and traders to journey long distances from their homelands. Empires, of course, were nothing new in world history, but many of those associated with third-wave civilizations were distinctive. In the first place, they were larger. The Arab Empire, which accompanied the initial spread of Islam, stretched from Spain to India. Even more extensive was the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the Western Hemisphere, the Inca Empire encompassed dozens of distinct peoples in a huge state that ran some 2,500 miles along the spine of the Andes Mountains.

Furthermore, the largest of these empires were the creation of nomadic or pastoral peoples. Classical empires in the Mediterranean basin, China, India, and Persia had been the work of settled farming societies. But now, in the thousand years between

500 and 1500, peoples with a recent history of a nomadic or herding way of life entered the stage of world history as empire builders—Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Aztecs—ruling over agricultural peoples and established civilizations. These empires changed those who created them as well as those who were forcibly incorporated within them. They also did much to foster cross-cultural interaction. Marco Polo, for example, made his way from Italy to China and back in the thirteenth century, thanks largely to the security provided by the Mongol Empire.

Together, large-scale empires and long-distance trade facilitated the spread of ideas, technologies, food crops, and germs far beyond their points of origin. Buddhism spread from India to much of Asia; Christianity encompassed Europe and took root in distant Russia as well as in northeastern Africa, southern India, and western China. Hinduism attracted followers in Southeast Asia; and more than any of the other world religions, Islam became an Afro-Eurasian phenomenon with an enormous reach. Beyond the connections born of commerce and conquest, those of culture and religion generated lasting ties among many peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere.

























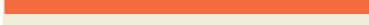
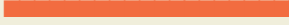
Technologies, too, were diffused widely. Until the sixth century C.E., China maintained a monopoly on the manufacture of raw silk. Then this technology spread beyond East Asia, allowing the development of a silk industry in the eastern Mediterranean and later in Italy. India too contributed much to the larger world—crystallized sugar, a system of numerals and the concept of zero, techniques for making cotton textiles, and many food crops. Arabs, who were responsible for spreading many of these Indian innovations, found India a “place of marvels.”<sup>2</sup> In the Americas, corn gradually diffused from Mesoamerica, where it was initially domesticated, to North America, where it stimulated population growth and the development of more complex societies. Disease also linked distant communities. The plague, or Black Death, decimated many parts of Eurasia and North Africa as it made its deadly way from east to west in the fourteenth century.

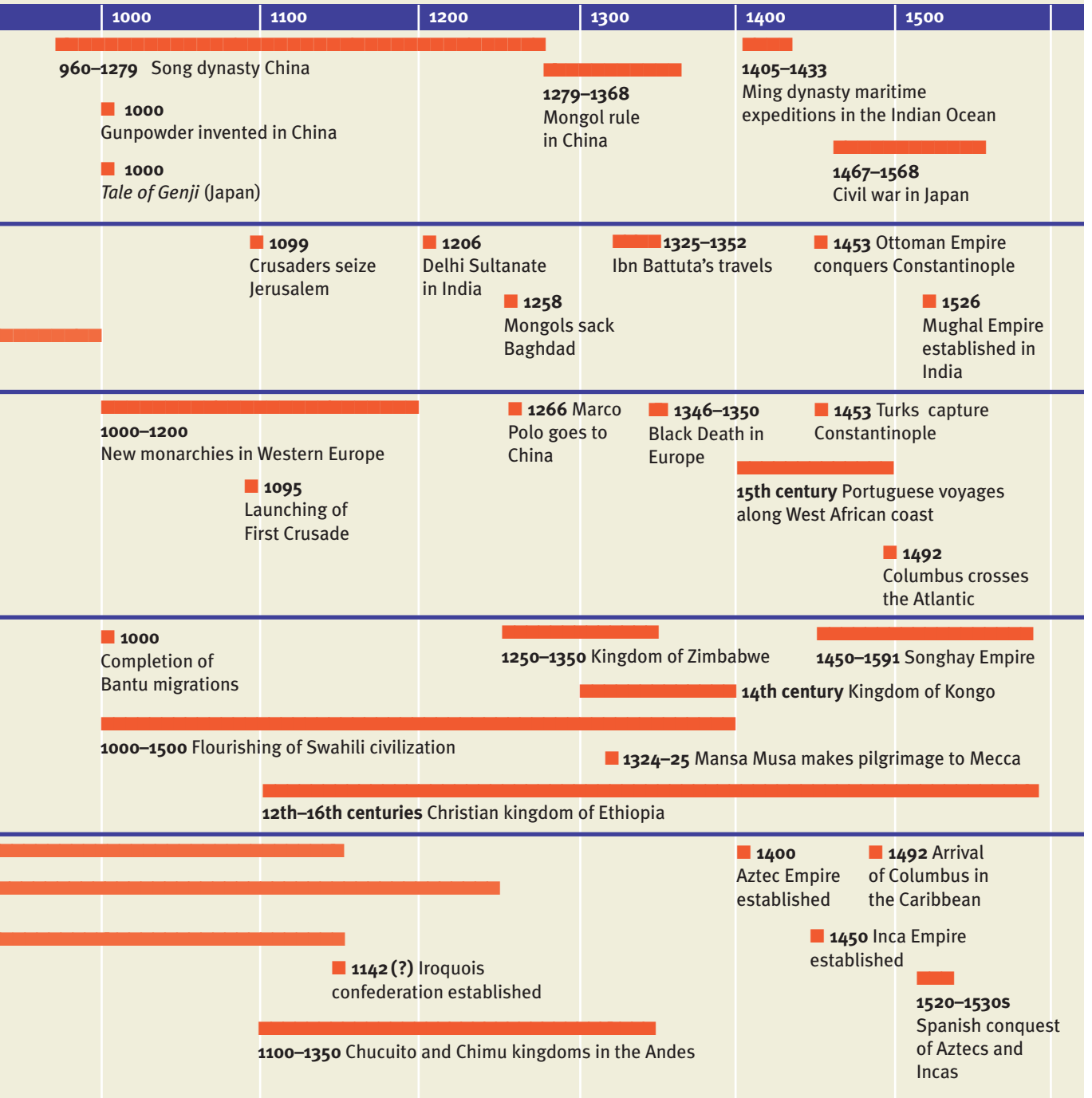
A focus on these accelerating connections across cultural boundaries puts the historical spotlight on merchants, travelers, missionaries, migrants, soldiers, and administrators—people who traveled abroad rather than those who stayed at home. Frequently, they stimulated cultural change in the lands they visited, and of course they themselves often were changed by the experience. More than a few of the Christian Crusaders who invaded the Middle East to rescue the holy places from Islamic control wound up as Muslims themselves.

This cross-cultural emphasis in world history also raises provocative questions about what happens when cultures interact or when strangers meet. How did external stimuli operate to produce change within particular societies? How did individuals or societies decide what to accept and what to reject when confronted with new ideas or practices? Were they free to decide such questions, or were they acting under pressure or constraints that limited the possibilities of real choice? In what ways did they alter foreign customs or traditions to better meet their own needs and correspond to their own values? These are some of the questions that will arise as we consider the accelerating connections associated with third-wave civilizations.



## Landmarks in the Era of Accelerating Connections, 500–1500

500	600	700	800	900
<b>East Asia</b>  <b>589–618</b> Sui dynasty; reunification of China  <b>604</b> Seventeen Article Constitution in Japan	 <b>688</b> Withdrawal of Chinese military forces from Korea		 <b>845</b> Suppression of Buddhism in China  <b>868</b> First printed book in China	 <b>939</b> Vietnam establishes independence from China
<b>Islamic World</b>  <b>570–632</b> Life of Muhammad	 <b>650s</b> Quran compiled  <b>656</b> Emergence of Shia Islam	 <b>750–900</b> High point of Abbasid dynasty	 <b>800–1000</b> Emergence of Sufism	 <b>912–961</b> Reign of Abd al-Rahman III in Spain
<b>The World of Christendom</b>  <b>476</b> End of western Roman Empire  <b>527–565</b> Justinian rules Byzantine Empire		 <b>726–843</b> Iconoclasm in Byzantium	 <b>800</b> Charlemagne crowned as new “Roman emperor”	 <b>988</b> Conversion of Kievan Rus to Christianity
<b>Africa</b>  <b>300–500</b> Beginnings of trans-Saharan trade	 <b>7th–8th centuries</b> Introduction of Islam and Arab culture in North Africa		 <b>869–883</b> African slave rebellion in Iraq	 <b>900s</b> Kings of Ghana convert to Islam
<b>The Americas</b>  <b>500</b> Flourishing of Teotihuacán	 <b>600–1150</b> Anasazi culture, Ancestral Pueblo		 <b>850</b> Collapse of Maya civilization	 <b>900–1250</b> Cahokia  <b>950–1150</b> Flourishing of Toltec civilization







# Commerce and Culture

500–1500

## Silk Roads: Exchange across Eurasia

The Growth of the Silk Roads  
Goods in Transit  
Cultures in Transit  
Disease in Transit

## Sea Roads: Exchange across the Indian Ocean

Weaving the Web of an Indian Ocean World  
Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: Southeast Asia and Srivijaya  
Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: East Africa and Swahili Civilization

## Sand Roads: Exchange across the Sahara

Commercial Beginnings in West Africa  
Gold, Salt, and Slaves: Trade and Empire in West Africa

## An American Network: Commerce and Connection in the Western Hemisphere

## Reflections: Economic Globalization—Ancient and Modern

## Considering the Evidence

Documents: Travelers' Tales and Observations  
Visual Sources: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia

“Forget compass readings, camel caravans, and disorienting, potentially deadly Jeep journeys through the world’s most fabled and forbidding desert. Soon it will be possible to take a leisurely drive along a paved two-lane highway from the spot where Europe kisses the tip of this continent into the heart of sub-Saharan Africa. That’s the idea, anyway.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote a journalist for the *New York Times* in late 2003, describing international plans for a modern highway across the Sahara, linking Europe and North Africa with the vast interior of West Africa. Such a road, its advocates hoped, would not only promote tourism, trade, and economic growth but also provide an alternative route for West African Muslims making the pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, in early 2004, some twenty-three nations signed an agreement to build a network of highways all across Asia, ultimately linking Tokyo with Istanbul and enabling a number of landlocked countries of Central Asia to participate more fully in the world economy.

THESE TWO AMBITIOUS PROJECTS OF THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY were part of the accumulating infrastructure of contemporary globalization. But they also evoked much older patterns of global commerce, the famous Silk Road network across Eurasia and the trans-Saharan trade routes, both of which flourished in the postclassical era. Here is a reminder, from the viewpoint of world history, that exchange among distant peoples is not altogether new and that the roots of economic globalization lie deep in the past.

**Travels on the Silk Road:** This Chinese ceramic figurine from the Tang dynasty (618–907 c.e.) shows a group of musicians riding on a camel along the famous Silk Road commercial network that long linked the civilizations of western and eastern Eurasia. The bearded figures represent Central Asian merchants, while the others depict Chinese. (©Asian Art & Archaeology, Inc./Corbis)

The exchange of goods among communities occupying different ecological zones has long been a prominent feature of human history. Coastlands and highlands, steppes and farmlands, islands and mainlands, valleys and mountains, deserts and forests—each generates different products desired by others. Furthermore, some societies have been able to monopolize, at least temporarily, the production of particular products, such as silk in China or certain spices in Southeast Asia, which others have found valuable. This uneven distribution of goods and resources, whether natural or resulting from human activity, has long motivated exchange, not only within particular civilizations or regions but among them as well. In the world of 500–1500, long-distance trade became more important than ever before in linking and shaping distant societies and peoples. For the most part, it was indirect, a chain of separate transactions in which goods traveled farther than individual merchants. Nonetheless, a network of exchange and communication extending all across the Afro-Eurasian world, and separately in parts of the Americas as well, slowly came into being.

In what ways was trade significant? How did it generate change within the societies that it connected? Economically speaking, it often altered consumption, enabling West Africans, for example, to import scarce salt, necessary for human diets and useful for seasoning and preserving food, from distant mines in the Sahara in exchange for the gold of their region. Trade also affected the day-to-day working lives of many people, encouraging them to specialize in producing particular products for sale in distant markets rather than for use in their own communities. Trade, in short, diminished the economic self-sufficiency of local societies.

Trade shaped the structure of those societies as well. Traders often became a distinct social group, viewed with suspicion by others because of their impulse to accumulate wealth without actually producing anything themselves. In some societies, trade became a means of social mobility, as Chinese merchants, for example, were able to purchase landed estates and establish themselves within the gentry class. Long-distance trade also enabled elite groups in society to distinguish themselves from commoners by acquiring prestigious goods from a distance—silk, tortoiseshells, rhinoceros horn, or particular feathers, for example. The association with faraway or powerful societies, signaled by the possession of their luxury goods, often conveyed status in communities more remote from major civilizations.

Political life also was sometimes transformed by trade. The wealth available from controlling and taxing trade motivated the creation of states in various parts of the world and sustained those states once they had been constructed. Furthermore, commerce posed a set of problems to governments everywhere. Should trade be left in private hands, as in the Aztec Empire, or should it be controlled by the state, as in the Inca Empire? How should state authorities deal with men of commerce, who were both economically useful and potentially disruptive?

Moreover, the saddlebags of camel caravans or the cargo holds of merchant vessels carried more than goods. Trade became the vehicle for the spread of religious ideas, technological innovations, disease-bearing germs, and plants and animals to

regions far from their places of origin. In just this fashion, Buddhism made its way from India to Central and East Asia, and Islam crossed the Sahara into West Africa. So did the pathogens that devastated much of Eurasia during the Black Death. These immense cultural and biological transformations were among the most significant outcomes of the increasingly dense network of long-distance commerce during the era of third-wave civilizations.

## Silk Roads: Exchange across Eurasia

The Eurasian landmass has long been home to the majority of humankind as well as to the world's most productive agriculture, largest civilizations, and greatest concentration of pastoral peoples. Beyond its many separate societies and cultures, Eurasia also gave rise to one of the world's most extensive and sustained networks of exchange among its diverse peoples. Known to scholars as the Silk Roads, a reference to their most famous product, these land-based trade routes linked pastoral and agricultural peoples as well as the large civilizations on the continent's outer rim (see Map 8.1). None of its numerous participants knew the full extent of this network's reach, for it was largely a “relay trade” in which goods were passed down the line, changing hands many times before reaching their final destination. Nonetheless, the Silk Roads provide a certain unity and coherence to Eurasian history alongside the distinct stories of its separate civilizations and peoples.

**Map 8.1** The Silk Roads  
For 2,000 years, goods, ideas, technologies, and diseases made their way across Eurasia on the several routes of the Silk Roads.





## *The Growth of the Silk Roads*

### ■ Change

What lay behind the emergence of Silk Road commerce, and what kept it going for so many centuries?

The beginnings of the Silk Roads lay in both geography and history. As a geographic unit, Eurasia is often divided into inner and outer zones that represent quite different environments. Outer Eurasia consists of relatively warm, well-watered areas, suitable for agriculture, which provided the setting for the great civilizations of China, India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Inner Eurasia—the lands of eastern Russia and Central Asia—lies farther north and has a harsher and drier climate, much of it not conducive to agriculture. Herding their animals from horseback, the pastoral people of this region had for centuries traded with and raided their agricultural neighbors to the south. Products of the forest and of semi-arid northern grasslands known as the steppes—such as hides, furs, livestock, wool, and amber—were exchanged for the agricultural products and manufactured goods of adjacent civilizations. The movement of pastoral peoples for thousands of years also served to diffuse Indo-European languages, bronze metallurgy, horse-based technologies, and more all across Eurasia.

The construction of the classical civilizations and their imperial states during the last five centuries B.C.E. added another element to these earlier Eurasian connections. From the south, the Persian Empire invaded the territory of pastoral peoples in present-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. From the west, Alexander the Great's empire stretched well into Central Asia. From the east, China's Han dynasty extended its authority westward, seeking to control the nomadic Xiongnu and to gain access to the powerful “heavenly horses” that were so important to Chinese military forces. By the early centuries of the Common Era, indirect trading connections, often brokered by pastoral peoples, linked the classical civilizations in a network of transcontinental exchange. (For the role of Central Asian pastoral peoples in the exchange of the Silk Roads, see *Visual Sources: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia*, pp. 367–77.)

Silk Road trading networks prospered most when large and powerful states provided security for merchants and travelers. Such conditions prevailed during the classical era when the Roman and Chinese empires anchored long-distance commerce at the western and eastern ends of Eurasia. Silk Road trade flourished again during the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. as the Byzantine Empire, the Muslim Abbasid dynasty, and Tang dynasty China created an almost continuous belt of strong states across Eurasia. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongol Empire briefly encompassed almost the entire route of the Silk Roads in a single state, giving a renewed vitality to long-distance trade.

## *Goods in Transit*

During prosperous times especially, a vast array of goods (detailed in the Snapshot on p. 337) made their way across the Silk Roads, often carried in large camel caravans that traversed the harsh and dangerous steppes, deserts, and oases of Central Asia. In high demand and hard to find, most of these goods were luxury products,

## Snapshot Economic Exchange along the Silk Roads

Region	Products Contributed to Silk Road Commerce
China	silk, bamboo, mirrors, gunpowder, paper, rhubarb, ginger, lacquerware, chrysanthemums
Forest lands of Siberia and grasslands of Central Asia	furs, walrus tusks, amber, livestock, horses, falcons, hides, copper vessels, tents, saddles, slaves
India	cotton textiles, herbal medicine, precious stones, spices
Middle East	dates, nuts, almonds, dried fruit, dyes, lapis lazuli, swords
Mediterranean basin	gold coins, glassware, glazes, grapevines, jewelry, artworks, perfume, wool and linen textiles, olive oil

destined for an elite and wealthy market, rather than staple goods, for only readily moved commodities of great value could compensate for the high costs of transportation across such long and forbidding distances.

Of all these luxury goods, it was silk that came to symbolize this Eurasian exchange system. When China held a monopoly on silk-producing technology, this precious fabric moved generally from east to west. The demand for silk as well as cotton textiles from India was so great in the Roman Empire that various Roman writers were appalled at the drain of resources that it represented. They also were outraged at the moral impact of wearing revealing silk garments. “I can see clothes of silk,” lamented Seneca the Younger in the first century C.E., “if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one’s decency, can be called clothes. . . . Wretched flocks of maids labour so that the adulteress may be visible through her thin dress, so that her husband has no more acquaintance than any outsider or foreigner with his wife’s body.”<sup>2</sup>

By the sixth century C.E., however, the knowledge and technology for producing raw silk had spread beyond China. An old Chinese story attributes it to a Chinese princess who smuggled out silkworms in her turban when she was married off to a Central Asian ruler. In a European version of the tale, Christian monks living in China did the deed by hiding some silkworms in a bamboo cane, an act of industrial espionage that allowed an independent silk-producing and silk-weaving industry to take hold in the Byzantine Empire. However it happened, Koreans, Japanese, Indians, and Persians likewise learned how to produce this precious fabric.

As the supply of silk increased, its many varieties circulated even more extensively across Eurasian trade routes. In Central Asia, silk was used as currency and as a means of accumulating wealth. In both China and the Byzantine Empire, silk became a symbol of high status, and governments passed laws that restricted silk clothing to members of the elite. Furthermore, silk became associated with the sacred in the expanding world religions of Buddhism and Christianity. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who made their way to India seeking religious texts and relics took with them large quantities of silk as gifts to the monasteries they visited (see

### ■ Significance

What made silk such a highly desired commodity across Eurasia?

Visual Source 8.2, p. 370). Buddhist monks in China received purple silk robes from Tang dynasty emperors as a sign of high honor. In the world of Christendom, silk wall hangings, altar covers, and vestments became highly prestigious signs of devotion and piety. Because no independent silk industry developed in Western Europe until the twelfth century C.E., a considerable market developed for silks imported from the Islamic world. Ironically, the splendor of Christian churches depended in part on Islamic trading networks and on silks manufactured in the Muslim world. Some of those silks were even inscribed with passages in Arabic from the Quran, unbeknownst to their European buyers.<sup>3</sup>

### ■ Connection

What were the major economic, social, and cultural consequences of Silk Road commerce?

Compared to contemporary global commerce, the volume of trade on the Silk Roads was small, and its focus on luxury goods limited its direct impact on most people. Nonetheless, it had important economic and social consequences. Peasants in the Yangzi River delta of southern China sometimes gave up the cultivation of food crops, choosing to focus instead on producing silk, paper, porcelain, lacquerware, or iron tools, much of which was destined for the markets of the Silk Roads. In this way, the impact of long-distance trade trickled down to affect the lives of ordinary farmers. Furthermore, favorably placed individuals could benefit immensely from long-distance trade. The twelfth-century Persian merchant Ramisht made a personal fortune from his long-distance trading business and with his profits purchased an enormously expensive silk covering for the Kaaba, the central shrine of Islam in Mecca.<sup>4</sup>

## *Cultures in Transit*

### ■ Change

What accounted for the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Roads?

More important even than the economic impact of the Silk Roads was their role as a conduit of culture. Buddhism in particular, a cultural product of Indian civilization, spread widely throughout Central and East Asia, owing much to the activities of merchants along the Silk Roads. From its beginnings in India during the sixth century B.C.E., Buddhism had appealed to merchants, who preferred its universal message to that of a Brahmin-dominated Hinduism that privileged the higher castes. Indian traders and Buddhist monks, sometimes supported by rulers such as Ashoka, brought the new religion to the trans-Eurasian trade routes. To the west, Persian Zoroastrianism largely blocked the spread of Buddhism, but in the oasis cities of Central Asia, such as Merv, Samarkand, Khotan, and Dunhuang, Buddhism quickly took hold. By the first century B.C.E., many of the inhabitants of these towns had converted to Buddhism, and foreign merchant communities soon introduced it to northern China as well.<sup>5</sup> (See Visual Sources 8.1 and 8.2, pp. 369 and 370, as well as Document 8.1, pp. 356–59.)

Conversion to Buddhism in the oasis cities was a voluntary process, without the pressure of conquest or foreign rule. Dependent on long-distance trade, the inhabitants and rulers of those sophisticated and prosperous cities found in Buddhism a link to the larger, wealthy, and prestigious civilization of India. Well-to-do Buddhist merchants could earn religious merit by building monasteries and supporting monks. The monasteries in turn provided convenient and culturally familiar places of rest



and resupply for merchants making the long and arduous trek across Central Asia. Many of these cities became cosmopolitan centers of learning and commerce. Scholars have found thousands of Buddhist texts in the city of Dunhuang, where several branches of the Silk Roads joined to enter western China, together with hundreds of cave temples, lavishly decorated with murals and statues.

Outside of the oasis communities, Buddhism progressed only slowly among pastoral peoples of Central Asia. The absence of a written language was an obstacle to the penetration of a highly literate religion, and their nomadic ways made the founding of monasteries, so important to Buddhism, quite difficult. But as pastoralists became involved in long-distance trade or came to rule settled agricultural peoples, Buddhism seemed more attractive. The nomadic Jie people, who controlled much of northern China after the collapse of the Han dynasty, are a case in point. Their ruler in the early fourth century C.E., Shi Le, became acquainted with a Buddhist monk called Fotudeng, who had traveled widely on the Silk Roads. The monk's reputation as a miracle worker, a rain-maker, and a fortune-teller and his skills as a military strategist cemented a personal relationship with Shi Le and led to the conversions of thousands and the construction of hundreds of Buddhist temples. In China itself, Buddhism remained for many centuries a religion of foreign merchants or foreign rulers. Only slowly did it become popular among the Chinese themselves, a process examined more closely in Chapter 9.

As Buddhism spread across the Silk Roads from India to Central Asia, China, and beyond, it also changed. The original faith had shunned the material world, but Buddhist monasteries in the rich oasis towns of the Silk Roads found themselves very much involved in secular affairs. Some of them became quite wealthy, receiving gifts from well-to-do merchants, artisans, and local rulers. The begging bowls of the monks became a symbol rather than a daily activity. Sculptures and murals in the monasteries depicted musicians and acrobats, women applying makeup, and even drinking parties.<sup>6</sup>

Doctrines changed as well. It was the more devotional Mahayana form of Buddhism (see Chapter 5)—featuring the Buddha as a deity, numerous bodhisattvas, an emphasis on compassion, and the possibility of earning merit—that flourished on the Silk Roads, rather than the more austere psychological teachings of the original Buddha. Moreover, Buddhism picked up elements of other cultures while in transit on the Silk Roads. In the area northwest of India that had been



#### Dunhuang

Located in western China at a critical junction of the Silk Road trading network, Dunhuang was also a center of Buddhist learning, painting, and sculpture as that religion made its way from India to China and beyond. In some 492 caves, a remarkable gallery of Buddhist art has been preserved. These images of Buddhist deities and heavenly beings date from the sixth century C.E. (© Benoy K. Behl)

influenced by the invasions of Alexander the Great, statues of the Buddha reveal distinctly Greek influences. The Greco-Roman mythological figure of Herakles, the son of Zeus and associated with great strength, courage, masculinity, and sexual prowess, was used to represent Vajrapani, one of the divine protectors of the Buddha (see Visual Source 8.1, p. 369). In a similar way, the gods of many peoples along the Silk Roads were incorporated into Buddhist practice as bodhisattvas.

### *Disease in Transit*

#### ■ Connection

What was the impact of disease along the Silk Roads?

Beyond goods and cultures, diseases too traveled the trade routes of Eurasia, and with devastating consequences.<sup>7</sup> Each of the major population centers of the Afro-Eurasian world had developed characteristic disease patterns, mechanisms for dealing with them, and in some cases immunity to them. But when contact among human communities occurred, people were exposed to unfamiliar diseases for which they had little immunity or few effective methods of coping. An early example involved Athens, which in 430–429 B.C.E. was suddenly afflicted by a new and still unidentified infectious disease that had entered Greece via seaborne trade from Egypt, killing perhaps 25 percent of its army and permanently weakening the city-state.

Even more widespread diseases affected the Roman Empire and Han dynasty China during the classical era as the Silk Roads promoted contact all across Eurasia. Smallpox and measles devastated the populations of both empires, contributing to their political collapse. Paradoxically, these disasters may well have strengthened the appeal of Christianity in Europe and Buddhism in China, for both of them offered compassion in the face of immense suffering.

Again in the period between 534 and 750 C.E., intermittent outbreaks of bubonic plague ravaged the coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea as the black rats that carried the disease arrived via the seaborne trade with India, where they originally lived. What followed was catastrophic. Constantinople, the capital city of the Byzantine Empire, lost some 10,000 people per day during a forty-day period in 534 C.E., according to a contemporary historian. Disease played an important role in preventing Byzantium from reintegrating Italy into its version of a renewed Roman Empire encompassing the Mediterranean basin. The repeated recurrence of the disease over the next several centuries also weakened the ability of Christendom to resist the Muslim armies that poured out of Arabia in the seventh century C.E.

The most well-known dissemination of disease was associated with the Mongol Empire, which briefly unified much of the Eurasian landmass during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries C.E. (see Chapter 12). That era of intensified interaction facilitated the spread of the Black Death—identified variously with the bubonic plague, anthrax, or a package of epidemic diseases—from China to Europe. Its consequences were enormous. Between 1346 and 1350, one-third or more of the population of Europe perished from the plague. “A dead man,” wrote the Italian writer Boccaccio, “was then of no more account than a dead goat.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the terrible human toll, some among the living benefited. Tenant farmers and urban workers,

now in short supply, could demand higher wages or better terms. Some landowning nobles, on the other hand, were badly hurt as the price of their grains dropped and the demands of their dependents grew.

A similar death toll afflicted China and parts of the Islamic world. The Central Asian steppes, home to many nomadic peoples including the Mongols, also suffered terribly, undermining Mongol rule and permanently altering the balance between pastoral and agricultural peoples to the advantage of settled farmers. In these and many other ways, disease carried by long-distance trade shaped the lives of millions and altered their historical development.

In the long run of world history, the exchange of diseases gave Europeans a certain advantage when they confronted the peoples of the Western Hemisphere after 1500. Exposure over time had provided them with some degree of immunity to Eurasian diseases. In the Americas, however, the absence of domesticated animals, the less intense interaction among major centers of population, and their isolation from the Eastern Hemisphere ensured that native peoples had little defense against the diseases of Europe and Africa. Thus, when their societies were suddenly confronted by Europeans and Africans from across the Atlantic, they perished in appalling numbers. Such was the long-term outcome of the very different histories of the two hemispheres.

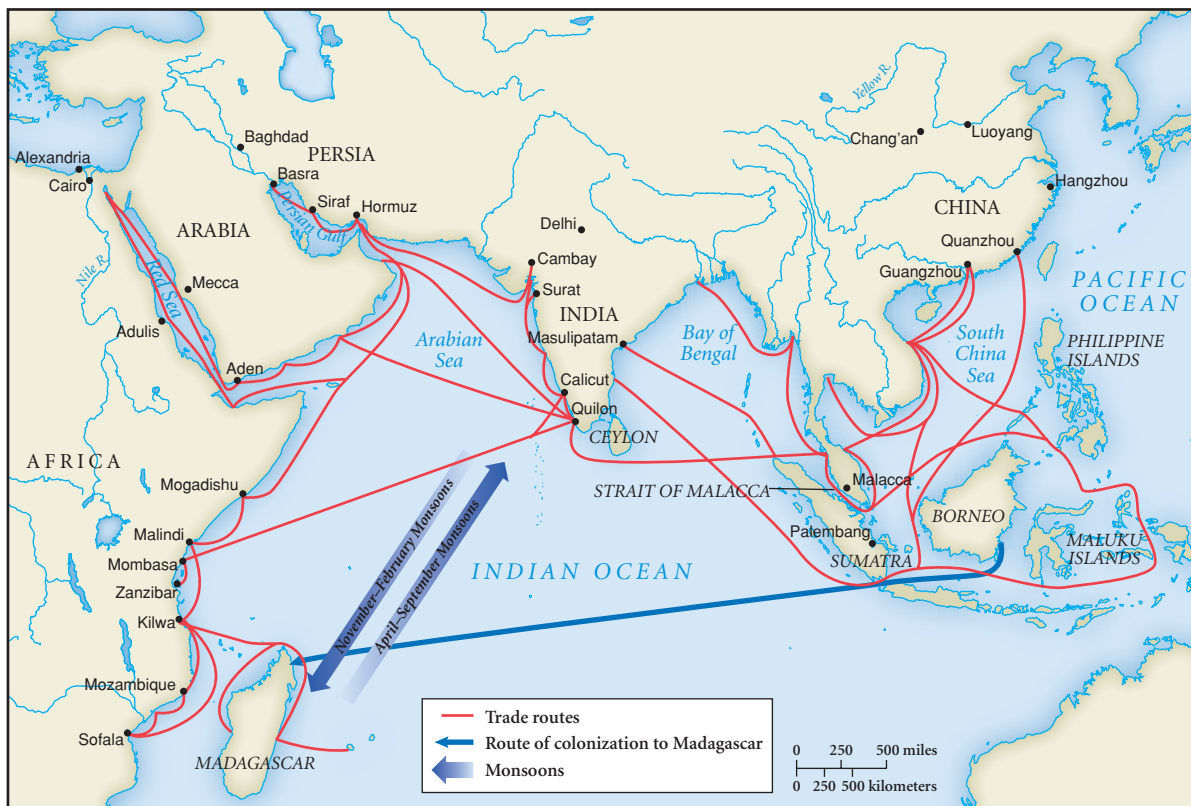
## Sea Roads: Exchange across the Indian Ocean

If the Silk Roads linked Eurasian societies by land, sea-based trade routes likewise connected distant peoples all across the Eastern Hemisphere. Since the days of the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, the Mediterranean Sea had been an avenue of maritime commerce throughout the region, a pattern that continued during the postclassical era. The Italian city of Venice, for example, emerged by 1000 C.E. as a major center of commerce, with its ships and merchants active in the Mediterranean and Black seas as well as on the Atlantic coast. Much of its wealth derived from control of expensive and profitable imported goods from Asia, many of which came up the Red Sea through the Egyptian port of Alexandria. There Venetian merchants picked up those goods and resold them throughout the Mediterranean basin. This type of transregional exchange linked the maritime commerce of the Mediterranean Sea to the much larger and more extensive network of seaborne trade in the Indian Ocean basin.

Until the creation of a genuinely global oceanic system of trade after 1500, the Indian Ocean represented the world's largest sea-based system of communication and exchange, stretching from southern China to eastern Africa (see Map 8.2). Like the Silk Roads, oceanic trade also grew out of the vast environmental and cultural diversities of the region. The desire for various goods not available at home—such as porcelain from China, spices from the islands of Southeast Asia, cotton goods and pepper from India, ivory and gold from the African coast—provided incentives for Indian Ocean commerce. Transportation costs were lower on the Sea

### ■ Comparison

How did the operation of the Indian Ocean trading network differ from that of the Silk Roads?



**Map 8.2** The Sea Roads  
Paralleling the Silk Road trading network, a sea-based commerce in the Indian Ocean basin connected the many peoples between China and East Africa.

Roads than on the Silk Roads, because ships could accommodate larger and heavier cargoes than camels. This meant that the Sea Roads could eventually carry more bulk goods and products destined for a mass market—textiles, pepper, timber, rice, sugar, wheat—whereas the Silk Roads were limited largely to luxury goods for the few.

What made Indian Ocean commerce possible were the monsoons, alternating wind currents that blew predictably eastward during the summer months and westward during the winter. An understanding of monsoons and a gradually accumulating technology of shipbuilding and oceanic navigation drew on the ingenuity of many peoples—Chinese, Malays, Indians, Arabs, Swahilis, and others. Collectively they made “an interlocked human world joined by the common highway of the Indian Ocean.”<sup>9</sup>

But this world of Indian Ocean commerce did not occur between entire regions and certainly not between “countries,” even though historians sometimes write about India, Indonesia, Southeast Asia, or East Africa as a matter of shorthand or convenience. It operated rather across an “archipelago of towns” whose merchants often had more in common with one another than with the people of their own hinterlands.<sup>10</sup> It was these urban centers, strung out around the entire Indian Ocean basin, that provided the nodes of this widespread commercial network.

## *Weaving the Web of an Indian Ocean World*

The world of Indian Ocean commerce was long in the making, dating back to the time of the First Civilizations. Seaborne trade via the Persian Gulf between ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley civilization is reflected in archeological finds in both places. Some scholars believe that the still-undeciphered Indian writing system may have been stimulated by Sumerian cuneiform. The ancient Egyptians, and later the Phoenicians, likewise traded down the Red Sea, exchanging their manufactured goods for gold, ivory, frankincense, and slaves from the coasts of Ethiopia, Somalia, and southern Arabia. These ventures mostly hugged the coast and took place over short distances. An exception was Malay sailors; speaking Austronesian languages, they jumped off from the islands of present-day Indonesia during the first millennium B.C.E. and made their way in double-outrigger canoes across thousands of miles of open ocean to the East African island of Madagascar. There they introduced their language and their crops. Those food crops—bananas, coconuts, and cocoyams—soon spread to the mainland, where they greatly enriched the diets of African peoples. Also spread to the mainland was a Malayo-Polynesian xylophone, which is still played in parts of Africa today.

The tempo of Indian Ocean commerce picked up in the era of classical civilizations during the early centuries of the Common Era, as mariners learned how to ride the monsoons. Merchants from the Roman Empire, mostly Greeks, Syrians, and Jews, established settlements in southern India and along the East African coast. The introduction of Christianity into both Ethiopia and Kerala (in southern India) testifies to the long-term cultural impact of that trade. In the eastern Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Chinese and Southeast Asian merchants likewise generated a growing commerce, and by 100 C.E. Chinese traders had reached India.

The fulcrum of this growing commercial network lay in India itself. Its ports bulged with goods from both west and east, as illustrated in the Snapshot. Its merchants were in touch with Southeast Asia by the first century C.E., and settled communities of Indian traders appeared throughout the Indian Ocean basin and as far away as

### Snapshot **Economic Exchange in the Indian Ocean Basin**

Region	Products Contributed to Indian Ocean Commerce
Mediterranean basin	ceramics, glassware, wine, gold, olive oil
East Africa	ivory, gold, iron goods, slaves, tortoiseshells, quartz, leopard skins
Arabia	frankincense, myrrh, perfumes
India	grain, ivory, precious stones, cotton textiles, spices, timber, tortoiseshells
Southeast Asia	tin, sandalwood, cloves, nutmeg, mace
China	silks, porcelain, tea



### ■ Change

What lay behind the flourishing of Indian Ocean commerce in the postclassical millennium?

Alexandria in Egypt. Indian cultural practices, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as South Asian political ideas began to take root in Southeast Asia.

In the era of third-wave civilizations between 500 and 1500, two major processes changed the landscape of the Afro-Eurasian world and wove the web of Indian Ocean exchange even more densely than before. One was the economic and political revival of China, some four centuries after the collapse of the Han dynasty. Especially during the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279), China reestablished an effective and unified state, which actively encouraged maritime trade. Furthermore, the impressive growth of the Chinese economy sent Chinese products pouring into the circuits of Indian Ocean commerce, while providing a vast and attractive market for Indian and Southeast Asian goods. Chinese technological innovations, such as larger ships and the magnetic compass, likewise added to the momentum of commercial growth.

A second transformation in the world of Indian Ocean commerce involved the sudden rise of Islam in the seventh century C.E. and its subsequent spread across much of the Afro-Eurasian world (see Chapter 11). Unlike Confucian culture, which was quite suspicious of merchants, Islam was friendly to commercial life; the Prophet Muhammad himself had been a trader. The creation of an Arab Empire, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean through the Mediterranean basin and all the way to India, brought together in a single political system an immense range of economies and cultural traditions and provided a vast arena for the energies of Muslim traders.

Those energies greatly intensified commercial activity in the Indian Ocean basin in many ways. Middle Eastern gold and silver flowed into southern India to purchase pepper, pearls, textiles, and gemstones. Muslim merchants and sailors, as well as Jews and Christians living within the Islamic world, established communities of traders from East Africa to the southern China coast. Efforts to reclaim wasteland in Mesopotamia to produce sugar and dates for export stimulated a slave trade from East Africa, which landed thousands of Africans in southern Iraq to work on plantations and in salt mines under horrendous conditions. A massive fifteen-year revolt (868–883) among these slaves badly disrupted the Islamic Abbasid Empire before it was brutally crushed.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond these specific outcomes, the expansion of Islam gave rise to an international maritime culture by 1000, shared by individuals living in the widely separated port cities around the Indian Ocean. The immense prestige, power, and prosperity of the Islamic world stimulated widespread conversion, which in turn facilitated commercial transactions. Even those who did not convert to Islam, such as Buddhist rulers in Burma, nonetheless regarded it as commercially useful to assume Muslim names.<sup>12</sup> Thus was created “a maritime Silk Road . . . a commercial and informational network of unparalleled proportions.”<sup>13</sup> After 1000, the culture of this network was increasingly Islamic.

### *Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: Southeast Asia and Srivijaya*

### ■ Connection

What is the relationship between the rise of Srivijaya and the world of Indian Ocean commerce?

Oceanic commerce transformed all of its participants in one way or another, but nowhere more so than in Southeast Asia and East Africa, at opposite ends of the Indian Ocean network. In both regions, trade stimulated political change as ambitious

or aspiring rulers used the wealth derived from commerce to construct larger and more centrally governed states or cities. Both areas likewise experienced cultural change as local people were attracted to foreign religious ideas from Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic sources. As on the Silk Roads, trade was a conduit for culture.

Located between the major civilizations of China and India, Southeast Asia was situated by geography to play an important role in the evolving world of Indian Ocean commerce. When Malay sailors, long active in the waters around Southeast Asia, opened an all-sea route between India and China through the Straits of Malacca around 350 C.E., the many small ports along the Malay Peninsula and the coast of Sumatra began to compete intensely to attract the growing number of traders and travelers making their way through the straits. From this competition emerged the Malay kingdom of Srivijaya, which dominated this critical choke point of Indian Ocean trade from 670 to 1025. A number of factors—Srivijaya’s plentiful supply of gold; its access to the source of highly sought-after spices, such as cloves, nutmeg, and mace; and the taxes levied on passing ships—provided resources to attract supporters, to fund an embryonic bureaucracy, and to create the military and naval forces that brought some security to the area.

Srivijaya monarchs drew upon local beliefs that chiefs possessed magical powers and were responsible for the prosperity of their people, but they also made use of imported Indian political ideas and Buddhist religious concepts, which had been brought to the area by a multitude of Indian merchants and teachers. Some Indians were employed as advisers, clerks, or officials to Srivijaya rulers, who began to assign Sanskrit titles to their subordinates. The capital city of Palembang was a cosmopolitan place, where even the parrots were said to speak four languages. Buddhism in particular provided a “higher level of magic” for rulers as well as the prestige of association with Indian civilization.<sup>14</sup> These rulers sponsored the creation of images of the Buddha and various bodhisattvas whose faces resembled those of deceased kings and were inscribed with traditional curses against anyone who would destroy them. Srivijaya grew into a major center of Buddhist observance and teaching, attracting thousands of monks and students from throughout the Buddhist world. The seventh-century Chinese monk Yi Jing was so impressed that he advised Buddhist monks headed for India to study first in Srivijaya for several years.<sup>15</sup>

Srivijaya was not the only part of Southeast Asia to be influenced by Indian culture. The Sailendra kingdom in central Java, an agriculturally rich region closely allied with Srivijaya, mounted a massive building program between the eighth and tenth centuries featuring Hindu temples and Buddhist monuments. The most famous, known as Borobudur, is an enormous mountain-shaped structure of ten levels, with a three-mile walkway and elaborate carvings illustrating the spiritual journey from ignorance and illusion to full enlightenment. The largest Buddhist monument anywhere in the world, it is nonetheless a distinctly Javanese creation, whose carved figures have Javanese features and whose scenes are clearly set in Java, not India. Its shape resonated with an ancient Southeast Asian veneration of mountains as

Southeast Asia ca. 1200 C.E.







### Borobudur

This huge Buddhist monument, constructed probably in the ninth century C.E., was subsequently abandoned and covered with layers of volcanic ash and vegetation as Java came under Islamic influence. It was rediscovered by British colonial authorities in the early nineteenth century and has undergone several restorations over the past two centuries. Although Indonesia is a largely Muslim country, its Buddhist minority (about 1 percent of the country's population) still celebrates the Buddha's birthday at Borobudur. (Robert Harding World Imagery/Alamy)

sacred places and the abode of ancestral spirits. Borobudur represents the process of Buddhism becoming culturally grounded in a new place.

Temple complexes such as Borobudur and others constructed in Burma, in the Khmer state of Angkor, and elsewhere illustrate vividly the penetration of Indian culture—in both Hindu and Buddhist forms—throughout mainland and island Southeast Asia. Some scholars have spoken of the “Indianization” of the region, similar perhaps to the earlier spread of Greek culture within the empires of Alexander the Great and Rome. In the case of Southeast Asia, however, no imperial control accompanied Indian cultural influence. It was a matter of voluntary borrowing by independent societies that found Hindu or Buddhist ideas useful and were free to adapt those ideas to their own needs and cultures. Somewhat later, but in much the same way, Islam too began to penetrate Southeast Asia, as the world of Indian Ocean commerce brought yet another religious tradition to the region.

### ■ Connection

What was the role of Swahili civilization in the world of Indian Ocean commerce?

### *Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: East Africa and Swahili Civilization*

On the other side of the Indian Ocean, the transformative processes of long-distance trade were likewise at work, giving rise to an East African civilization known as

Swahili. Emerging in the eighth century C.E., this civilization took shape as a set of commercial city-states stretching all along the East African coast, from present-day Somalia to Mozambique.

The earlier ancestors of the Swahili lived in small farming and fishing communities, spoke Bantu languages, and traded with the Arabian, Greek, and Roman merchants who occasionally visited the coast during the classical era. But what stimulated the growth of Swahili cities was the far more extensive commercial life of the western Indian Ocean following the rise of Islam. As in Southeast Asia, local people and aspiring rulers found opportunity for wealth and power in the growing demand for East African products associated with an expanding Indian Ocean commerce. Gold, ivory, quartz, leopard skins, and sometimes slaves acquired from interior societies, as well as iron and processed timber manufactured along the coast, found a ready market in Arabia, Persia, India, and beyond. In response to such opportunities, an African merchant class developed, villages turned into sizable towns, and clan chiefs became kings. A new civilization was in the making.

Between 1000 and 1500, that civilization flourished along the coast, and it was a very different kind of society than the farming and pastoral cultures of the East African interior. It was thoroughly urban, centered in cities of 15,000 to 18,000 people, such as Lamu, Mombasa, Kilwa, Sofala, and many others. Like the city-states of ancient Greece, each Swahili city was politically independent, generally governed by its own king, and in sharp competition with other cities. No imperial system or larger territorial states unified the world of Swahili civilization. Nor did any of them control a critical choke point of trade, as Srivijaya did for the Straits of Malacca. Swahili cities were commercial centers that accumulated goods from the interior and exchanged them for the products of distant civilizations, such as Chinese porcelain and silk, Persian rugs, and Indian cottons. While the transoceanic journeys occurred largely in Arab vessels, Swahili craft navigated the coastal waterways, concentrating goods for shipment abroad. Swahili cities were class-stratified societies with sharp distinctions between a mercantile elite and commoners.

Culturally as well as economically, Swahili civilization participated in the larger Indian Ocean world. Arab, Indian, and perhaps Persian merchants were welcome visitors, and some settled permanently. Many ruling families of Swahili cities claimed Arab or Persian origins as a way of bolstering their prestige, even while they dined off Chinese porcelain and dressed in Indian cottons. The Swahili language, widely spoken in East Africa today, was grammatically an African tongue within the larger Bantu family of languages, but it was written in Arabic script and contained a number of Arabic loan words. A small bronze lion found in the Swahili city of Shanga and dating to about 1100 illustrates the distinctly cosmopolitan character of Swahili culture. It depicted a clearly African lion, but it was created in a distinctly Indian artistic style and was made from melted-down Chinese copper coins.<sup>16</sup>

Most important, however, Swahili civilization rapidly became Islamic. Introduced by Arab traders, Islam was voluntarily and widely adopted within

The Swahili Coast of East Africa



the Swahili world. Like Buddhism in Southeast Asia, Islam linked Swahili cities to the larger Indian Ocean world. These East African cities were soon dotted with substantial mosques. When Ibn Battuta, a widely traveled Arab scholar, merchant, and public official, visited the Swahili coast in the early fourteenth century, he found altogether Muslim societies in which religious leaders often spoke Arabic, and all were eager to welcome a learned visitor from the heartland of Islam. But these were African Muslims, not colonies of transplanted Arabs. “The rulers, scholars, officials, and big merchants as well as the port workers, farmers, craftsmen, and slaves, were dark-skinned people speaking African tongues in everyday life.”<sup>17</sup>

Islam sharply divided the Swahili cities from their African neighbors to the west, for neither the new religion nor Swahili culture penetrated much beyond the coast until the nineteenth century. Economically, however, the coastal cities acted as intermediaries between the interior producers of valued goods and the Arab merchants who carried them to distant markets. Particularly in the southern reaches of the Swahili world, this relationship extended the impact of Indian Ocean trade well into the African interior. Hundreds of miles inland, between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers, lay rich sources of gold, much in demand on the Swahili coast. The emergence of a powerful state, known as Great Zimbabwe, seems clearly connected to the growing trade in gold to the coast as well as to the wealth embodied in its large herds of cattle. At its peak between 1250 and 1350, Great Zimbabwe had the resources and the labor power to construct huge stone enclosures entirely without mortar, with walls sixteen feet thick and thirty-two feet tall. “[It] must have been an astonishing sight,” writes a recent scholar, “for the subordinate chiefs and kings who would have come there to seek favors at court.”<sup>18</sup> Here in the interior of southeastern Africa lay yet another example of the reach and transforming power of Indian Ocean commerce.

## Sand Roads: Exchange across the Sahara

In addition to the Silk Roads and the Sea Roads, another important pattern of long-distance trade—this one across the vast reaches of the Sahara—linked North Africa and the Mediterranean world with the land and peoples of interior West Africa. Like the others, these Sand Road commercial networks had a transforming impact, stimulating and enriching West African civilization and connecting it to larger patterns of world history during the postclassical era.

### *Commercial Beginnings in West Africa*

Trans-African trade, like the commerce of the Silk Roads and the Sea Roads, was rooted in environmental variation. The North African coastal regions, long part of Roman or later Arab empires, generated cloth, glassware, weapons, books, and other manufactured goods. The great Sahara held deposits of copper and especially salt, while its oases produced sweet and nutritious dates. Although the sparse populations

of the desert were largely pastoral and nomadic, farther south lived agricultural peoples who grew a variety of crops, produced their own textiles and metal products, and mined a considerable amount of gold. The agricultural regions of sub-Saharan Africa are normally divided into two ecological zones: the savanna grasslands immediately south of the Sahara, which produced grain crops such as millet and sorghum; and the forest areas farther south, where root and tree crops such as yams and kola nuts predominated. These quite varied environments provided the economic incentive for the exchange of goods.

The earliest long-distance trade within this huge region was not across the Sahara at all, but largely among the agricultural peoples themselves in the area later known to Arabs as the Sudan, or “the land of black people.” During the first millennium B.C.E., the peoples of Sudanic West Africa began to exchange metal goods, cotton textiles, gold, and various food products across considerable distances using boats along the Niger River and donkeys overland. On the basis of this trade, a number of independent urban clusters emerged by the early centuries of the Common Era. The most well known was Jenne-jeno, which was located at a crucial point on the Niger River where goods were transshipped from boat to donkey or vice versa.<sup>19</sup> This was the Niger Valley civilization, described in Chapter 7.

### *Gold, Salt, and Slaves: Trade and Empire in West Africa*

A major turning point in African commercial life occurred with the introduction of the camel to North Africa and the Sahara in the early centuries of the Common Era. This remarkable animal, which could go for ten days without water, finally made possible the long trek across the Sahara. It was camel-owning dwellers of desert oases who initiated regular trans-Saharan commerce by 300 to 400 C.E. Several centuries later, North African Arabs, now bearing the new religion of Islam, also organized caravans across the desert.

What they sought, above all else, was gold, which was found in some abundance in the border areas straddling the grasslands and the forests of West Africa. From its source, it was transported by donkey to transshipment points on the southern edge of the Sahara and then transferred to camels for the long journey north across the desert. African ivory, kola nuts, and slaves were likewise in considerable demand in the desert, the Mediterranean basin, and beyond. In return, the peoples of the Sudan received horses, cloth, dates, various manufactured goods, and especially salt from the rich deposits in the Sahara.

Thus the Sahara was no longer simply a barrier to commerce and cross-cultural interaction; it quickly became a major international trade route that fostered new relationships among distant peoples. The caravans that made the desert crossing could be huge, with as many as 5,000 camels and hundreds of people. Traveling mostly at night to avoid the daytime heat, the journey might take up to seventy days, covering fifteen to twenty-five miles per day. For well over 1,000 years, such caravans traversed the desert, linking the interior of West Africa with lands and people far to the north.

#### ■ Connections

What changes did trans-Saharan trade bring to West Africa?





**Map 8.3** The Sand Roads

For a thousand years or more, the Sahara was an ocean of sand that linked the interior of West Africa with the world of North Africa and the Mediterranean but separated them as well.

teenth century, Mali's rulers monopolized the import of strategic goods such as horses and metals; levied duties on salt, copper, and other merchandise; and reserved large nuggets of gold for themselves while permitting the free export of gold dust.

As in all civilizations, slavery found a place in West Africa. Early on, most slaves had been women, working as domestic servants and concubines. As West African civilization crystallized, however, male slaves were put to work as state officials, porters, craftsmen, miners harvesting salt from desert deposits, and especially agricultural laborers producing for the royal granaries on large estates or plantations. Most came from non-Islamic and stateless societies farther south, which were raided during the dry season by cavalry-based forces of West African states, though some white slave women from the eastern Mediterranean also made an appearance in Mali. A song in honor of one eleventh-century ruler of Kanem boasted of his slave-raiding achievements.

The best you took (and sent home) as the first fruits of battle. The children crying on their mothers you snatched away from their mothers. You took the slave wife from a slave, and set them in lands far removed from one another.<sup>21</sup>

As in Southeast Asia and East Africa, long-distance trade across the Sahara provided both incentive and resources for the construction of new and larger political structures. It was the peoples of the western and central Sudan, living between the forests and the desert, who were in the best position to take advantage of these new opportunities. Between roughly 500 and 1600, they constructed a series of states, empires, and city-states that reached from the Atlantic coast to Lake Chad, including Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem, and the city-states of the Hausa people (see Map 8.3).

All of them were monarchies with elaborate court life and varying degrees of administrative complexity and military forces at their disposal. All drew upon the wealth of trans-Saharan trade, taxing the merchants who conducted it. In the wider world, these states soon acquired a reputation for great riches. An Arab traveler in the tenth century C.E. described the ruler of Ghana as “the wealthiest king on the face of the earth because of his treasures and stocks of gold.”<sup>20</sup> At its high point in the four-

Most of these slaves were used within this emerging West African civilization, but a trade in slaves also developed across the Sahara. Between 1100 and 1400, perhaps 5,500 slaves per year made the perilous trek across the desert. When the famous Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta visited Mali in the fourteenth century, he returned home to Morocco with a caravan that included 600 female slaves, who walked across the burning desert, while he rode a camel. Most such slaves were put to work in the homes of the wealthy in Islamic North Africa, but a small number were sold in Europe. Those who arrived in Ireland, for example, were termed “blue men.” Far more significant in Europe were slaves from the Slavic-speaking regions along the northern coast of the Black Sea. They were so numerous that the word “slave” in many European languages derives from the term “Slav.” Not until the Atlantic slave trade developed after the 1440s did Africans become the major source of slaves for Europeans.

These states of Sudanic Africa developed substantial urban and commercial centers—such as Koumbi-Saleh, Jenne, Timbuktu, Gao, Gobir, and Kano—where traders congregated and goods were exchanged. Some of these cities also became centers of manufacturing, creating finely wrought beads, iron tools, or cotton textiles, some of which entered the circuits of commerce. Visitors described them as cosmopolitan places where court officials, artisans, scholars, students, and local and foreign merchants all rubbed elbows. As in East Africa, Islam accompanied trade and became an important element in the urban culture of West Africa (see Document 8.3, pp. 362–65). The growth of long-distance trade had stimulated the development of an African civilization, which was linked to the wider networks of exchange in the Eastern Hemisphere.

## An American Network: Commerce and Connection in the Western Hemisphere

Before the voyages of Columbus, the world of the Americas developed quite separately from that of the Eastern Hemisphere. Despite intriguing hints of occasional contacts, no sustained interaction between the peoples of these two great landmasses took place. But if the Silk, Sea, and Sand Roads linked the diverse peoples of the Afro-Eurasian world, did a similar network of interaction join and transform the various societies of the Western Hemisphere?

Clearly, direct connections among the various civilizations and cultures of the Americas were less densely woven than in the Afro-Eurasian region. The llama and the potato, both domesticated in the Andes, never reached Mesoamerica; nor did the writing system of the Maya diffuse to Andean civilizations. The Aztecs and the Incas, contemporary civilizations in the fifteenth century, had little if any direct contact with each other. The limits of these interactions owed something to the



### The Gold of Mali

This detail from the *Catalan Atlas*, a series of maps issued in Spain in 1375, illustrates Mali's reputation in Europe for its great wealth in gold. This reputation later propelled Portuguese voyages down the west coast of Africa in search of direct access to that wealth. (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

### ■ Comparison

In what ways did networks of interaction in the Western Hemisphere differ from those in the Eastern Hemisphere?

absence of horses, donkeys, camels, wheeled vehicles, and large oceangoing vessels, all of which facilitated long-distance trade and travel in Afro-Eurasia.

Geographic or environmental differences added further obstacles. The narrow bottleneck of Panama, largely covered by dense rain forests, surely inhibited contact between South and North America. Furthermore, the north/south orientation of the Americas—which required agricultural practices to move through, and adapt to, quite distinct climatic and vegetation zones—slowed the spread of agricultural products. By contrast, the east/west axis of Eurasia meant that agricultural innovations could diffuse more rapidly because they were entering roughly similar environments. Thus nothing equivalent to the long-distance trade of the Silk, Sea, or Sand Roads of the Eastern

### Map 8.4 The American Web

Transcontinental interactions within the American web were more modest than those of the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere. The most intense areas of exchange and communication occurred within the Mississippi valley, Mesoamerican, and Andean regions.



Hemisphere arose in the Americas, even though local and regional commerce flourished in many places. Nor did distinct cultural traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam spread so widely to integrate distant peoples.

Nonetheless, scholars have discerned “a loosely interactive web stretching from the North American Great Lakes and upper Mississippi south to the Andes.”<sup>22</sup> (See Map 8.4.) Partly, it was a matter of slowly spreading cultural elements, such as the gradual diffusion of maize from its Mesoamerican place of origin to the southwestern United States and then on to much of eastern North America as well as to much of South America in the other direction. A game played with rubber balls on an outdoor court has left traces in the Caribbean, Mexico, and northern South America. Construction in the Tantoc region of northeastern Mexico resembled the earlier building styles of Cahokia, suggesting the possibility of some interaction between the two regions.<sup>23</sup> The spread of particular pottery styles and architectural conventions likewise suggests at least indirect contact over wide distances.

Commerce too played an important role in the making of this “American web.” A major North American chief-



dom at Cahokia, near present-day St. Louis, flourished from about 900 to 1250 at the confluence of the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri rivers (see pp. 303–04). Cahokia lay at the center of a widespread trading network that brought it shells from the Atlantic coast, copper from the Lake Superior region, buffalo hides from the Great Plains, obsidian from the Rocky Mountains, and mica from the southern Appalachian Mountains. Sturdy dugout canoes plied the rivers of the eastern woodlands, connecting their diverse but related societies. Early European explorers and travelers along the Amazon and Orinoco rivers of South America reported active networks of exchange that may well have operated for many centuries. Caribbean peoples using large oceangoing canoes had long conducted an inter-island trade, and the Chincha people undertook ocean-based exchange in copper, beads, and shells along the Pacific coasts of Peru and Ecuador in large seagoing rafts.<sup>24</sup> Another regional commercial network, centered in Mesoamerica, extended north to what is now the southwestern United States and south to Ecuador and Colombia. Many items from Mesoamerica—copper bells, macaw feathers, tons of shells—have been found in the Chaco region of New Mexico. Residents of Chaco also drank liquid chocolate, using jars of Mayan origin and cacao beans imported from Mesoamerica, where the practice began.<sup>25</sup> Turquoise, mined and worked among the Ancestral Pueblo (see pp. 301–03) flowed in the other direction.

But the most active and dense networks of communication and exchange in the Americas lay within, rather than between, the regions that housed the two great civilizations of the Western Hemisphere—Mesoamerica and the Andes. During the classical era of Mesoamerican civilization (200–900 C.E.), both the Maya cities in the Yucatán area of Mexico and Guatemala and the huge city-state of Teotihuacán in central Mexico maintained commercial relationships with one another and throughout the region. In addition to this land-based trade, the Maya conducted a seaborne commerce, using large dugout canoes holding forty to fifty people, along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.<sup>26</sup>

Although most of this trade was in luxury goods rather than basic necessities, it was critical to upholding the position and privileges of royal and noble families. Items such as cotton clothing, precious jewels, and feathers from particular birds marked the status of elite groups and served to attract followers. Controlling access to such high-prestige goods was an important motive for war among Mesoamerican states.<sup>27</sup> Among the Aztecs of the fifteenth century, professional merchants, known as *pochteca*, undertook large-scale trading expeditions both within and well beyond the borders of

#### Inca Roads

Used for transporting goods by pack animal or sending messages by foot, the Inca road network included some 2,000 inns where travelers might find food and shelter. Messengers, operating in relay, could cover as many as 150 miles a day. Here a modern-day citizen of Peru walks along an old Inca trail road. (Loren McIntyre/lorenmcintyre.com)



their empire, sometimes as agents for the state or for members of the nobility, but more often acting on their own as private businessmen.

Unlike the Aztec Empire, in which private traders largely handled the distribution of goods, economic exchange in the Andean Inca Empire during the fifteenth century was a state-run operation, and no merchant group similar to the Aztec *pochteca* emerged there. Instead, great state storehouses bulged with immense quantities of food, clothing, military supplies, blankets, construction materials, and more, all carefully recorded on *quipus* (knotted cords used to record numerical data) by a highly trained class of accountants. From these state centers, goods were transported as needed by caravans of human porters and llamas across the numerous roads and bridges of the empire. Totalling some 20,000 miles, Inca roads traversed the coastal plain and the high Andes in a north/south direction, while lateral roads linked these diverse environments and extended into the eastern rain forests and plains as well. Despite the general absence of private trade, local exchange took place at highland fairs and along the borders of the empire with groups outside the Inca state.



## Reflections: Economic Globalization— Ancient and Modern

The densely connected world of the modern era, linked by ties of commerce and culture around the planet, certainly has roots in much earlier patterns. Particularly in the era of third-wave civilizations from 500 to 1500, the Silk, Sea, and Sand roads of the Afro-Eurasian world and the looser networks of the American web linked distant peoples both economically and culturally, prompted the emergence of new states, and sustained elite privileges in many ancient civilizations. In those ways, they resembled the globalized world of modern times.

In other respects, though, the networks and webs of the premodern millennium differed sharply from those of more recent centuries. Most people still produced primarily for their own consumption rather than for the market, and a much smaller range of goods was exchanged in the marketplaces of the world. Far fewer people then were required to sell their own labor for wages, an almost universal practice in modern economies. Because of transportation costs and technological limitations, most trade was in luxury goods rather than in necessities. In addition, the circuits of commerce were rather more limited than the truly global patterns of exchange that emerged after 1500.

Furthermore, the world economy of the modern era increasingly had a single center—industrialized Western European countries—which came to dominate much of the world both economically and politically during the nineteenth century. Though never completely equal, the economic relationships of earlier times occurred among much more equivalent units. For example, no one region dominated the complex pattern of Indian Ocean exchange, although India and China generally offered manufactured goods, while Southeast Asia and East Africa contributed agricultural products or raw materials. And with the exception of the brief Mongol con-

trol of the Silk Roads and the Inca domination of the Andes for a century, no single power exercised political control over the other major networks of world commerce.

The world of third-wave civilizations, in short, was a more balanced, multicentered world than that of the modern era. Although massive inequalities occurred within particular regions or societies, relationships among the major civilizations operated on a rather more equal basis than in the globalized world of the past several centuries. With the rise of China and India as major players in the world economy of the twenty-first century, are we perhaps returning to that earlier pattern?

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## Second Thoughts

### What's the Significance?

Silk Roads	Srivijaya	Sand Roads
Black Death	Borobudur	Ghana, Mali, Songhay
Indian Ocean trading network	Swahili civilization	trans-Saharan slave trade
	Great Zimbabwe	American web

To assess your mastery of the material in this chapter, visit the **Student Center** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

### Big Picture Questions

1. What motivated and sustained the long-distance commerce of the Silk Roads, Sea Roads, and Sand Roads?
2. Why did the Eastern Hemisphere develop long-distance trade more extensively than did the societies of the Western Hemisphere?
3. In what ways did commercial exchange foster other changes?
4. In what ways was Afro-Eurasia a single interacting zone, and in what respects was it a vast region of separate cultures and civilizations?

### Next Steps: For Further Study

Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (1993). A wonderfully succinct and engaging history of cross-cultural interaction all across Afro-Eurasia before 1500.

E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (1970). A classic account of the trans-Saharan trade.

Rainer Buschmann, *Oceans in World History* (2007). A brief study of communication and exchange across the world's oceans.

K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (1985). A well-regarded study that treats the Indian Ocean basin as a single region linked by both commerce and culture during the postclassical era.

Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (1984). Explores long-distance trade as a generator of social change on a global level.

Liu Xinru and Lynda Shaffer, *Connections across Eurasia* (2007). A brief, accessible, and up-to-date account by two major scholars of the Silk Road trading network.

*Bridging World History*, <http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory>. Units 9 and 10 of this Web-based guide to world history provide an illustrated examination of global trade in the postclassical millennium.

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For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

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# Documents

## Considering the Evidence: Travelers' Tales and Observations



Historians generally prefer to rely on “insiders” for understanding the societies and cultures they study. Documents, artifacts, and images created by people actually living in those times and places have an authenticity that accounts by foreigners may lack. Nonetheless, scholars often find it helpful—even necessary—to make use of records written by outsiders as well. During the postclassical millennium, as long-distance trade flourished and large trans-regional empires grew, opportunities for individuals to travel far beyond their homelands increased. Their accounts have provided historians with invaluable information about particular regions and cultures, as well as about interactions among disparate peoples. The authors of these accounts, perhaps inadvertently, also reveal much about themselves and about the perceptions and misperceptions generated by cross-cultural encounters. The selections that follow provide three examples of intrepid long-distance travelers and their impressions of the societies they encountered on their arduous journeys.

### Document 8.1

#### A Chinese Buddhist in India

During the seventh century, Xuanzang (600–664 C.E.), a highly educated Buddhist monk from China, made a long and difficult journey to India through some of the world’s most daunting deserts and mountain ranges, returning home in 645 C.E. after sixteen years abroad (see Visual Source 8.2, p. 370). His motives, like those of many other Buddhist travelers to India, were essentially religious. “I regretted that the teachings of [Buddhism] were not complete and the scriptures deficient in my own country,” he wrote. “I have doubts and have puzzled in my mind, but I could find no one to solve them. That was why I decided to travel to the West. . . .”<sup>28</sup> In India, the homeland of Buddhism, he hoped to find the teachers and the sacred texts that would answer his questions, enrich Buddhist practice in China, and resolve the many disputes that had created serious divisions within the Buddhist community of his own country.

During a ten-year stay in India, Xuanzang visited many of the holy sites associated with the Buddha's life and studied with leading Buddhist teachers, particularly those at Nalanda University, a huge monastic complex dedicated to Buddhist scholarship (see Map 8.1, p. 335). He traveled widely within India and established a personal relationship with Harsha, the ruler of the state which then encompassed much of northern India. On his return journey to China, he carried hundreds of manuscripts, at least seven statues of the Buddha, and even some relics. Warmly greeted by the Chinese emperor, Xuanzang spent the last two decades of his life translating the texts he had collected into Chinese. He also wrote an account of his travels, known as the *Record of the Western Regions*, and shared his recollections with a fellow monk and translator named Huili, who subsequently wrote a biography of Xuanzang.<sup>29</sup> The selections that follow derive from these two accounts and convey something of Xuanzang's impressions of Indian civilization in the seventh century C.E.

- What do you think surprised or impressed Xuanzang on his visit to India? What features of Indian life might seem most strange to a Chinese visitor?
- How might these selections serve to illustrate or to contradict the descriptions of classical Indian civilization in Chapters 4–6?
- What can this document contribute to our understanding of Buddhist practice in India?

## HUILI

### *A Biography of the Tripitaka Master* Seventh Century C.E.

*[Certainly the emotional highlight of Xuanzang's travels in India was his visit to the site of the Buddha's enlightenment under the famous Bodhi tree. The great traveler's biographer, Huili, recorded his Master's response.]*

Upon his arrival there, the Master worshipped the Bodhi tree and the image of the Buddha attaining enlightenment made by Maitreya Bodhisattva. After having looked at the image with deep sincerity, he prostrated himself before it and deplored sadly, saying with self-reproach, "I do not know where I was born in the course of transmigration at the time

when the Buddha attained enlightenment. I could only come here at this time. . . . It makes me think that my karmic hindrances must have been very heavy!" While he was saying so, his eyes brimmed with sorrowful tears. As that was the time when the monks dismissed the summer retreat, several thousand people forgathered from far and near. Those who saw the Master were choked by sobs in sympathy with him.

*[The great Buddhist monastery/university at Nalanda was likewise a major destination of Xuanzang's journey. It must have been a place of wonder and delight to the Chinese monk, as he described it to Huili.]*

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Source: Li Rongxi (trans.), *A Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation, 1995), 89–90, 94–95.

Ten thousand monks always lived there, both hosts and guests. They studied Mahayana teachings and the doctrines of the eighteen schools, as well as

wordly books such as the Vedas. They also learned about works on logic, grammar, medicine, and divination... Lectures were given at more than a hundred places in the monastery every day, and the students studied diligently without wasting a single moment. As all the monks who lived there were men of virtue, the atmosphere in the monastery was naturally solemn and dignified. For more than seven hundred years since its establishment, none of the monks had committed any offence. Out of

respect for them, the king gave more than a hundred villages for their sustenance. Each village had two hundred families, who daily provided several hundred *shi* of polished nonglutinous rice, butter, and milk. Thus the students could enjoy sufficient supplies of the four requisites without the trouble of going to beg for them. It was because of this effort of their supporters that the scholars could gain achievements in learning.

## XUANZANG

### *Record of the Western Region*

Seventh Century C.E.

[Selections from Xuanzang's more general description of Indian civilization follow here drawn from his own account.]

#### On Towns and Villages

The towns and villages have inner gates; the walls are wide and high; the streets and lanes are tortuous, and the roads winding. The thoroughfares are dirty and the stalls arranged on both sides of the road with appropriate signs. Butchers, fishers, dancers, executioners, and scavengers, and so on [untouchables], have their abodes without [outside] the city. In coming and going these persons are bound to keep on the left side of the road till they arrive at their homes. Their houses are surrounded by low walls and form the suburbs. The earth being soft and muddy, the walls of the towns are mostly built of brick or tiles...

#### On Buddhist Studies

The different schools are constantly at variance, and their contending utterances rise like the angry waves of the sea. The different sects have their separate masters...

There are eighteen schools, each claiming pre-

eminence. The partisans of the Great and Little Vehicle are content to dwell apart. There are some who give themselves up to quiet contemplation, and devote themselves, whether walking or standing still or sitting down, to the acquirement of wisdom and insight; others, on the contrary, differ from these in raising noisy contentions about their faith. According to their fraternity, they are governed by distinctive rules and regulations...

The *Vinaya* discourses [rules governing monastic life] are equally Buddhist books. He who can entirely explain one class of these books is exempted from the control of the *karmadāna*<sup>o</sup>. If he can explain two classes, he receives in addition the equipments of an upper seat (*room*); he who can explain three classes has allotted to him different servants to attend to and obey him; he who can explain four classes has "pure men" allotted to him as attendants; he who can explain five classes of books is then allowed an elephant carriage; he who can explain six classes of books is allowed a surrounding escort. When a man's renown has reached to a high distinction, then at different times he convokes an assembly for discussion. He judges of the superior or inferior talent of those who take part in it; he distinguishes their good or bad points; he praises the clever and reproves the faulty; if one of the assembly distinguishes himself by refined language, subtle

Source: Samuel Beal (trans.), *Su-Yü-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1906), vol. I, book 2, 73–74, 77, 79–84.

<sup>o</sup>*karmadāna*: a high monastic official.



investigation, deep penetration, and severe logic, then he is mounted on an elephant covered with precious ornaments, and conducted by a numerous suite to the gates of the convent.

If, on the contrary, one of the members breaks down in his argument, or uses poor and inelegant phrases, or if he violates a rule in logic and adapts his words accordingly, they proceed to disfigure his face with red and white, and cover his body with dirt and dust, and then carry him off to some deserted spot or leave him in a ditch. Thus they distinguish between the meritorious and the worthless, between the wise and the foolish.

### On Caste and Marriage

With respect to the division of families, there are four classifications. The first is called the Brâhman, men of pure conduct. They guard themselves in religion, live purely, and observe the most correct principles. The second is called Kshatriya, the royal caste. For ages they have been the governing class: they apply themselves to virtue and kindness. The third is called Vaiśyas, the merchant class: they engage in commercial exchange, and they follow profit at home and abroad. The fourth is called Sûdra, the agricultural class: they labor in plowing and tillage. In these four classes purity or impurity of caste assigns to every one his place. When they marry they rise or fall in position according to their new relationship. They do not allow promiscuous marriages between relations. A woman

once married can never take another husband. Besides these there are other classes of many kinds that intermarry according to their several callings.

### On Manners and Justice

With respect to the ordinary people, although they are naturally light-minded, yet they are upright and honorable. In money matters they are without craft, and in administering justice they are considerate. They dread the retribution of another state of existence, and make light of the things of the present world. They are not deceitful or treacherous in their conduct, and are faithful to their oaths and promises. In their rules of government there is remarkable rectitude, whilst in their behavior there is much gentleness and sweetness. With respect to criminals or rebels, these are few in number, and only occasionally troublesome. When the laws are broken or the power of the ruler violated, then the matter is clearly sifted and the offenders imprisoned. There is no infliction of corporal punishment; they are simply left to live or die, and are not counted among men. When the rules of propriety or justice are violated, or when a man fails in fidelity or filial piety, then they cut his nose or his ears off, or his hands and feet, or expel him from the country or drive him out into the desert wilds. For other faults, except these, a small payment of money will redeem the punishment. In the investigation of criminal cases there is no use of rod or staff to obtain proofs (*of guilt*).

## Document 8.2

### A European Christian in China

Of all the travelers along the Silk Road network, the most well-known and celebrated, at least in the West, was Marco Polo (1254–1324). Born and raised in the prosperous commercial city-state of Venice in what is now northern Italy, Marco Polo was a member of a family prominent in the long-distance trade of the Mediterranean and Black sea regions. At the age of seventeen, Marco accompanied his father and an uncle on an immense journey across Eurasia which by 1275 brought the Polos to China, recently conquered by the Mongols. It was, in fact, the relative peace which the Mongols had created in



their huge transcontinental empire that facilitated the Polos' journey (see Map 12.1, p. 530). For the next seventeen years, they lived in China, where they were employed in minor administrative positions by Khublai Khan, the country's Mongol ruler. During these years, Marco Polo apparently traveled widely within China where he gathered material for the book about his travels, which he dictated to a friend after returning home in 1295.

Marco Polo's journey and the book that described it, generally known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, were important elements of the larger process by which an emerging West European civilization reached out to and became aware of the older civilizations of the East. Christopher Columbus carried a marked-up copy of the book on his transatlantic journeys, believing that he was seeking by sea the places Marco Polo had visited by land. Some modern scholars are skeptical about parts of Marco Polo's report, and a few even question whether he ever got to China at all, largely because he omitted any mention of certain prominent features of Chinese life, for example, foot binding, the Great Wall, and tea drinking. Most historians, however, accept the basic outlines of Marco Polo's account, even as they notice exaggerations as well as an inflated perception of his own role within China. The selection that follows conveys Marco Polo's description of the city of Hangzhou, which he referred to as Kinsay. At the time of Marco Polo's visit, it was among the largest cities in the world.

- How would you describe Marco Polo's impressions of the city? What did he notice? What surprised him?
- Why did Marco Polo describe the city as "the finest and the noblest in the world"?
- What marks his account of the city as that of a foreigner and a Christian?
- What evidence of China's engagement with a wider world does this account offer?

## MARCO POLO

### *The Travels of Marco Polo*

1299

The city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world. In this we shall speak

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Source: *The Book of Sir Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 3rd ed., translated and edited by Henry Yule, revised by Henri Cordier (London: John Murray, 1903), vol. 2:185–206.

according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm sent to Bayan, the [Mongol] conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he might be aware of the surpassing grandeur of the city and might be moved to save it from destruction or injury. I will tell you all the truth as it was set down in that doc-

ument. For truth it was, as the said Messer Marco Polo at a later date was able to witness with his own eyes. . . .

First and foremost, then, the document stated the city of Kinsay to be so great that it hath an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it 12,000 bridges of stone. . . . [Most scholars consider these figures a considerable exaggeration.] And though the bridges be so high, the approaches are so well contrived that carts and horses do cross them.

The document aforesaid also went on to state that there were in this city twelve guilds of the different crafts, and that each guild had 12,000 houses in the occupation of its workmen. Each of these houses contains at least twelve men, whilst some contain twenty and some forty. . . . And yet all these craftsmen had full occupation, for many other cities of the kingdom are supplied from this city with what they require.

The document aforesaid also stated that the number and wealth of the merchants, and the amount of goods that passed through their hands, were so enormous that no man could form a just estimate thereof. And I should have told you with regard to those masters of the different crafts who are at the head of such houses as I have mentioned, that neither they nor their wives ever touch a piece of work with their own hands, but live as nicely and delicately as if they were kings and queens. The wives indeed are most dainty and angelical creatures! Moreover it was an ordinance laid down by the King that every man should follow his father's business and no other, no matter if he possessed 100,000 bezants.<sup>o</sup>

Inside the city there is a Lake . . . and all round it are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the richest and most exquisite structure that you can imagine, belonging to the nobles of the city. There are also on its shores many abbeys and churches of the Idolaters [Buddhists]. In the middle of the Lake are two Islands, on each of which stands a rich, beautiful, and spacious edifice, furnished in such style as to seem fit for the palace of an Emperor. And when any one of the citizens desired to hold a marriage feast, or to give any other entertainment, it used to

be done at one of these palaces. And everything would be found there ready to order, such as silver plate, trenchers, and dishes, napkins and table-cloths, and whatever else was needful. . . . Sometimes there would be at these palaces an hundred different parties; some holding a banquet, others celebrating a wedding. . . . in so well-ordered a manner that one party was never in the way of another. . . .

Both men and women are fair and comely, and for the most part clothe themselves in silk, so vast is the supply of that material, both from the whole district of Kinsay, and from the imports by traders from other provinces. And you must know they eat every kind of flesh, even that of dogs and other unclean beasts, which nothing would induce a Christian to eat. . . .

You must know also that the city of Kinsay has some 3,000 baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world. . . .

And the Ocean Sea comes within twenty-five miles of the city at a place called Ganfu, where there is a town and an excellent haven, with a vast amount of shipping which is engaged in the traffic to and from India and other foreign parts, exporting and importing many kinds of wares, by which the city benefits. . . .

I repeat that everything appertaining to this city is on so vast a scale, and the Great Kaan's yearly revenues therefrom are so immense, that it is not easy even to put it in writing. . . .

In this part are the ten principal markets, though besides these there are a vast number of others in the different parts of the town. . . . [T]oward the [market] squares are built great houses of stone, in which the merchants from India and other foreign parts store their wares, to be handy for the markets. In each of the squares is held a market three days in the week, frequented by 40,000 or 50,000 persons, who bring thither for sale every possible necessary of life, so that there is always an ample supply of every kind of meat and game. . . .

Those markets make a daily display of every kind of vegetables and fruits. . . . [V]ery good raisins are

<sup>o</sup>bezant: a Byzantine gold coin.

brought from abroad, and wine likewise. . . . From the Ocean Sea also come daily supplies of fish in great quantity, brought twenty-five miles up the river. . . . All the ten market places are encompassed by lofty houses, and below these are shops where all sorts of crafts are carried on, and all sorts of wares are on sale, including spices and jewels and pearls. Some of these shops are entirely devoted to the sale of wine made from rice and spices, which is constantly made fresh, and is sold very cheap. Certain of the streets are occupied by the women of the town, who are in such a number that I dare not say what it is. They are found not only in the vicinity of the market places, where usually a quarter is assigned to them, but all over the city. They exhibit themselves splendidly attired and abundantly perfumed, in finely garnished houses, with trains of waiting-women. These women are extremely accomplished in all the arts of allurements, and readily adapt their conversation to all sorts of persons, insomuch that strangers who have once tasted their attractions seem to get bewitched, and are so taken with their blandishments and their fascinating ways that they never can get these out of their heads. . . .

Other streets are occupied by the Physicians, and by the Astrologers, who are also teachers of reading and writing; and an infinity of other professions have their places round about those squares. In each of the squares there are two great palaces facing one another, in which are established the officers appointed by the King to decide differences arising between merchants, or other inhabitants of the quarter. . . .

The crowd of people that you meet here at all hours . . . is so vast that no one would believe it possible that victuals enough could be provided for their consumption, unless they should see how, on every market-day, all those squares are thronged and crammed with purchasers, and with the traders who have brought in stores of provisions by land or water; and everything they bring in is disposed of. . . .

The natives of the city are men of peaceful character, both from education and from the example of their kings, whose disposition was the same. They know nothing of handling arms, and keep none in their houses. You hear of no feuds or noisy quarrels or dissensions of any kind among them. Both in their commercial dealings and in their manufactures they are thoroughly honest and truthful, and there is such a degree of good will and neighborly attachment among both men and women that you would take the people who live in the same street to be all one family.

And this familiar intimacy is free from all jealousy or suspicion of the conduct of their women. These they treat with the greatest respect, and a man who should presume to make loose proposals to a married woman would be regarded as an infamous rascal. They also treat the foreigners who visit them for the sake of trade with great cordiality and entertain them in the most winning manner, affording them every help and advice on their business. But on the other hand they hate to see soldiers, and not least those of the Great Kaan's garrisons, regarding them as the cause of their having lost their native kings and lords.

### Document 8.3

## An Arab Muslim in West Africa

For most of the postclassical millennium, the world of Islam was far more extensive than that of Christendom. Nothing more effectively conveys both the extent and the cultural unity of the Islamic world than the travels of Ibn Battuta (1304–1368). Born in Morocco, this learned Arab scholar traversed nearly 75,000 miles during his extraordinary journeys, which took him to Spain, Anatolia, West and East Africa, Arabia, Iraq, Persia, Central and Southeast Asia, India, and China. He traveled at various times as a pilgrim, as a religious seeker, as a legal scholar, and frequently in the company of Muslim

merchants. Remarkably, almost all of his extensive travels occurred within the realm of Islam, where he moved among people who shared his faith and often his Arabic language. Marco Polo, by contrast, had felt himself constantly an outsider, “a stranger in a strange land,” for he was traveling almost everywhere beyond the borders of Christendom. But as a visitor from a more-established Islamic society, Ibn Battuta was often highly critical of the quality of Islamic observance in the frontier regions of the faith.

One such frontier region was West Africa, where a new civilization was taking shape, characterized by large empires such as Mali, a deep involvement in trans-Saharan commerce, and the gradual assimilation of Islam (see Map 8.3, p. 350, and pp. 348–51 and 492–94). The new faith had been introduced by North African Muslim traders and had found a growing acceptance, particularly in the urban centers, merchant communities, and ruling classes of West African kingdoms. On the last of his many journeys, Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara Desert with a traders’ caravan to visit Mali in 1352. Upon returning home the following year, he dictated his recollections and experiences to a scribe, producing a valuable account of this West African civilization in the fourteenth century.

- How would you describe Ibn Battuta’s impression of Mali? What surprised or shocked him? What did he appreciate?
- What does Ibn Battuta’s description of his visit to Mali reveal about his own attitudes and his image of himself?
- What might historians learn from this document about the nature and extent of Islam’s penetration in this West African empire? What elements of older and continuing West African cultural traditions are evident in the document?
- What specifically does Ibn Battuta find shocking about the women he encounters on his travels in West Africa?
- What indications of Mali’s economic involvement with a wider world are evident in the document?

#### IBN BATTUTA

### *Travels in Asia and Africa*

1354

Thus we reached the town of Iwalatan<sup>o</sup> after a journey from Sijilmasa of two months to a day. Iwalatan is the northernmost province of the blacks.... The garments of its inhabitants, most of

whom belong to the Massufa tribe, are of fine Egyptian fabrics.

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Source: Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, translated and edited by H.A.R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929), 319–34.

<sup>o</sup>Iwalatan: Walata.

Their women are of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. The state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever; no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of Malabar. But those are heathens; these people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending the prayers.

The women there have "friends" and "companions" amongst the men outside their own families, and the men in the same way have "companions" amongst the women of other families. A man may go into his house and find his wife entertaining her "companion," but he takes no objection to it. One day at Iwalatan I went into the qadi's<sup>o</sup> house, after asking his permission to enter, and found with him a young woman of remarkable beauty. When I saw her I was shocked and turned to go out, but she laughed at me, instead of being overcome by shame, and the qadi said to me "Why are you going out? She is my companion." I was amazed at their conduct, for he was a theologian and a pilgrim [to Mecca] to boot. . . .

When I decided to make the journey to Malli,<sup>o</sup> which is reached in twenty-four days from Iwalatan if the traveler pushes on rapidly, I hired a guide from the Massufa—for there is no necessity to travel in a company on account of the safety of that road—and set out with three of my companions. . . .

A traveler in this country carries no provisions, whether plain food or seasonings, and neither gold nor silver. He takes nothing but pieces of salt and glass ornaments, which the people call beads, and some aromatic goods. When he comes to a village the womenfolk of the blacks bring out millet, milk, chickens, pulped lotus fruit, rice,

"funi" (a grain resembling mustard seed, from which "kuskusu"<sup>o</sup> and gruel are made), and pounded haricot beans. . . .

Thus I reached the city of Malli, the capital of the king of the blacks. I stopped at the cemetery and went to the quarter occupied by the whites, where I asked for Muhammad ibn al-Faqih. I found that he had hired a house for me and went there. . . . I met the qadi of Malli, 'Abd ar-Rahman, who came to see me; he is a black, a pilgrim [to Mecca], and a man of fine character. I met also the interpreter Dugha, who is one of the principal men among the blacks. All these persons sent me hospitality gifts of food and treated me with the utmost generosity. . . .

The sultan<sup>o</sup> of Malli is Mansa Sulayman. . . . He is a miserly king, not a man from whom one might hope for a rich present. It happened that I spent these two months without seeing him, on account of my illness. Later on he held a banquet. . . . to which the commanders, doctors, qadi, and preacher were invited, and I went along with them. Reading-desks were brought in, and the Koran was read through, then they prayed for our master Abu'l-Hasan<sup>o</sup> and also for Mansa Sulayman.

When the ceremony was over I went forward and saluted Mansa Sulayman. . . . When I withdrew, the [sultan's] hospitality gift was sent to me. . . . I stood up thinking. . . . that it consisted of robes of honor and money, and lo!, it was three cakes of bread, and a piece of beef fried in native oil, and a calabash of sour curds. When I saw this I burst out laughing, and thought it a most amazing thing that they could be so foolish and make so much of such a paltry matter.

On certain days the sultan holds audiences in the palace yard, where there is a platform under a tree, with three steps; this they call the "pempi." It is carpeted with silk and has cushions placed on it. [Over it] is raised the umbrella, which is a sort of pavilion made of silk, surmounted by a bird in gold, about the size of a falcon. The sultan comes out of a door in a corner of the palace, carrying a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. On his head he has a golden

<sup>o</sup>qadi: judge.

<sup>o</sup>Malli: the city of Mali.

<sup>o</sup>kuskusu: couscous.

<sup>o</sup>sultan: ruler.

<sup>o</sup>Abu'l-Hasan: the sultan of Morocco.



skullcap, bound with a gold band which has narrow ends shaped like knives, more than a span in length. His usual dress is a velvety red tunic, made of the European fabrics called "mutanfas." The sultan is preceded by his musicians, who carry gold and silver guimbris<sup>o</sup>, and behind him come three hundred armed slaves. He walks in a leisurely fashion, affecting a very slow movement, and even stops from time to time. On reaching the *pempi* he stops and looks round the assembly, then ascends it in the sedate manner of a preacher ascending a mosque-pulpit. As he takes his seat the drums, trumpets, and bugles are sounded. Three slaves go out at a run to summon the sovereign's deputy and the military commanders, who enter and sit down. Two saddled and bridled horses are brought, along with two goats, which they hold to serve as a protection against the evil eye....

The blacks are of all people the most submissive to their king and the most abject in their behavior before him.... If he summons any of them while he is holding an audience in his pavilion, the person summoned takes off his clothes and puts on worn garments, removes his turban and dons a dirty skullcap, and enters with his garments and trousers raised knee-high. He goes forward in an attitude of humility and dejection and knocks the ground hard with his elbows, then stands with bowed head and bent back listening to what he says. If anyone addresses the king and receives a reply from him, he uncovers his back and throws dust over his head and back, for all the world like a bather splashing himself with water....

On feast-days..., the poets come in. Each of them is inside a figure resembling a thrush, made of feathers, and provided with a wooden head with a red beak, to look like a thrush's head. They stand in front of the sultan in this ridiculous makeup and recite their poems. I was told that their poetry is a kind of sermonizing in which they say to the sultan: "This *pempi* which you occupy was that whereon sat this king and that king, and such and such were this one's noble actions and such and such the other's. So do you too do good deeds whose memory will

outlive you."... I was told that this practice is a very old custom amongst them, prior to the introduction of Islam, and that they have kept it up.

The blacks possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth. On the contrary, they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it. They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous in attending them in congregations, and in bringing up their children to them.

On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the mosque, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd. It is a custom of theirs to send each man his boy [to the mosque] with his prayer-mat; the boy spreads it out for his master in a place befitting him [and remains on it] until he comes to the mosque....

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their zeal for learning the Koran by heart.... I visited the qadi in his house on the day of the festival. His children were chained up, so I said to him, "Will you not let them loose?" He replied, "I shall not do so until they learn the Koran by heart."

Among their bad qualities are the following. The women servants, slave-girls, and young girls go about in front of everyone naked, without a stitch of clothing on them. Women go into the sultan's presence naked and without coverings, and his daughters also go about naked. Then there is their custom of putting dust and ashes on their heads, as a mark of respect, and the grotesque ceremonies we have described when the poets recite their verses. Another reprehensible practice among many of them is the eating of carrion, dogs, and asses.

<sup>o</sup> **guimbris:** two-stringed guitars.

I went on...to Gawgaw<sup>o</sup>, which is a large city on the Nile<sup>o</sup>, and one of the finest towns in the

<sup>o</sup>**Gawgaw:** Gogo.

<sup>o</sup>**Nile:** Niger. The Niger River was long regarded by outsiders as a tributary of The Nile.

land of the blacks. It is also one of their biggest and best-provisioned towns, with rice in plenty, milk, and fish... The buying and selling of its inhabitants is done with cowry shells, and the same is the case at Malli. I stayed there about a month.

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## Using the Evidence: Travelers' Tales and Observations

1. **Describing a foreign culture:** Each of these documents was written by an outsider to the people or society he is describing. What different postures toward these foreign cultures are evident in the sources? How did the travelers' various religions shape their perception of places they visited? How did they view the women of their host societies? Were these travelers more impressed by the similarities or by the differences between their home cultures and the ones they visited?
2. **Defining the self-perception of authors:** What can we learn from these documents about the men who wrote them? What motivated them? How did they define themselves in relationship to the societies they observed?
3. **Assessing the credibility of sources:** What information in these sources would be most valuable for historians seeking to understand India, China, and West Africa in the postclassical era? What statements in these sources might be viewed with the most skepticism? You will want to consider the authors' purposes and their intended audiences in evaluating their writings.
4. **Considering outsiders' accounts:** What are the advantages and limitations for historians in drawing on the writings of foreign observers?

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# Visual Sources

## Considering the Evidence: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia



The huge region between the Caspian Sea and western China is known to scholars as Central Asia, or sometimes as Inner Asia (see Map 8.1, p. 335). Its geography features rugged mountains, vast deserts, extensive grasslands, and a generally arid climate, all of which made settled farming difficult or impossible, except in scattered oases. As a result, most of Central Asia's peoples pursued a pastoral and nomadic way of life, dependent on their horses, camels, sheep, goats, or cattle. Linguistically and culturally, the majority were of Turkic or Mongol background. These features have long given Central Asia a distinctive character, despite the diversity of its many disparate peoples.

In recent centuries, Central Asia gained a reputation as a remote and backward region, far removed from the major centers of global trade and development. During the postclassical millennium, however, that region functioned as a vital Eurasian crossroad. Perhaps most obviously, it was a commercial crossroads, as the Silk Roads traversed its territory, while many of its peoples participated actively in that network of exchange. Central Asia was also a cultural and religious crossroads: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, elements of Greek and Chinese culture—all of these traditions, born in the outer rim of Eurasian civilizations, found a place among the peoples of Central Asia, frequently carried there by merchants. Finally, Central Asia was an imperial crossroads, for there the empires or military federations periodically established by pastoral societies clashed with the established civilizations and states of China, India, the Middle East, and Europe to the south and west. Thus Central Asia was for many centuries a vast arena of intense cross-cultural interaction. The images that follow provide a brief introduction to a few of its many peoples and to the mingling of their cultures with those of a wider world.

The Kushans were a pastoral nomadic people from the area around Dunhuang at the far western edge of China. In the early centuries B.C.E., they had migrated to the region that now makes up northwestern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, where they established a sizable and prosperous empire linked to the Silk Road trading network. It was a remarkably cosmopolitan

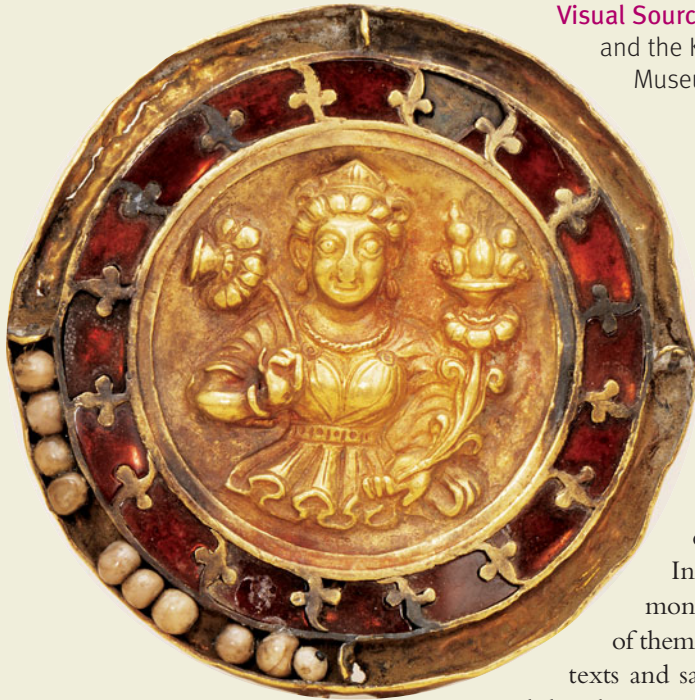
place, and it flourished until the third or fourth century C.E. That empire, according to one recent account, “created stable conditions at the heart of Central Asia, allowing for the great flowering of trans-Eurasian mercantile and cultural exchange that occurred along the Silk Roads.”<sup>30</sup>

Since parts of this empire had earlier been ruled by Alexander the Great and his Greek successors (see pp. 152–54), classical Mediterranean culture was a prominent element of Kushan culture. The Kushans used the Greek alphabet to write their official language, which was derived from India. The greatest of the Kushan rulers, Kanishka (ruled ca. 127–153 C.E.), styled himself “Great King, King of Kings, Son of God,” a title that had both Persian and Chinese precedents. Hindu devotional cults as well as Buddhism flourished, and the Kushan Empire became a launching pad for the spread of Buddhism into Central Asia and ultimately into China and Japan (see pp. 338–40). It was here that the earliest human representations of the Buddha were sculpted, and often with distinctly Greek features. Despite multiple Eurasian influences, Kushan artists depicted their rulers in typical steppe nomadic style: on horseback, wearing loose trousers, heavy boots, and knee-length robes.<sup>31</sup>

In Visual Source 8.1, a Kushan pendant dating to the fourth century C.E. provides an illustration of the cultural blending so characteristic of the region. The medallion features Hariti, originally a fearsome Hindu goddess who abducted and killed children, feeding their flesh to her own offspring. But in an encounter with the Buddha, Hariti repented and was transformed into a compassionate protector of children. Here she is depicted holding in her right hand a lotus blossom, a prominent Buddhist symbol; her left hand holds another lotus flower supporting a flask or cornucopia overflowing with pomegranates (symbolizing food and abundance). According to local mythology, the Buddha had offered Hariti pomegranates (often said to resemble human flesh) as a substitute for the children she was devouring.

While the content of this pendant is thoroughly Indian and Buddhist, scholars believe that this representation of Hariti was probably modeled after the Greek goddess Tyche, also portrayed holding a cornucopia. Furthermore, her short tunic worn with a belt was likewise of Greek or Hellenistic origin. A further cultural influence is found in the decorations that surround the image, for the border of pearls and stylized flowers derives from Persia.

- Why do you think the Kushan artist who created this image chose to weave together so many distinct cultural strands?
- What does the story of Hariti’s transformation tell us about the impact of Buddhism in the region?
- Why might the Greek goddess Tyche been used as a model for Hariti? (Hint: you might want to do a little research on Tyche before answering this question.)



**Visual Source 8.1** Greek Culture, Buddhism, and the Kushans (V&A Images, Victoria and Albert Museum)

If the Kushan state was a major point of departure for the spread of Buddhism beyond India, that faith soon took hold in many of the Central Asian oasis cities along the Silk Road network, reaching China in the early centuries C.E. (see pp. 335–41).

In addition to merchants, Buddhist monks traversed the Silk Roads, some of them headed for India in search of holy texts and sacred relics (see Document 8.1), while others traveled from town to town teaching

the message of the Buddha. Thus at least until the rise of Islam (see Chapter 11), Buddhism was a common feature in the experience of many Central Asian peoples and a point of contact with the civilizations of India and China. Visual Source 8.2, a tenth-century Chinese painting, shows a traveling monk on the Silk Road. It derives from the Magao Caves, located near Dunhuang, a major center of Buddhist art and an important stop on the Silk Roads. (See Map 8.1, p. 335, and the photo on p. 339.) Notice that the monk is leading a tiger, long a symbol of protection and courage and a messenger between heaven and the human world (see the photo on p. 91). It also recalls a much-told story of the Buddha, in an earlier life, compassionately offering his blood and body to feed some starving tiger cubs and their mother.

- What function does the small Buddha sitting on a cloud at the upper left play in this painting?
- On his back the monk is carrying a heavy load of Buddhist texts, or *sutras*. Why do you think Buddhist monks were so eager to acquire and to disseminate such texts? (See also Document 8.1, pp. 356–59.)
- At the end of the monk's staff hangs what is probably a container for relics, perhaps a bone or a tuft of hair from the Buddha himself. Why might such relics have had such an appeal for the faithful? Can you identify a similar veneration of relics in other religious traditions?





Visual Source 8.2 Buddhist Monks on the Silk Road (British Museum/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Another central Asian people with extensive involvement in trans-Eurasian commerce were the Uighurs, Turkic-speaking nomads living north of the Gobi Desert (see Map 8.1, p. 335). By the eighth century C.E., they had established a powerful state that endured for about a century (744–840). Controlling a critical passage of the Silk Road network, Uighurs traded extensively with China, exchanging horses, camels, yaks, and hides for enormous quantities of Chinese silk. In fact, Uighur military forces saved the Chinese Tang dynasty from an internal rebellion between 755 and 763 and gained even greater access to Chinese wealth as they looted Chinese cities. A Chinese dynastic history bemoaned the unequal relationship that followed for a time: “The barbarians acquired silk insatiably and we were given useless horses.”<sup>32</sup> The Uighur court likewise gained a series of Chinese princesses and considerable Chinese cultural influence.

They also acquired a new religion in China—Manichaeism. This was a faith of Persian origin, whose prophet, Mani (216–274 C.E.), saw himself in a long line of prophets including Zoroaster, the Buddha, and Jesus. Drawing on all of these traditions, Mani fashioned a religion that understood the world as an arena of intense conflict between the forces of Light (the soul) and the Dark (the material world). It spread widely within the Roman Empire and along the Silk Road network into China, where it was soon subject to intense persecution at the hands of Buddhists. From there the invading Uighurs picked it up and made it the official faith of their empire. No one knows precisely why Uighur rulers chose to convert to this Persian-based religion. Perhaps it linked the Uighurs to the larger world of agrarian civilizations, while reducing their cultural dependence on China. In any event, it represents another remarkable example of cultural interchange along the crossroads of Central Asia.

Visual Source 8.3 comes from a page in a Manichaean book dated variously between the eighth and eleventh centuries and found in the Uighur region of Khocho. It shows a number of Manichaean priests, wearing their characteristic tall white hats and writing at their desks. The fragmentary text in the middle, written in a Uighur script, warns against those who “believe in a wrong and contrary law” and “pray false prayers.” As if to symbolize the corrupt and inverted world of Darkness, the image presents the priests writing left-handed and the script running from bottom to top instead of the normal top-down fashion.<sup>33</sup>

- How would you read the overall religious message of the painting? What might suggest the ultimate triumph of the Light? Consider the role of the trees, bearing the flowers and fruits of good deeds.
- What does the presence of this Persian-based religion among a distant Central Asian people suggest about the postclassical Eurasian world?





Visual Source 8.3 Manichaean Scribes (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY)

Clearly the most well-known of Central Asian peoples were the Mongols, described more fully in Chapter 12. Under the leadership of Chinggis Khan, a number of quite distinct and rival pastoral tribes in what is now Mongolia had been brought together in a powerful military confederation by the early thirteenth century. That newly created Mongol state then embarked on an enormous effort of conquest that gave rise to the world's largest empire. That empire encompassed the civilizations of China, Persia, and Russia as well as many of the other nomadic peoples of Central Asia, and it threatened Japan, Southeast Asia, central Europe, and Egypt (see Map 12.1, p. 530.). Its presence loomed all across Eurasia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, generating numerous cross-cultural encounters and interactions.

None of these was of greater significance than the Mongol conquest of China fully accomplished by 1279. While the Mongols ruled China in a largely Chinese fashion, they also sought to preserve much of their own culture. Thus they undertook an annual ritual of scattering mare's milk, employed Mongol shamans at the ruler's court, continued to wear native costumes of leather and fur, and rode to the hunt in traditional Mongol fashion. Mongol women living in China generally gave birth in a traditional felt-covered dwelling rather than in a Chinese-style home.

Visual Source 8.4 illustrates the Mongol effort to maintain their own identity even as they were immersed in the sophisticated culture of China, which had proved so attractive to many neighboring peoples. The painting (ca. 1280) is by the Chinese court artist Liu Guandao and was commissioned by Khubilai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan and the Mongol ruler of China from 1264 to 1294. Titled *Khubilai Khan on a Hunt*, it shows the Mongol ruler on a dark horse, wearing a distinctive fur-rimmed white robe that covers his Chinese royal garments, and accompanied by a female consort and a number of servants and officials. The figure in blue in the lower group of hunters carries a hawk, often used by Central Asian peoples during a hunt, while a trained wildcat sits on the horse below.

- Why do you think Khubilai Khan commissioned such a painting? What impression of himself did he seek to convey?
- What features of the landscape and depictions of people and animals illustrate the world of pastoral peoples from which the Mongols had come?
- What elements of Central Asian history are suggested by the camel train in the upper right?
- How might traditional Chinese officials respond to this painting? How might they react to the inclusion of women in a royal hunt?





Visual Source 8.4 The Mongols in China (National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan)



Among the peoples of Central Asia, none had a longer-lasting impact on world history than the Turks, a term that refers to a variety of groups speaking related Turkic languages. Originating as pastoral nomads in what is now Mongolia, Turkic peoples gradually migrated westward, occupying much of Central Asia, sometimes creating sizeable empires and settling down as farmers. But the greatest transformation of Turkic culture occurred with the Turkic peoples' conversion to Islam. That process took place between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, as Muslim armies penetrated Central Asia and Muslim merchants became prominent traders on the Silk Road.

Also very important in the Turks' conversion to Islam were Muslim holy men known as dervishes. Operating within the Sufi tradition of Islam, dervishes were spiritual seekers who sought a direct personal experience of the Divine Reality and developed reputations for good works, personal kindness, and sometimes magic or religious powers. A Turkic tale from the fourteenth century tells the story of one such holy man, Baba Tukles, sent by God to convert a ruler named Ozbek Khan. To overcome the opposition of the khan's traditional shamans, Baba Tukles invited one of the shamans to enter a fiery-hot oven pit with him. The shaman was instantly incinerated, while the Muslim holy man emerged unscathed from that test of religious power.<sup>34</sup> Such tales of the supernatural and the conversion of rulers contributed to the attractiveness of Islam among Turkic peoples and have been a common feature in the spread of all of the major world religions.

Visual Source 8.5, a painting dating from the sixteenth century, shows a number of Turkish dervishes performing the turning or whirling dance associated with the Sufi religious order established in the thirteenth century by the great mystical poet Rumi. Intended to bring participants into direct contact with the Divine, the whirling dance itself drew upon the ideas and practices of an ancient Central Asian religious life in which practitioners, known as shamans, entered into an ecstatic state of consciousness and connection to the spirit world. "Especially in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Anatolia," writes one scholar, "the mystical ecstasy [of the whirling dance] was understood in the spirit of the shamanic tradition."<sup>35</sup> This blending of two religious traditions—mystical or Sufi Islam and shamanism—represents yet another example of the cultural interactions that washed across Central Asia in the postclassical millennium.

- What image of these dervishes was the artist trying to convey?
- Why might such holy men have been effective missionaries of Islam in Central Asia?
- Notice the musical instruments that accompany the turning dance—sticks on the left, a flutelike instrument known as a *ney* in the center, and drums on the right. What do you think this music and dance contributed to the religious experience of the participants?



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## Using the Evidence: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia

1. **Considering cross-cultural interactions:** The pastoral peoples of Central Asia and the settled agricultural civilizations adjacent to them did not live in closed or separate worlds. What evidence contained in these visual sources supports or challenges this assertion?
2. **Defining change and continuity:** In what ways do these visual sources indicate that the peoples of Central Asia were changed by their interactions with surrounding civilizations? In what respects did they retain elements of their earlier cultures?
3. **Explaining cultural change:** What aspects of these visual sources indicate that the various peoples of Central Asia were receptive to the religious and cultural traditions of neighboring civilizations?