WORLD HISTORY TO 1500



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Arkansas Tech
World History to 1500

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

1: Introduction

- 1.1: TitlePage
- 1.2: InfoPage
- 1.3: Table of Contents
- 1.4: Licensing
- 1.5: Introduction- Understanding the Past
  - 1.5.1: Introduction
  - 1.5.2: Developing a Global Perspective
  - 1.5.3: Primary Sources
  - 1.5.4: Causation and Interpretation in History
  - 1.5.5: Key Terms
  - 1.5.6: Section Summary
  - 1.5.7: Review Questions
  - 1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
  - 1.5.9: Application and Reflection Questions

2: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies

- 2.1: Introduction
- 2.2: Early Civilizations
- 2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia
- 2.4: Ancient Egypt
- 2.5: The Indus Valley Civilization
- 2.6: Key Terms
- 2.7: Section Summary
- 2.8: Review Questions
- 2.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 2.10: Application and Reflection Questions

3: The Near East

- 3.1: Introduction
- 3.2: From Old Babylon to the Medes
- 3.3: Egypt's New Kingdom
- 3.4: The Persian Empire
- 3.5: The Hebrews
- 3.6: Key Terms
- 3.7: Section Summary
- 3.8: Review Questions
- 3.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 3.10: Application and Reflection Questions

4: Asia in Ancient Times

- 4.1: Introduction
- 4.2: Geography of East Asia
- 4.3: Ancient China
- 4.4: The Steppes
- 4.5: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
- 4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia
- 4.7: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire
- 4.8: Key Terms
- 4.9: Section Summary
- 4.10: Review Questions
- 4.11: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 4.12: Application and Reflection Questions

5: Mediterranean Peoples

- 5.1: Introduction
- 5.2: Early Mediterranean Peoples
- 5.3: Ancient Greece
- 5.4: The Hellenistic Era
- 5.5: The Roman Republic
- 5.6: The Age of Augustus
- 5.7: Key Terms
- 5.8: Section Summary
- 5.9: Review Questions
- 5.10: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 5.11: Application and Reflection Questions

6: Africa in Ancient Times

- 6.1: Introduction
- 6.2: Africa’s Geography and Climate
- 6.3: The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations
- 6.4: The Kingdom of Kush
- 6.5: North Africa’s Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections
- 6.6: Key Terms
- 6.7: Section Summary
- 6.8: Review Questions
- 6.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 6.10: Application and Reflection Questions

7: The Americas in Ancient Times

- 7.1: Introduction
- 7.2: Populating and Settling the Americas
- 7.3: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas
- 7.4: The Age of Empires in the Americas
- 7.5: Key Terms
- 7.6: Section Summary
- 7.7: Review Questions
- 7.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

- 7.9: Application and Reflection Questions

8: Empires of Faith

- 8.1: Introduction
- 8.2: The Eastward Shift
- 8.3: The Byzantine Empire and Persia
- 8.4: The Kingdoms of Aksum and Himyar
- 8.5: The Margins of Empire
- 8.6: Key Terms
- 8.7: Section Summary
- 8.8: Review Questions
- 8.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 8.10: Application and Reflection Questions

9: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates

- 9.1: Introduction
- 9.2: The Rise and Message of Islam
- 9.3: The Arab-Islamic Conquests and the First Islamic States
- 9.4: Islamization and Religious Rule under Islam
- 9.5: Key Terms
- 9.6: Section Summary
- 9.7: Review Questions
- 9.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 9.9: Application and Reflection Questions

10: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia

- 10.1: Introduction
- 10.2: The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages
- 10.3: East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages
- 10.4: Border States- Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan
- 10.5: Key Terms
- 10.6: Section Summary
- 10.7: Review Questions
- 10.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 10.9: Application and Reflection Questions

11: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement

- 11.1: Introduction
- 11.2: The Post-Roman West in the Early Middle Ages
- 11.3: The Seljuk Migration and the Call from the East
- 11.4: Patriarch and Papacy- The Church and the Call to Crusade
- 11.5: The Crusading Movement
- 11.6: Key Terms
- 11.7: Section Summary
- 11.8: Review Questions
- 11.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 11.10: Application and Reflection Questions

12: Pax Mongolica- The Steppe Empire of the Mongols

- 12.1: Introduction
- 12.2: Song China and the Steppe Peoples
- 12.3: Chinggis Khan and the Early Mongol Empire
- 12.4: The Mongol Empire Fragments
- 12.5: Christianity and Islam outside Central Asia
- 12.6: Key Terms
- 12.7: Section Summary
- 12.8: Review Questions
- 12.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 12.10: Application and Reflection Questions

13: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa

- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Culture and Society in Medieval Africa
- 13.3: Medieval Sub-Saharan Africa
- 13.4: The People of the Sahel
- 13.5: Key Terms
- 13.6: Section Summary
- 13.7: Review Questions
- 13.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 13.9: Application and Reflection Questions

14: Climate Change and Plague in the Fourteenth Century

- 14.1: Introduction
- 14.2: Asia, North Africa, and Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century
- 14.3: Famine, Climate Change, and Migration
- 14.4: The Black Death from East to West
- 14.5: The Long-Term Effects of Global Transformation
- 14.6: Key Terms
- 14.7: Section Summary
- 14.8: Review Questions
- 14.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 14.10: Application and Reflection Questions

15: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming

- 15.1: Introduction
- 15.2: The Ottomans and the Mongols
- 15.3: From the Mamluks to Ming China
- 15.4: Gunpowder and Nomads in a Transitional Age
- 15.5: Key Terms
- 15.6: Section Summary
- 15.7: Review Questions
- 15.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 15.9: Application and Reflection Questions

16: Appendix

- 16.1: Appendix A- Glossary
- 16.2: Appendix B- Maps and Timelines
- 16.3: Appendix C- World Maps
- 16.4: Appendix D- Recommended Resources for the Study of World History

17: Resources

- 17.1: Prehistory
  - 17.1.1: Chronology
  - 17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory
  - 17.1.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.1.4: Key Terms
  - 17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa
  - 17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution
  - 17.1.7: Summary
  - 17.1.8: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.1.9: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.2: Early Middle Eastern and Northeast African Civilizations
  - 17.2.1: Chronology
  - 17.2.2: Introduction - Defining Civilization
  - 17.2.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.2.4: Key Terms
  - 17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia
  - 17.2.6: Sumerian City-States
  - 17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
  - 17.2.8: The Significance of Mesopotamia for World History
  - 17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel
  - 17.2.10: Early Israelites
  - 17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel
  - 17.2.12: The Importance of the Israelites and Ancient Israel
  - 17.2.13: Ancient Egypt
  - 17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
  - 17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush
  - 17.2.16: Summary
  - 17.2.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.2.18: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.3: Ancient and Medieval India
  - 17.3.1: Chronology of Ancient and Medieval India
  - 17.3.2: Introduction - A Political Overview
  - 17.3.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.3.4: Key Terms
  - 17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)
  - 17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)
  - 17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
  - 17.3.8: The Mauryan Empire (321-184 BCE)
  - 17.3.9: Regional States, Trade, and Devotional Religion- India 200 BCE-300 CE
  - 17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)
  - 17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300

- 17.3.12: Conclusion
- 17.3.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.3.14: Links to Primary Sources

- 17.4: China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
  - 17.4.1: Chronology of China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
  - 17.4.2: Introduction to China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
  - 17.4.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.4.4: Key Terms
  - 17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
  - 17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
  - 17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China
  - 17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE
  - 17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
  - 17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia
  - 17.4.11: The Song Dynasty
  - 17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty
  - 17.4.13: Conclusion
  - 17.4.14: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.5: The Greek World from Bronze Age to Roman Conquest
  - 17.5.1: Chronology
  - 17.5.2: Introduction
  - 17.5.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.5.4: Key Terms
  - 17.5.5: Geography and Topography
  - 17.5.6: Periods of Greek History
  - 17.5.7: Methodology- Sources and Problem
  - 17.5.8: From Mythology to History
  - 17.5.9: Archaic Greece
  - 17.5.10: The Classical Period
  - 17.5.11: Hellenistic Period
  - 17.5.12: Conclusion
  - 17.5.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.5.14: Links of Primary Sources
- 17.6: The Roman World from 753 BCE to 500 BCE
  - 17.6.1: Chronology
  - 17.6.2: Introduction
  - 17.6.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.6.4: Key Terms
  - 17.6.5: Geography and Topography of Rome and the Roman Empire
  - 17.6.6: Basic Chronology and Periods of Roman History
  - 17.6.7: Sources and Problems
  - 17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
  - 17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
  - 17.6.10: The Early Empire
  - 17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
  - 17.6.12: Conclusion- From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages
  - 17.6.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.6.14: Links to Primary Sources

- 17.7: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE
  - 17.7.1: Chronology
  - 17.7.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE
  - 17.7.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.7.4: Key Terms
  - 17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire
  - 17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian
  - 17.7.7: Perspectives - Post-Roman East and West
  - 17.7.8: The British Isles - Europe's Periphery
  - 17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery
  - 17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
  - 17.7.11: Global Context
  - 17.7.12: Daily Life in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empires
  - 17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse
  - 17.7.14: The Tenth-Century Church
  - 17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors
  - 17.7.16: Conclusion and Global Perspectives
  - 17.7.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.7.18: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.8: Islam to the Mamluks
  - 17.8.1: Chronology
  - 17.8.2: Introduction
  - 17.8.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.8.4: Key Terms
  - 17.8.5: Geography of the Middle East
  - 17.8.6: Rise of Islam
  - 17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
  - 17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
  - 17.8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate
  - 17.8.10: The 'Abbasid Caliphate
  - 17.8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate
  - 17.8.12: The Crusades
  - 17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate
  - 17.8.14: Conclusion
  - 17.8.15: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.8.16: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.9: African History to 1500
  - 17.9.1: Chronology
  - 17.9.2: Introduction
  - 17.9.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.9.4: Key Terms
  - 17.9.5: Writing the History of Ancient and Medieval Africa
  - 17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
  - 17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
  - 17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe
  - 17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
  - 17.9.10: Conclusion
  - 17.9.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.10: The Americas

- 17.10.1: Chronology
- 17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas
- 17.10.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
- 17.10.4: Key Terms
- 17.10.5: Mesoamerica
- 17.10.6: The Maya
- 17.10.7: The Aztec
- 17.10.8: Early Andes
- 17.10.9: North America
- 17.10.10: Conclusion
- 17.10.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.10.12: Links to Primary Sources

- 17.11: Central Asia
  - 17.11.1: Chronology
  - 17.11.2: Introduction to Central Asia
  - 17.11.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.11.4: Key Terms
  - 17.11.5: Turkic Migrations
  - 17.11.6: Islam
  - 17.11.7: The Mongol Era
  - 17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai
  - 17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)
  - 17.11.10: Timur
  - 17.11.11: Conclusion
  - 17.11.12: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.11.13: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.12: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE
  - 17.12.1: Chronology
  - 17.12.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE
  - 17.12.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.12.4: Key Terms
  - 17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe
  - 17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade
  - 17.12.7: Growth in Agriculture
  - 17.12.8: A Roman Empire?
  - 17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation
  - 17.12.10: Expansion of Christendom
  - 17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century
  - 17.12.12: The Crusades
  - 17.12.13: The Twelfth Century in Western Europe
  - 17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse
  - 17.12.15: The Twelfth-Century Renaissance
  - 17.12.16: The Third Crusade
  - 17.12.17: The Fourth Crusade
  - 17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe
  - 17.12.19: Later Crusades and Crusading's Ultimate Failure
  - 17.12.20: Scholasticism
  - 17.12.21: Daily Life at the Medieval Zenith
  - 17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises

- 17.12.23: War
- 17.12.24: Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages
- 17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy
- 17.12.26: The European Renaissance
- 17.12.27: States in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance
- 17.12.28: Iberia and the Atlantic- New Worlds
- 17.12.29: Conclusion
- 17.12.30: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.12.31: Links to Primary Sources

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Detailed Licensing

Licensing

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Introduction

1.1: TitlePage
1.2: InfoPage
1.3: Table of Contents
1.4: Licensing
1.5: Introduction- Understanding the Past
1.5.1: Introduction
1.5.2: Developing a Global Perspective
1.5.3: Primary Sources
1.5.4: Causation and Interpretation in History
1.5.5: Key Terms
1.5.6: Section Summary
1.5.7: Review Questions
1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
1.5.9: Application and Reflection Questions

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

1: Introduction

- 1.1: TitlePage
- 1.2: InfoPage
- 1.3: Table of Contents
- 1.4: Licensing
- 1.5: Introduction- Understanding the Past
  - 1.5.1: Introduction
  - 1.5.2: Developing a Global Perspective
  - 1.5.3: Primary Sources
  - 1.5.4: Causation and Interpretation in History
  - 1.5.5: Key Terms
  - 1.5.6: Section Summary
  - 1.5.7: Review Questions
  - 1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
  - 1.5.9: Application and Reflection Questions

2: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies

- 2.1: Introduction
- 2.2: Early Civilizations
- 2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia
- 2.4: Ancient Egypt
- 2.5: The Indus Valley Civilization
- 2.6: Key Terms
- 2.7: Section Summary
- 2.8: Review Questions
- 2.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 2.10: Application and Reflection Questions

3: The Near East

- 3.1: Introduction
- 3.2: From Old Babylon to the Medes
- 3.3: Egypt's New Kingdom
- 3.4: The Persian Empire
- 3.5: The Hebrews
- 3.6: Key Terms
- 3.7: Section Summary
- 3.8: Review Questions
- 3.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 3.10: Application and Reflection Questions

4: Asia in Ancient Times

- 4.1: Introduction
- 4.2: Geography of East Asia
- 4.3: Ancient China
- 4.4: The Steppes
- 4.5: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
- 4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia
- 4.7: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire
- 4.8: Key Terms
- 4.9: Section Summary
- 4.10: Review Questions
- 4.11: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 4.12: Application and Reflection Questions

5: Mediterranean Peoples

- 5.1: Introduction
- 5.2: Early Mediterranean Peoples
- 5.3: Ancient Greece
- 5.4: The Hellenistic Era
- 5.5: The Roman Republic
- 5.6: The Age of Augustus
- 5.7: Key Terms
- 5.8: Section Summary
- 5.9: Review Questions
- 5.10: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 5.11: Application and Reflection Questions

6: Africa in Ancient Times

- 6.1: Introduction
- 6.2: Africa’s Geography and Climate
- 6.3: The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations
- 6.4: The Kingdom of Kush
- 6.5: North Africa’s Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections
- 6.6: Key Terms
- 6.7: Section Summary
- 6.8: Review Questions
- 6.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 6.10: Application and Reflection Questions

7: The Americas in Ancient Times

- 7.1: Introduction
- 7.2: Populating and Settling the Americas
- 7.3: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas
- 7.4: The Age of Empires in the Americas
- 7.5: Key Terms
- 7.6: Section Summary
- 7.7: Review Questions
- 7.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

- 7.9: Application and Reflection Questions

8: Empires of Faith

- 8.1: Introduction
- 8.2: The Eastward Shift
- 8.3: The Byzantine Empire and Persia
- 8.4: The Kingdoms of Aksum and Himyar
- 8.5: The Margins of Empire
- 8.6: Key Terms
- 8.7: Section Summary
- 8.8: Review Questions
- 8.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 8.10: Application and Reflection Questions

9: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates

- 9.1: Introduction
- 9.2: The Rise and Message of Islam
- 9.3: The Arab-Islamic Conquests and the First Islamic States
- 9.4: Islamization and Religious Rule under Islam
- 9.5: Key Terms
- 9.6: Section Summary
- 9.7: Review Questions
- 9.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 9.9: Application and Reflection Questions

10: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia

- 10.1: Introduction
- 10.2: The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages
- 10.3: East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages
- 10.4: Border States- Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan
- 10.5: Key Terms
- 10.6: Section Summary
- 10.7: Review Questions
- 10.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 10.9: Application and Reflection Questions

11: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement

- 11.1: Introduction
- 11.2: The Post-Roman West in the Early Middle Ages
- 11.3: The Seljuk Migration and the Call from the East
- 11.4: Patriarch and Papacy- The Church and the Call to Crusade
- 11.5: The Crusading Movement
- 11.6: Key Terms
- 11.7: Section Summary
- 11.8: Review Questions
- 11.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 11.10: Application and Reflection Questions

12: Pax Mongolica- The Steppe Empire of the Mongols

- 12.1: Introduction
- 12.2: Song China and the Steppe Peoples
- 12.3: Chinggis Khan and the Early Mongol Empire
- 12.4: The Mongol Empire Fragments
- 12.5: Christianity and Islam outside Central Asia
- 12.6: Key Terms
- 12.7: Section Summary
- 12.8: Review Questions
- 12.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 12.10: Application and Reflection Questions

13: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa

- 13.1: Introduction
- 13.2: Culture and Society in Medieval Africa
- 13.3: Medieval Sub-Saharan Africa
- 13.4: The People of the Sahel
- 13.5: Key Terms
- 13.6: Section Summary
- 13.7: Review Questions
- 13.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 13.9: Application and Reflection Questions

14: Climate Change and Plague in the Fourteenth Century

- 14.1: Introduction
- 14.2: Asia, North Africa, and Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century
- 14.3: Famine, Climate Change, and Migration
- 14.4: The Black Death from East to West
- 14.5: The Long-Term Effects of Global Transformation
- 14.6: Key Terms
- 14.7: Section Summary
- 14.8: Review Questions
- 14.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 14.10: Application and Reflection Questions

15: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming

- 15.1: Introduction
- 15.2: The Ottomans and the Mongols
- 15.3: From the Mamluks to Ming China
- 15.4: Gunpowder and Nomads in a Transitional Age
- 15.5: Key Terms
- 15.6: Section Summary
- 15.7: Review Questions
- 15.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
- 15.9: Application and Reflection Questions

16: Appendix

- 16.1: Appendix A- Glossary
- 16.2: Appendix B- Maps and Timelines
- 16.3: Appendix C- World Maps
- 16.4: Appendix D- Recommended Resources for the Study of World History

17: Resources

- 17.1: Prehistory
  - 17.1.1: Chronology
  - 17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory
  - 17.1.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.1.4: Key Terms
  - 17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa
  - 17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution
  - 17.1.7: Summary
  - 17.1.8: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.1.9: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.2: Early Middle Eastern and Northeast African Civilizations
  - 17.2.1: Chronology
  - 17.2.2: Introduction - Defining Civilization
  - 17.2.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.2.4: Key Terms
  - 17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia
  - 17.2.6: Sumerian City-States
  - 17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
  - 17.2.8: The Significance of Mesopotamia for World History
  - 17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel
  - 17.2.10: Early Israelites
  - 17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel
  - 17.2.12: The Importance of the Israelites and Ancient Israel
  - 17.2.13: Ancient Egypt
  - 17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
  - 17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush
  - 17.2.16: Summary
  - 17.2.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.2.18: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.3: Ancient and Medieval India
  - 17.3.1: Chronology of Ancient and Medieval India
  - 17.3.2: Introduction - A Political Overview
  - 17.3.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.3.4: Key Terms
  - 17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)
  - 17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)
  - 17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
  - 17.3.8: The Mauryan Empire (321-184 BCE)
  - 17.3.9: Regional States, Trade, and Devotional Religion- India 200 BCE-300 CE
  - 17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)
  - 17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300

- 17.3.12: Conclusion
- 17.3.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.3.14: Links to Primary Sources

- 17.4: China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
  - 17.4.1: Chronology of China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
  - 17.4.2: Introduction to China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
  - 17.4.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.4.4: Key Terms
  - 17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
  - 17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
  - 17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China
  - 17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE
  - 17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
  - 17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia
  - 17.4.11: The Song Dynasty
  - 17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty
  - 17.4.13: Conclusion
  - 17.4.14: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.5: The Greek World from Bronze Age to Roman Conquest
  - 17.5.1: Chronology
  - 17.5.2: Introduction
  - 17.5.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.5.4: Key Terms
  - 17.5.5: Geography and Topography
  - 17.5.6: Periods of Greek History
  - 17.5.7: Methodology- Sources and Problem
  - 17.5.8: From Mythology to History
  - 17.5.9: Archaic Greece
  - 17.5.10: The Classical Period
  - 17.5.11: Hellenistic Period
  - 17.5.12: Conclusion
  - 17.5.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.5.14: Links of Primary Sources
- 17.6: The Roman World from 753 BCE to 500 BCE
  - 17.6.1: Chronology
  - 17.6.2: Introduction
  - 17.6.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.6.4: Key Terms
  - 17.6.5: Geography and Topography of Rome and the Roman Empire
  - 17.6.6: Basic Chronology and Periods of Roman History
  - 17.6.7: Sources and Problems
  - 17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
  - 17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
  - 17.6.10: The Early Empire
  - 17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
  - 17.6.12: Conclusion- From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages
  - 17.6.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.6.14: Links to Primary Sources

- 17.7: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE
  - 17.7.1: Chronology
  - 17.7.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE
  - 17.7.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.7.4: Key Terms
  - 17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire
  - 17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian
  - 17.7.7: Perspectives - Post-Roman East and West
  - 17.7.8: The British Isles - Europe's Periphery
  - 17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery
  - 17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
  - 17.7.11: Global Context
  - 17.7.12: Daily Life in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empires
  - 17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse
  - 17.7.14: The Tenth-Century Church
  - 17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors
  - 17.7.16: Conclusion and Global Perspectives
  - 17.7.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.7.18: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.8: Islam to the Mamluks
  - 17.8.1: Chronology
  - 17.8.2: Introduction
  - 17.8.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.8.4: Key Terms
  - 17.8.5: Geography of the Middle East
  - 17.8.6: Rise of Islam
  - 17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
  - 17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
  - 17.8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate
  - 17.8.10: The 'Abbasid Caliphate
  - 17.8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate
  - 17.8.12: The Crusades
  - 17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate
  - 17.8.14: Conclusion
  - 17.8.15: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.8.16: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.9: African History to 1500
  - 17.9.1: Chronology
  - 17.9.2: Introduction
  - 17.9.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.9.4: Key Terms
  - 17.9.5: Writing the History of Ancient and Medieval Africa
  - 17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
  - 17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
  - 17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe
  - 17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
  - 17.9.10: Conclusion
  - 17.9.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.10: The Americas

- 17.10.1: Chronology
- 17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas
- 17.10.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
- 17.10.4: Key Terms
- 17.10.5: Mesoamerica
- 17.10.6: The Maya
- 17.10.7: The Aztec
- 17.10.8: Early Andes
- 17.10.9: North America
- 17.10.10: Conclusion
- 17.10.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.10.12: Links to Primary Sources

- 17.11: Central Asia
  - 17.11.1: Chronology
  - 17.11.2: Introduction to Central Asia
  - 17.11.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.11.4: Key Terms
  - 17.11.5: Turkic Migrations
  - 17.11.6: Islam
  - 17.11.7: The Mongol Era
  - 17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai
  - 17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)
  - 17.11.10: Timur
  - 17.11.11: Conclusion
  - 17.11.12: Works Consulted and Further Reading
  - 17.11.13: Links to Primary Sources
- 17.12: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE
  - 17.12.1: Chronology
  - 17.12.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE
  - 17.12.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
  - 17.12.4: Key Terms
  - 17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe
  - 17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade
  - 17.12.7: Growth in Agriculture
  - 17.12.8: A Roman Empire?
  - 17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation
  - 17.12.10: Expansion of Christendom
  - 17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century
  - 17.12.12: The Crusades
  - 17.12.13: The Twelfth Century in Western Europe
  - 17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse
  - 17.12.15: The Twelfth-Century Renaissance
  - 17.12.16: The Third Crusade
  - 17.12.17: The Fourth Crusade
  - 17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe
  - 17.12.19: Later Crusades and Crusading's Ultimate Failure
  - 17.12.20: Scholasticism
  - 17.12.21: Daily Life at the Medieval Zenith
  - 17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises

- 17.12.23: War
- 17.12.24: Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages
- 17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy
- 17.12.26: The European Renaissance
- 17.12.27: States in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance
- 17.12.28: Iberia and the Atlantic- New Worlds
- 17.12.29: Conclusion
- 17.12.30: Works Consulted and Further Reading
- 17.12.31: Links to Primary Sources

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Detailed Licensing

1.4: Licensing

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

SECTION OVERVIEW

1.5: Introduction- Understanding the Past

1.5.1: Introduction

1.5.2: Developing a Global Perspective

1.5.3: Primary Sources

1.5.4: Causation and Interpretation in History

1.5.5: Key Terms

1.5.6: Section Summary

1.5.7: Review Questions

1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

1.5.9: Application and Reflection Questions

1.5.1: Introduction

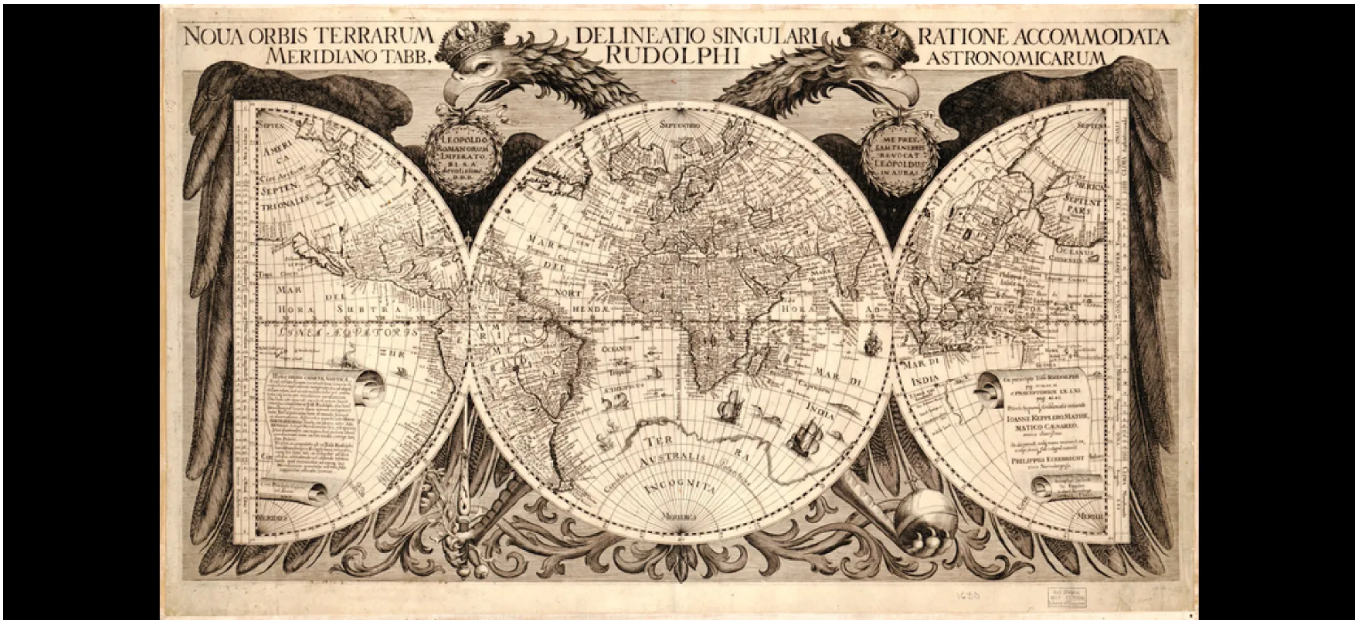


Figure 1.1 The Whole World. This seventeenth-century projection map of the world, prepared by cartographer Philip Eckebrecht for the noted German astronomer Johannes Kepler, gives a sense of the breadth of territory this text will cover. As we see later in this chapter, maps often reflect the maker's perception of geographical realities. (credit: modification of work "A Modern Depiction of the World" by Library of Congress/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

1.1 Developing a Global Perspective
1.2 Primary Sources
1.3 Causation and Interpretation in History

What is history? Is it simply a record of things people have done? Is it what writer Maya Angelou suggested—a way to meet the pain of the past and overcome it? Or is it, as Winston Churchill said, a chronicle by the victors, an interpretation by those who write it? History is all this and more. Above all else, it is a path to knowing why we are the way we are—all our greatness, all our faults—and therefore a means for us to understand ourselves and change for the better.

But history serves this function only if it is a true reflection of the past. It cannot be a way to mask the darker parts of human nature, nor a way to justify acts of previous generations. It is the historian's task to paint as clear a picture as sources will allow.

Will history ever be a perfect telling of the human tale? No. There are voices we may never hear. Yet each new history book written and each new source uncovered reveal an ever more precise record of events around the world (Figure 1.1). You are about to take a journey into human history.

1.5.2: Developing a Global Perspective

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the role history plays in higher education
- Discuss the ways in which the study of history can build skills for lifelong learning and success
- Explain how the features of this text will optimize your learning experience

From the legends of Troy heralded by Homer to the contents of digital archives accessed by modern students, the human story has fascinated and instructed those who have tried to understand its complexities. Knowing the past has long been considered a mark of civilization, and its study has never been more important. We have all heard the philosopher George Santayana's observation, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Yet because history is an ever-changing collection of events influenced and shaped by a variety of causes and outcomes, it never truly repeats at all.

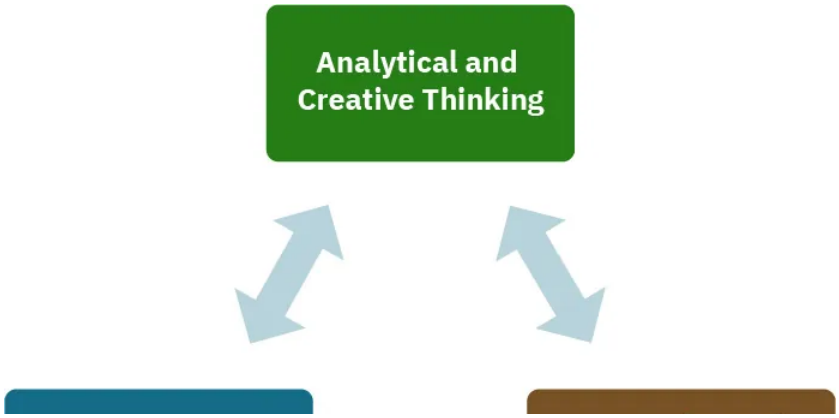
Santayana's comment rings true, however, in that we can discern patterns of human behavior by careful study of the past. To know history is to know ourselves, and understanding history's nuances opens our imaginations to the possibilities each new situation creates. It is this knowledge of possibilities that allows the student of history to see the present with more clarity and prescience.

World History as Preparation for Life after College

History is more than a series of names and dates; those are simply its building blocks, the pieces necessary for completing the whole picture. History is a story, the human story, that connects us both to each other and to the generations that lived before us. And today we study history in a way that grounds students in this shared past while also preparing them for their futures. The liberal arts are intended to help students find fulfillment, to better themselves and their communities through meaningful self-reflection and development. But they have also always prepared students to enter the workplace by honing career skills. To say that a world history class prepares students for the workplace is simply to acknowledge what has always been true.

This world history text has several key features that will help you understand the past in ways that are relevant to the present. Perhaps most important is its recognition that the study of world history prepares us to meet modern challenges. To cover the history of the whole world is daunting, perhaps, but a student must be prepared to engage with the globalization processes that have dominated history for the past few centuries. People around the globe are more integrated than ever by social and economic forces that transcend national boundaries. Both your private and public lives will require knowledge of the world and its people. Understanding the diversity of peoples and ideas and possessing cultural empathy and awareness will allow you to meet global complexities with competence.

The study of history will also enhance your critical-thinking and analytical ability, both of which consistently appear among the top ten skills desired by employers (Figure 1.2). Other skills that have become increasingly important include adaptive thinking, social intelligence, cross-cultural competency, and media literacy. This final skill is critical to modern workplaces. History teaches students how to assess and analyze the material they are reading, as well as how to develop and present content in a meaningful and persuasive way. It also hones a creative mindset that is flexible and open to interpretations and ideas outside our own worldview.



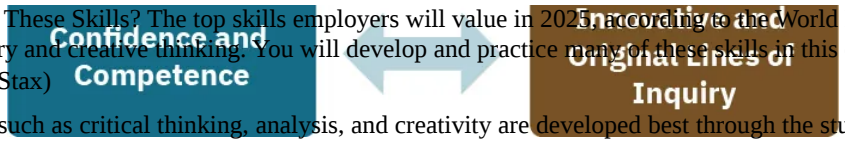


Figure 1.2 Do You Have These Skills? The top skills employers will value in 2025, according to the World Economic Forum, include innovative inquiry and creative thinking. You will develop and practice many of these skills in this course. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Without question, skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and creativity are developed best through the study of history. Historians must be truly multidisciplinary in the sense that they observe and gather as much information as they can and then interpret that data with the aim of drawing conclusions. The historian also must be a creative thinker because the source material—the data—is human, making it the most complex data imaginable. Historical data is as diverse as the people who make it, and it might be everything from the edicts of kings to the tunes played by street musicians. Historians must also be effective communicators. Who cares about a story nobody reads or a product nobody buys? What company in the world could not use and value someone who can think critically and creatively and then explain and communicate effectively? Historical thinking also provides students with a stronger sense of self, with avenues to explore human existence, and with the skills necessary to navigate the complexity of their world and future workplaces.

This text and its assessment questions will encourage you to analyze large amounts of information, to understand myriad concepts, and to make connections across topics. Developing cultural awareness and empathy is also critically important, and studying world history is a way to ensure you have this necessary skill. The influential job site Indeed.com says, “In our workplaces, in our world, we are a diverse people. Cultural competence is increasingly important as our means of communication and collaboration in working environments evolve. Learning how to respect, communicate and collaborate with an increasingly diverse work culture is crucial to optimizing a company’s efficiency and productivity.”

World History and Global Citizenship

The study of world history recognizes the integrated nature of modern life and prepares students for diverse, global workplaces. Knowing about the world will prepare you to be a global citizen, someone who may reside in only one nation but who self-identifies as part of the larger world community. Issues in need of solutions, like climate change, social justice, and human rights, are global in scale. You must know the world to be the change it needs. How do you fit in the global environment? What is your story, and how is it linked to that of others?

In many ways, the idea of global citizenship emerged from the human wreckage of the two world wars. Beginning in 1948, the United Nations (UN) established a series of universal declarations that conceived of all people as deserving of human rights and dignity (Figure 1.3). Three such declarations further affirmed the rights of women (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, also known as CEDAW, 1979), of children (The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1959), and of people with disabilities (The Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, 1975). The UN regularly requires that member nations report on progress in these areas. Words and declarations help to create an ethos, a set of guiding principles. So, in addition to participating in global economies that transcend lines on a map, many in our world recognize that we have also agreed to a series of rights and obligations that do the same.



Figure 1.3 Human Rights, Codified. Eleanor Roosevelt is shown holding a poster of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in November 1949. Roosevelt, the former First Lady of the United States, chaired the committee that drafted the declaration. (credit: "Eleanor Roosevelt UDHR" by FDR Presidential Library & Museum/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

A BBC poll in 2015–2016 surveyed eighteen countries and found that more than half the respondents believed themselves to be "global citizens." It also found that in times of prosperity, sentiments favoring a world community grow, while in times of strife, people tend to revert to more local, national identities. Though no one can see the future, it is difficult to imagine turning the clock back on the processes of globalization. Whether you would like to be a global citizen of the world or not, understanding the world is essential.

Link to Learning

What does it mean to be a citizen of the world? Watch this TED Talk by Hugh Evans and think about the ways this concept resonates with you. Do you see yourself as connected to the world? Is that a positive attribute? Why or why not?

Features of This Textbook

This text is a great place to begin your journey into the world's past. It has several features that will help you understand the history of world civilizations from the earliest time to the modern era. For clarity, it adopts a traditional chronological approach, proceeding from ancient to modern times. Each chapter features maps prominently and will help you frame world cultures in their geographic and historical context. You will engage with firsthand accounts of key people and events—including instances in which people's recollections of the same events might differ. And the text will highlight links between the past and the present to emphasize how earlier knowledge applies to our world.

Of particular note are the feature boxes within each chapter. These present documents and images from the eras you are studying. Sometimes you will be guided outside the text—such as in the Link to Learning boxes—to explore other digital resources that

clarify content, expand on ideas, and highlight interesting new work happening in the field. Finally, where appropriate, the text will offer material relevant to your current experiences, to help you understand the links between the past and the present. Following is a quick reference to these features.

In Their Own Words

In Their Own Words feature boxes present a source composed in the period the chapter covers and allow you to examine it in context, learning how to critically analyze source material. A short series of questions will help to guide your analysis.

Dueling Voices

Dueling Voices feature boxes present either an ongoing historical debate or conflicting reports of the same event or idea that were written around the time it occurred or emerged.

Beyond the Book

In Beyond the Book feature boxes, you can explore the value of art, architecture, music, film, and other physical objects as sources in interpreting history. The goal is to demonstrate that the human story resides in a great deal more than just the written word itself. You may also have the opportunity to do some experiential learning.

The Past Meets the Present

The Past Meets the Present feature boxes ask you to understand the connections between the material in the chapter and the present. They will prompt you to think about the relevance of a particular historical issue in today's world.

Because this is a global history, we tried to be true to the essence of world cultures by presenting people's names in forms as close as possible to their language of origin. These spelling choices have been made by experts in their field based on current research. For example, the text uses the pinyin system of transliteration for writing Chinese names, as opposed to the older Wade-Giles system, because pinyin is the system adopted by the People's Republic of China and more closely approximates the sounds of Mandarin Chinese. In languages using the Latin alphabet, accents have been retained on all personal names (Hernán Cortés, Napoléon Bonaparte); however, in transliterated languages such as Chinese and Arabic, we have avoided accents and apostrophes whenever possible, unless they are necessary to aid pronunciation and enhance readability. In naming events, places, and other items of historical interest, we have generally chosen the most commonly encountered English variants. Finally, dates are given using the Gregorian calendar, the international standard for civil calendars, with "BCE" to indicate developments occurring before the Common Era and "CE" to mark events in our own era.

The study of world history also requires a strong understanding of geography. You might assume that maps are fairly cut and dried. After all, we can clearly demonstrate where things are, can't we? For most of history, however, this was not actually the case. Maps are some of the most contested pieces of historical evidence we have because they were almost always made from the perspective of the one making the map, not as an objective practice. Most civilizations put themselves at the center of their known world, for instance. Maps have also been used to aid in the conquest and suppression of peoples. During the Age of Exploration, the Pope arbitrarily divided inhabited territory that was new to Europeans and granted it to Spain and Portugal. Centuries later in Berlin, Germany, European diplomats drew lines on a map of Africa to apportion territory among colonial powers. Think of how written history might change if our surviving maps were indigenous in origin. Even when humanity acquired knowledge of the size and space of things, maps remained inaccurate, often showing Europe as larger than it is and regions of the Global South—Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia and Oceania—as smaller than their actual size.

Maps also present challenges because some territories are claimed by more than one political entity. There are many examples in the distant past, and even today, of contested regions, such as Crimea and Taiwan, that can make presenting regional geographies difficult. Crimea is claimed by both Russia and Ukraine, and Taiwan claims independence while China considers Taiwan part of its territory. The text will highlight these regions as they arise in the human story so you can explore geography's complexities.

Link to Learning

For a perspective on how Google Earth reflects the globalization of society, read "World Maps and the Dawn of Globalisation" by Jerry Brotton, a cultural historian and author of *The History of the World in Twelve Maps*. This brief blog post comments on

the precision of GPS map technology as used by Google Earth. As you read it, consider the possibilities and dangers of such technology.

1.5.3: Primary Sources

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify different types of primary sources
- Analyze primary sources in a historical context
- Interpret primary sources effectively

Historians develop interpretations of the past based on source material, and we do the same in this book. From ancient hieroglyphs to works of art to blog posts, from histories and biographies written by later scholars to Google Maps, sources help us build our interpretations of the human story.

Learning to Evaluate Documents and Images

There are two main kinds of historical sources, primary and secondary. A primary source is a gateway to the past because it is an object or document that comes directly from the time period to which it refers. Primary sources might be government documents, menus from restaurants, diaries, letters, musical instruments, photographs, portraits drawn from life, songs, and so on. If a historian is looking at Ancient Egypt, a statue of a pharaoh is a primary source for that time period, as are hieroglyphs that tell of the pharaoh's reign. Primary sources, when we have them, are considered more valuable than other sources because they are as close in time as we can get to the events being studied. Think, for example, of a court trial: The ideal is to have the trial quickly so that witness testimony is fresher and therefore more reliable. With the passage of time, people can forget, they might subconsciously add or take away parts of a memory, and they may be influenced to interpret events differently.

A secondary source is one written or created after the fact. A twentieth-century biography of an Egyptian pharaoh is a secondary source, as are a map drawn in the 1960s to identify the battle sites of World War II (1939–1945) and a museum curator's blog post about the artistic achievements of the Ming (1368–1644). These types of scholarly sources are critical for the evolution of historical knowledge and are often the place students begin to form an understanding of past events. Secondary sources are useful for setting context and placing a topic in relationship to others of the same era. They also provide access to scholarly research based on primary sources for students whose access might be limited by language or geography. Good research requires both types of sources and some attention to historiography, which is the study of how other historians have already interpreted and written about the past.

All primary sources are not equal. History technically begins with the advent of writing, when humans began to deliberately make records and, after that, to develop the idea that preserving the past was a worthwhile endeavor. This is not to say that there isn't anything valuable to be found in the oral histories of preliterate societies, or in prehistoric cave paintings and archaeological artifacts. For historians, however, the written word is more accurate evidence for building narratives of the past. For example, imagine a modern magazine with a rock or pop star on the front, dressed for performance in a vibrant or provocative style. If that were the only piece of evidence that existed five hundred years from now, how would historians interpret our era? Without context, interpretation of the past is quite difficult. Studying artifacts is certainly worthwhile, but text offers us greater clarity. Even if the cover of the magazine bore only a caption, like "Pop star rising to the top of the charts," future historians would have significantly more information than from the photo alone. However, even textual sources must be met with a critical eye. "Fake news" is not new, but the speed at which it travels today is unprecedented. We must investigate the full context of any source and look for corroboration.

It takes time to develop the skills necessary to interpret primary sources. As an example, consider the act of reading a poem. You can read the surface of a poem, the literal meaning of the words presented. But that seldom reflects the true meaning the poet meant to convey. You must also look for nuances, hidden meanings, or repeated metaphors. We approach a primary source in a similar way.

There are four key areas to consider when interpreting sources: the author, the audience, the intent, and the context. Here are some key questions to ask yourself when exploring a new source:

1. What kind of source is it? Government documents have a different purpose than personal diaries. A former president commenting on a political issue has a different view from a comedian doing the same.
2. Who authored the source and why? Is the author responsible for simply recording the information, or was the author involved in the event? Is the author reliable, or does the author have an agenda?
3. What is the historical context? How does the source relate to the events covered in the chapter?

None of the answers disqualify a source from adding value, but precisely what that source brings to the overall picture depends heavily on those answers.

Link to Learning

This is a presentation on working with primary sources produced by the Smithsonian. Pay particular attention to section 2, "Documents." Read through it and take note of the kinds of questions to ask as you critically assess primary sources. You may want to write them down or have them on hand for reference as you work your way through this text.

In a world where many sources are available in digital format, searching online, as many students do, is a convenient way of doing research. But the internet has just as much misinformation as it has legitimate sources. Historians evaluate the strength of both primary and secondary sources, especially online. How do we decide what a good source is? Some clues are more obvious than others. For example, it is unlikely any truly scholarly material will be found on the first page of a Google search, unless the search terms include key phrases or use targeted search engines such as Google Scholar. Online encyclopedias may be a good place to start your research, but they should be only a springboard to more refined study.

Your work is only as strong as the sources you use. Whether you are writing a paper, a discussion post online, or even a creative writing piece, the better your sources, the more persuasive will be your writing. Sites like Wikipedia and Encyclopedia.com offer a quick view of content, but they will not give enough depth to allow for the critical thinking necessary to produce quality work. However, they are useful for introducing a topic with which you might not be familiar. And if you start with encyclopedic sources, you can often find pathways to better sources. They might spark new lines of inquiry, for instance, or have bibliographic information that can lead you to higher-quality material.

Always make sure you can tell who is producing the website. Is it a scholar, a museum, or a research organization? If so, there is a good chance the material is sound. Is the information cited? In other words, does the source tell you where it got the information? Are those sources in turn objective and reliable? Can you corroborate the site's information? This means doing some fact checking. You should see whether other sources present similar data and whether your source fits into the narrative developed by other scholars. Does your school library list the site as a resource? Finally, if you are not sure, ask. Librarians work in online spaces too, and you can generally reach out to these experts with any questions.

As you explore world history via this text, you will be asked many times to read and interpret primary sources. These will normally be set off as feature boxes, as noted earlier. Let's work through a few examples. The goal is to become more familiar with the types of questions you should ask of sources, as well as the variety of sources you will work with throughout the text.

First, an image exercise. The following images are exterior and interior views of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a wonder of the late antique world whose name means "Holy Wisdom" in Greek. Buildings and other material objects change as they are affected by historical events. Images of them can tell us much about those events and the people who enter or interact with them.

The first set of images (Figure 1.4 and Figure 1.5) provide a likeness of the famous church at the time it was built, during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (483–565 CE). The domed structure was unique for its engineering and stunning in its effect. Decorated with Greek iconography, the visual images and symbols used in a work of art, the basilica stood as an emblem of Justinian's power, the awesome nature of the Christian God, and the surviving wealth and stability of the East. Churches at the time were meant to inspire awe; because most people could not read, stories of religious figures and events were told through highly decorative and symbolic images, and obedience and a desire to join a religious community could be motivated by the buildings' grandeur. As you study the renderings, reflect on the following questions: What are the key features of the building? What does it make you think about? What does it tell you about the period in which it was built? What would you think about it if you were a poor sixth-century farmer, an urban merchant of some wealth, or a foreign leader?

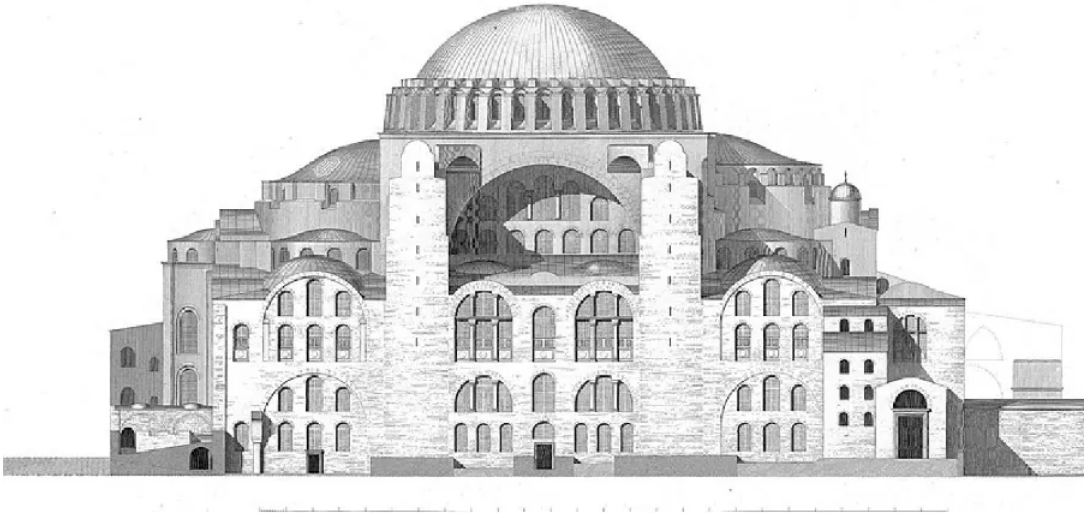


Figure 1.4 Exterior of Hagia Sophia. Note the domes and archways in this drawing of the exterior of the Hagia Sophia. Such architectural features were particularly hard to build during the sixth century and often collapsed because the engineering was flawed. Thanks to their durability, those of Hagia Sophia were a marvel at the time it was built. (credit: "Saint Sophia, Constantinopolis" by ETH Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



Figure 1.5 Interior of Hagia Sophia. The Greek Christian iconography found in the interior of the Hagia Sophia includes halos on the figures, signifying holiness. Also note the lavish use of precious gold in this tenth-century mosaic of Mary, the child Jesus, and the emperors (left) Justinian and (right) Constantine. (credit: "Hagia Sophia Southwestern entrance mosaics 2" by "Myrabella"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

In 1453, nearly a thousand years after the reign of Justinian, the city of Constantinople (now called Istanbul in present-day Turkey) was conquered by Muslim Turks. According to contemporary accounts of the conquest, when the Ottoman leader Sultan Mehmed II came to the Hagia Sophia, he recognized its beauty and saved it from destruction. To Muslims, the Christian God and the Muslim God are the same, so Mehmed made the church a mosque—following a long tradition in the Middle East of continuing the use of sacred spaces. Minarets, towers from which the Muslim call to prayer is issued, were added at the four corners of the building, and Arabic writing was placed beside the ancient Greek iconography.

The second set of images (Figure 1.6 and Figure 1.7) show the Hagia Sophia as it stands today, having also been a museum and now serving as a mosque once again. The building tells a tale spanning hundreds of years and highlights many fascinating aspects of the region's history. But without the context, its meaning would be far less clear.



Figure 1.6 Hagia Sophia's Minarets. Hagia Sophia has four tall minarets, which were added a thousand years after its initial construction. Minarets are towers from which the Muslim call to prayer goes out multiple times a day. (credit: "Hagia Sophia (Istanbul)" by Frank Mago/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

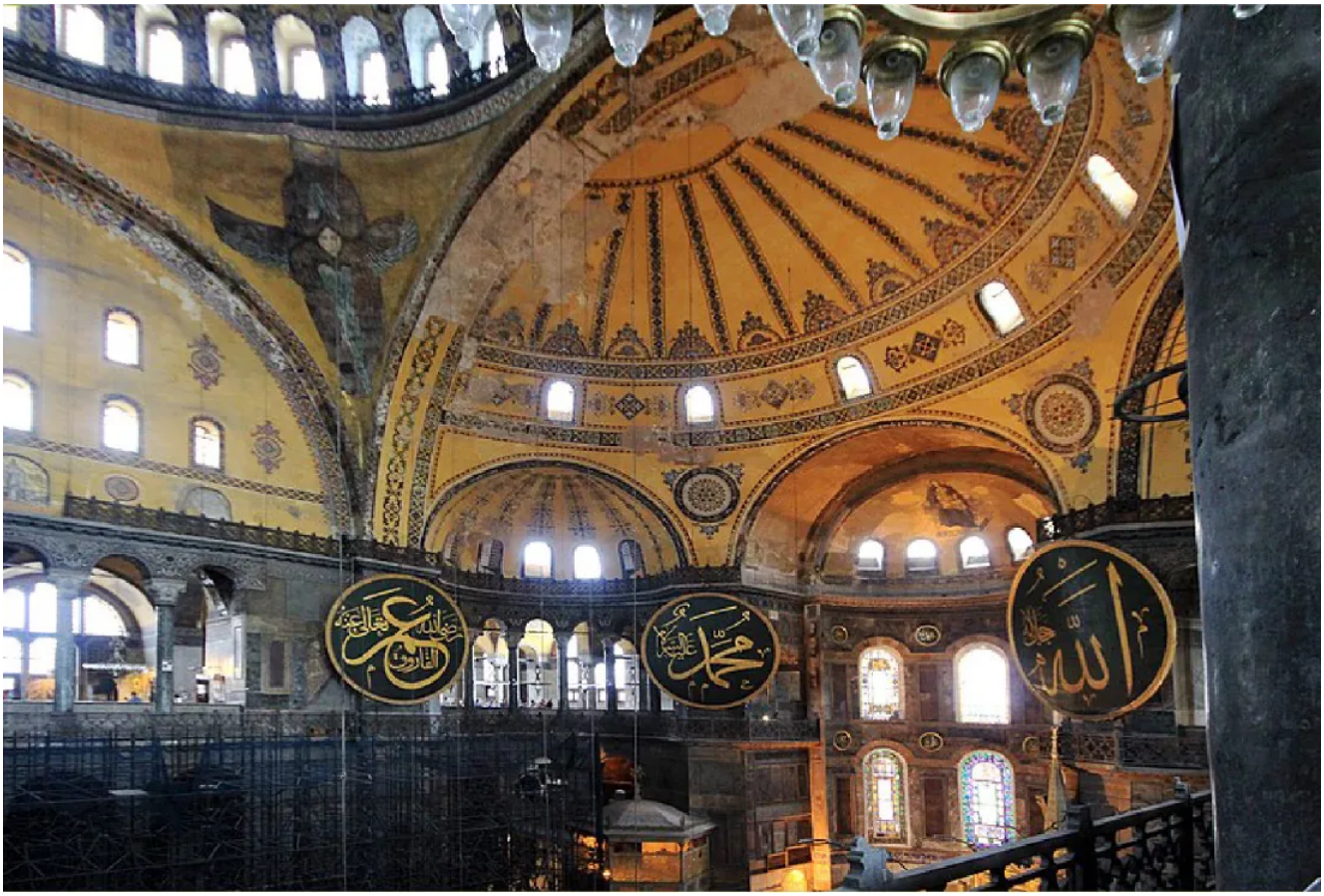


Figure 1.7 Hagia Sophia's Many Influences. Muslims consider themselves the heirs of Judaism and Christianity, and until recently, you could still see the early Greek iconography in the interior of Hagia Sophia. Now it is covered during prayer times by large medallions bearing Arabic writing. (credit: "Hagia Sophia Istanbul 2013 13" by Karelj/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Documentary Sources: Competing Narratives

Textual, or written, primary sources are considered the best possible resource for historians. They tend to offer both far more context and far more information than other types of sources, and sometimes clues about the writer's intent. But even they must be approached with method and scrutiny. We must evaluate the author, audience, intent, and context in order to accurately interpret a primary source document. Some questions you might ask about the author include the following: Who wrote the piece and what is their background? What was important to the author? Why might the author have written what they did? In some cases, the answers will be fairly obvious. In others, a deeper inspection might reveal hidden motives.

You must also take into account the planned audience for a document: For whom was it written? Was it meant to be public or private? Is it a letter to a friend or an essay submitted for publication? For a modern example, is it a text to a friend or to a mother? Texts will one day be a source for historians to use, but knowing who sent them, and to whom, will be essential to interpreting them correctly. (For fun, search online using the term "misinterpreted texts.")

In addition to considering the audience, you should think about the intent: Why was the document written? Was it intended to be a factual account of an event? Was it meant to persuade? Is it a complete falsification? Often people write things that present them in the best light rather than reveal weaknesses.

Finally, you should reflect on the circumstances of the document's creation. Some questions you may want to ask include the following: What is the general time period of the document, and what was that time like? What was happening when the individual wrote the document? Was there any sort of intimidation or distress? Is it a time of war or peace? Is there religious conflict? Is there an economic crisis? A health crisis? A natural disaster? Could the writer have been fending off an attack or lobbying for one? Are we missing other perspectives or voices we would like to hear?

The answers to these questions will shape your interpretation of the primary source and bring you closer to its true meaning. Most text-based sources have meanings beyond the obvious, and it is the historian's job to uncover these. Be sure to keep these questions in mind throughout this course and whenever you undertake historical research or are considering the accuracy of information you encounter (Figure 1.8).

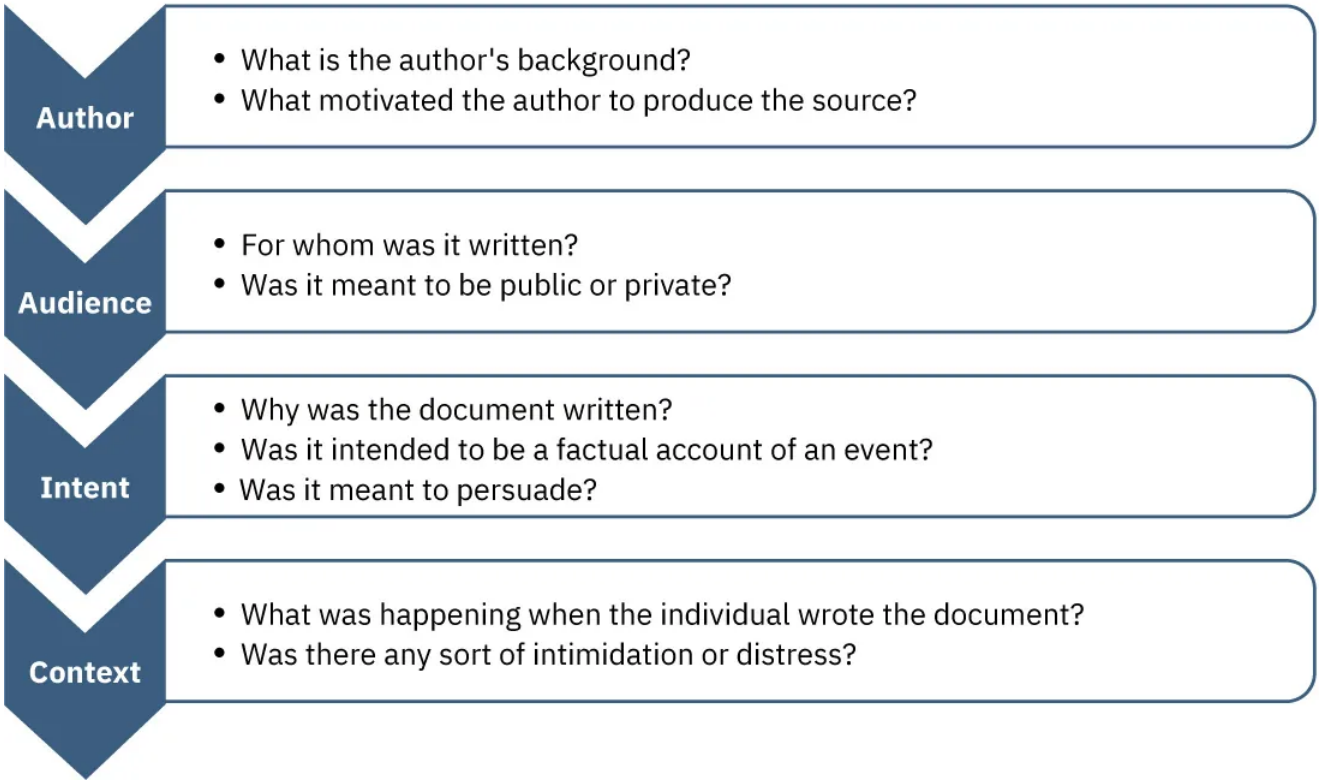


Figure 1.8 Evaluating Primary Sources. These key questions to ask about primary sources help us evaluate the author, audience, intent, and context. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

To gain experience using these questions, consider the two accounts in The Spanish Arrival in the Aztec Capital, written relatively close to each other in time and dealing with similar subjects from different perspectives. According to the first account, written in 1519 by Hernán Cortés, Indigenous people in the Americas were thrilled to become subjects of Spain when European colonizers arrived. The Aztec, telling of their encounter with the Spanish, relate that the Spaniards killed even the unarmed, which seemed barbaric to the author. What should historians do with such widely competing texts? How do they decide what each one adds to the true story of the conquest of Mexico? As you read, keep these questions in mind.

Dueling Voices

The Spanish Arrival in the Aztec Capital

Hernán Cortés was a Spanish conquistador who conquered the Aztec Empire in what is now central Mexico in 1521. An ambitious but brutal young man seeking fame and fortune, Cortés wrote a series of letters to Charles V describing his exploits in the hope of raising himself in the king's esteem. In the following letter, written in 1519, Cortés recounts his conquest of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, and describes the Indigenous people he encountered. The letter is followed by an Aztec account of the conquest that describes an event known as the Massacre in the Great Temple, an attack on nobles and warriors who had gathered in Tenochtitlán to celebrate a religious festival. The attack was conducted by Pedro de Alvarado, who had been left in charge while Cortés was absent from the city. At the time of the massacre, Moctezuma, the Aztec ruler, was under house arrest, having previously greeted Cortés on his arrival and invited him into the sacred city.

> *In my former despatch [sic], Most Excellent Prince, I gave a list of the cities and towns that had to that time voluntarily submitted to your authority, together with those*

I had reduced by conquest. I also mentioned having received information from the natives of a certain great Lord, called MUTECZUMA, who, according to their computation of distances, dwelt ninety or a hundred leagues from the coast and the port where I had disembarked; and that, trusting in the greatness of God, and the confidence inspired by the royal name of your Highness, I proposed to go and see him wherever he might be. I also recollect having [. . .] assured your Highness that he should be taken either dead or alive, or become a subject to the royal throne of your Majesty. With this determination I departed from the city of Cempoal, to which I gave the name of Sevilla, on the 16th of August, with fifteen horse and three hundred infantry, all in the best condition for war in which I was able, or the time permitted me to render them. [. . .] I also left the whole province of Cempoal, and all the mountainous region adjacent to the town, containing fifty thousand warriors, and fifty towns and fortresses, in peace and security, and firm in their allegiance to your Majesty, as they have remained to the present time. Although they were subjects of Muteczuma, yet according to the information I received, they had been reduced to that condition by force, within a short period; and when they had obtained through me some knowledge of your Highness, and of your great regal power, they declared their desire to become vassals of your Majesty, and to form an alliance with me. They also begged me to protect them against that mighty Lord, who used violent and tyrannical measures to keep them in subjection, and took from them their sons to be slain and offered as sacrifices to his idols; with many other complaints against him, in order to avoid whose tyranny they embraced the service of your Majesty.

—Hernán Cortés, Second Letter to Charles V

During this time, the people asked Motecuhzoma how they should celebrate their god's fiesta. He said: "Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments."

During this same time, The Sun commanded that Motecuhzoma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan named Nezahualquentzin. They also murdered the king of Nauhtla, Cohualpopocatzin, by wounding him with arrows and then burning him alive.

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. [. . .] But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli [the god of sun and war]. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery: his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. [. . .]

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers—and even the spectators—were also killed. This

> *slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.*
>
> *The king Motecuhzoma [. . .] protested: "Our lords, that is enough! What are you doing? These people are not carrying shields or macanas. Our lords, they are completely unarmed!"*
>
> *The Sun had treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the captain left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.*
>
> *—Miguel León-Portilla, The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*

- To whom is each author writing?
- How do the authors' different intentions affect what they wrote?
- One author was on the side of the victorious and one among the vanquished. How does this context affect the tone of the writing?

Textual Sources: The Importance of Language

The different types of language used in a source are clues to its interpretation. Linguists call the use of language rhetoric. Rhetorical choices, decisions about the way words are used and put together, are often deliberate and intended to achieve a certain outcome. For example, think about the way you talk to a professor versus the way you talk to a friend. We must closely examine the rhetorical choices in any primary document to correctly interpret it. To practice this skill, consider President Roosevelt's famous speech in Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" Speech and the guiding questions that follow.

In Their Own Words

Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" Speech

The United States entered World War II in 1941 after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (Figure 1.9), the naval base where the U.S. Pacific fleet moored most of its vessels. It was a surprise attack that killed hundreds, devastated the base, and shocked the country. President Franklin D. Roosevelt went to Congress and asked for a declaration of war against Japan. The speech he gave, however, was about more than this request. Roosevelt used certain words to highlight that the attack was secret and calculated. He also suggested that God was on the side of the United States. As you read, pay special attention to the words Roosevelt uses. Can you pick out a few key rhetorical choices?



Figure 1.9 Pearl Harbor under Attack. This photograph of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was taken from a Japanese plane on December 7, 1941, shortly after the beginning of the torpedo attack on the U.S. fleet anchored there. (credit: “Attack on Pearl Harbor Japanese planes view” by Naval History and Heritage Command/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

> *Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate and of the House of Representatives: Yesterday, December 7th, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.*
>
> *The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific. Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American Island of Oahu, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our secretary of state a formal reply to a recent American message. And while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack.*
>
> *It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.*

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the army and navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Day of Infamy"

- What message was Roosevelt conveying to the nation's people and to the world?
- What word choices did he make to convey this message?

Link to Learning

In his "Day of Infamy" speech, Roosevelt uses a rhythmic cadence to give the impression of imminent danger as Japan attacks other targets. Listen to an audio recording of the speech from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

Hidden in History

Historians begin their work with a research question and seek to find the sources necessary to build an authentic narrative that answers it. One challenge is that written sources are undeniably valuable but often leave out important details. For example, many speak only of the lives of elites. It is not terribly difficult to find information about kings, queens, and other rulers of the past, but what of their families? Their servants? What of the ordinary people who lived under their rule?

Some groups of people remain hidden in our account of history because few records talk about their lives and experiences. Historians of the 1960s began to revolutionize the discipline by studying history "from the bottom up." In other words, they began to focus on just those groups that had long been ignored. They used sources like church records, newspapers, and court hearings to illuminate the lives of the poor and illiterate. Court hearings were one venue in which the words of people from all backgrounds were recorded as they served as witnesses and as accused. Mothers and fathers also sought out those who could write letters for them to get pardons for loved ones convicted of crimes. These kinds of sources shed light on those whose voices were rarely heard, either while they lived or after they died. Great strides have been made in the field of social history, which looks beyond politics to the everyday aspects of life in the past. But it remains difficult, lacking records, to represent women, the poor, and minority communities on an equal footing with those who have traditionally held power.

These kinds of limitations can also apply to regions of the world. Civilizations with long-standing and abundant historical documents often have more complete histories than others. Much is known, for example, about European history and Chinese history, both of which have deep roots in the written word. Europe, after all, had Herodotus, and China had Sima Qian. Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE, is called the father of history in the West; he wrote the history of the Greco-Persian wars. Sima Qian, born in the middle of the second century BCE, is referred to in China as the father of history for his work *Records of the Grand Historian*, a sweeping history of the Han dynasty. The Middle East and India also have rich textual histories. In Africa and Latin America, the historical record is less full.

In the case of Latin America, the historical record was significantly altered when the Europeans arrived. Believing that much of the writing of Indigenous people that they found spoke of a religion and culture they meant to replace, the conquerors deliberately destroyed it. Writing Africa's history is complicated by both its size and its diversity, as well as its colonial past. Due to the extremes of climate, surviving written documents and even archaeological evidence are not easily found, and what exists of written history is often tainted by the bias of the colonial observers who wrote it. New scholarship is emerging in both regions, generated by historians who look with fresh eyes and seek to understand history as it was. To gain some insight into the way history is relevant to the present, read Chinua Achebe on the Value of Indigenous History and consider the questions posed.

The Past Meets the Present

Chinua Achebe on the Value of Indigenous History

The following is an interview with the noted Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) in *The Atlantic*. Achebe, author of several important books including *Things Fall Apart*, which explores the impact of British missionary work in Nigeria, speaks to both the historic legacy of colonialism—the practice of controlling another people or area, usually for economic gain—and the need to first see ourselves independently and then in relation to others (Figure 1.10).

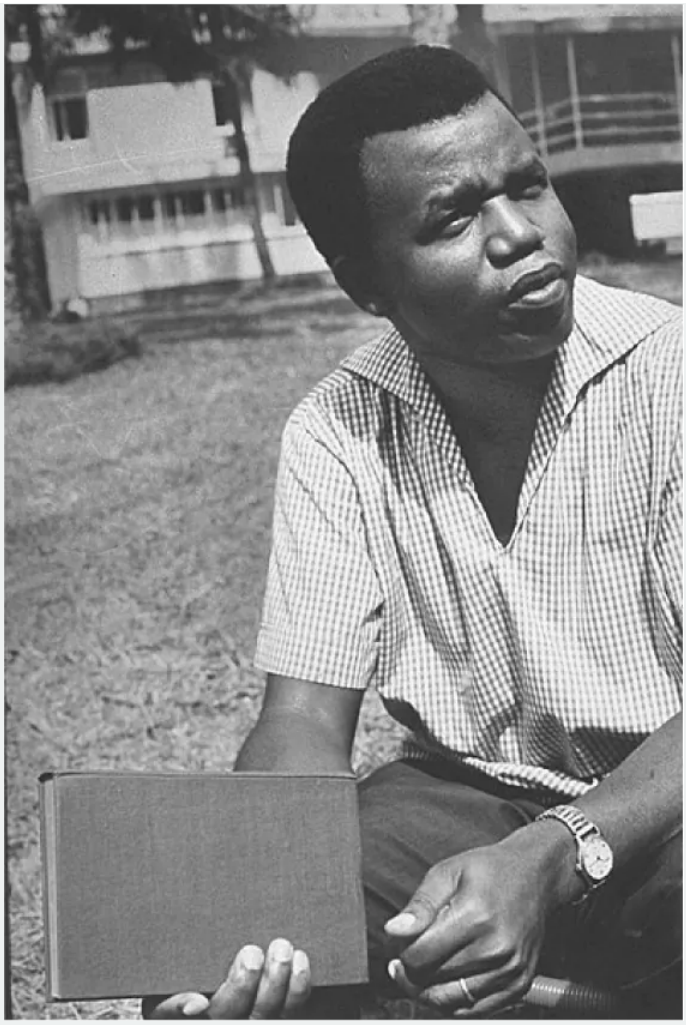


Figure 1.10 Chinua Achebe. This is a photo of the young Chinua Achebe in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1966. (credit: "Chinua Achebe, 1966" by *The New York Times*/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

> *But, of course, something doesn't continue to surprise you every day. After a while I began to understand why the book [Things Fall Apart] had resonance. I began to understand my history even better. It wasn't as if when I wrote it I was an expert in the history of the world. I was a very young man. I knew I had a story, but how it fit into the story of the world—I really had no sense of that. Its meaning for my Igbo people was clear to me, but I didn't know how other people elsewhere would respond to it. Did it have any meaning or resonance for them? I realized that it did when, to give you just one example, the whole class of a girls' college in South Korea wrote to me, and each one expressed an opinion about the book. And then I learned something, which was that they had a history that was similar to the story of Things Fall Apart—the history of colonization. This I didn't know before. Their colonizer was Japan. So these people across the waters were able to relate to the story of dispossession in Africa. People from different parts of the world can respond to the same story, if it says something to them about their own history and their own experience.*
>
> *—Chinua Achebe in Katie Bacon, "An African Voice," The Atlantic*

- Try to sum up Chinua Achebe’s words in one sentence.
- In what ways do you think colonialism has influenced the writing of history?

1.5.4: Causation and Interpretation in History

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe causation as it is used in the study of history
- Identify the levels of causation
- Analyze the role of interpretation in producing an accurate historical record

The study of history has always been about more than giving a recounting of past events. It is about remembering our shared past, making human connections that traverse centuries, and helping us know more about ourselves. Once we know how to muster as many facts as we can, we must consider the next step—understanding causation. Causation is the *why* behind events; understanding it is the way historians get at the heart of the matter. The powerful and public forces that change society and government are also present when individuals make choices about their lives. What, then, are the forces that shape history, that shift it one way or another, that move people to change on both an individual and a societal level?

All of us see these historical causes through the lens of our own experiences, circumstances, and value systems. Historians, particularly those trained in recent times, work to eliminate as much bias as they can, but we cannot wholly disconnect ourselves from our environment and beliefs. Bias can even sometimes act as a positive force, allowing us to look at the past in new ways. For example, historians in the 1960s and 1970s began to question their discipline's traditional focus on elites and sought out new sources that highlight the lives of more ordinary people. Driven by a bias in favor of the counterculture and politics of the era, they wanted to know more about what *all* people experienced.

Levels of Causation

In their quest for the why of an event, historians look at both the immediate and the long-term circumstances of that event. Not all causes are equally significant; we need to rank them in importance. Let us begin with a thought exercise. At this moment in your history, you are reading this textbook. Why? Perhaps you would say, "Because the instructor told me to, and it will be on the test." Certainly that is a valid reason. But if you think a bit more deeply, you might also say, "I want to do well in my education so I can be successful." And at an even deeper level, "Society tells me that education is necessary to realize my full potential, find fulfillment, and participate in the community."

Think of all the other things that caused you to be here in this moment. There are no wrong answers; just explore the levels of causation behind your reading right now. Now rank them in order of importance. Which causes had the most influence on you, and which were more remote? Your response might look something like a pyramid (Figure 1.11). The primary cause is the most immediate. It is the spark. The secondary cause is once removed. The tertiary cause offers the broader context.

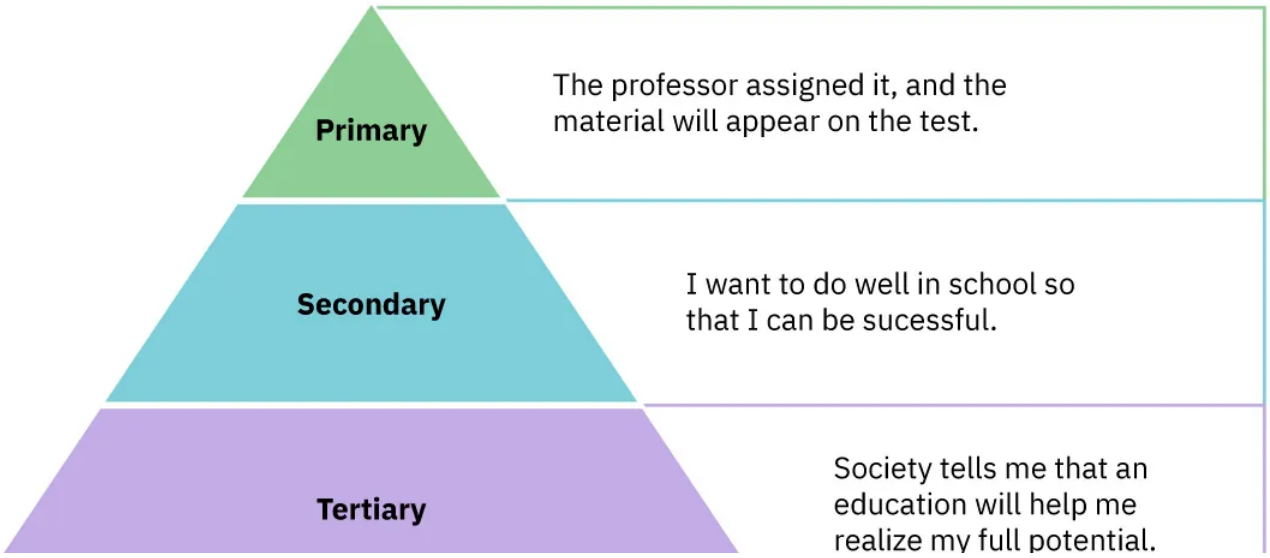


Figure 1.11 Causation Explained. This causation chart answers the question, "Why are you reading?" on three levels. The primary level is the most immediate. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

To reach a true understanding of why you are reading your text, you needed to know yourself well, understand the connection between education and career, and assess how social factors, such as the value employers place on education, influence your decision-making. The more aspects of causation historians can find, the closer they can get to the true nature of the event.

Let's try another example, this one from history. Why did the United States enter World War II in 1941? In this case, the immediate cause was Japan's attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, but hostilities had been brewing for some time. The president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, had been looking for ways to help the British fend off a potential German invasion, and Japan and the United States had long-standing issues over the use of power in the Pacific (Figure 1.12).

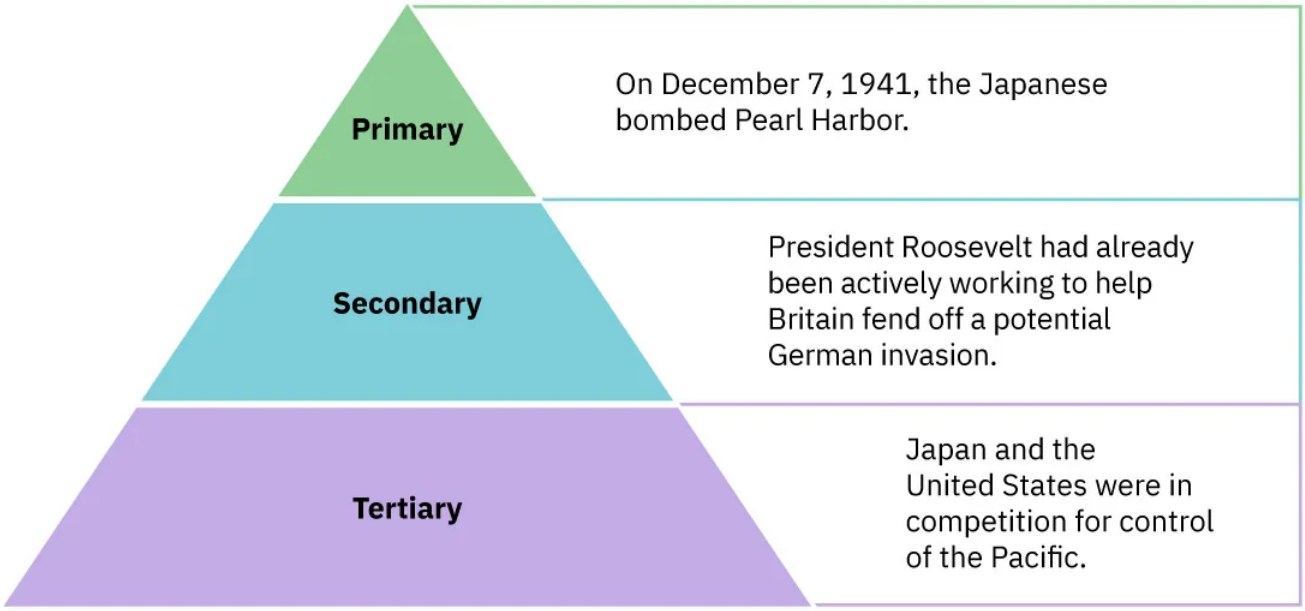


Figure 1.12 Causation Applied to World War II. This causation chart identifies and ranks the reasons for the entry of the United States into World War II. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Here is one more example. In 1453, Mehmed II laid siege to the city of Constantinople. Why? Mehmed II was the leader of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan. He had been badly treated by his father, and when he ascended the throne, he felt he had something to prove. The Ottomans had tried several times to take Constantinople because it lay at the crossroads of many civilizations. Conquest had long been a reliable mechanism for bringing new people and wealth into the Ottoman Empire and for keeping its economy prosperous. All these factors played a role in the siege undertaken by Mehmed II. Can you order them by importance? This is the point where historians usually disagree, even about events for which most of the facts are clear. A historian who believes powerful leaders are the most influential factor driving events would rank Mehmed's personal goals first (Figure 1.13). Base your ranking on the strongest arguments you can make.

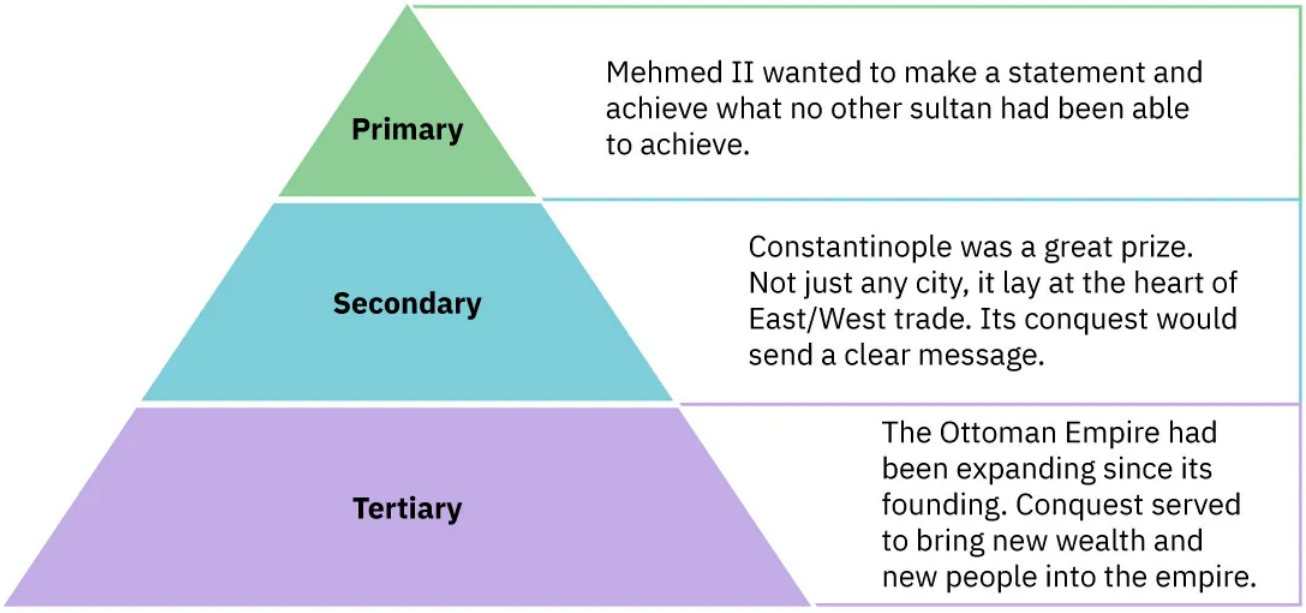


Figure 1.13 Causation Applied to the Conquest of Constantinople. This causation chart ranks the reasons for Mehmed II's 1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

There can be more than three causes to any event, of course, and because human choice always plays a role, we sometimes cannot separate events on the big stage from the smallest of personal moments in history. The context of the Ottoman Empire's continuous expansion set the scene in this example, and Mehmed II's desire to prove his ability was the spark.

Before moving on, try one more example on your own. Pick a moment in history with which you are familiar and follow the same process.

Interpretation in History

Hand in hand with bringing causation to light is discovering what informed the choices people made in the past. What makes people act as they do? For much of history, we found the answer in the actions of elites—tsars, sultans, kings, and queens. The first historians largely concerned themselves with the study of wars and rulers, in accordance with the great man theory of history that credits leaders and heroes with triggering history's pivotal events. Although these historians gave some attention to historical detail, there was also an equal measure of bravado, exaggeration, and political spin in their work. This seemed reasonable in a world where the king's choice became everyone's choice and where sources rarely spoke about anyone other than noble lords and ladies. That this type of history remained the norm for so long was also a function of who was writing it.

In the West, Thomas Carlyle, a nineteenth-century Scottish historian, considered the study of the lives of "big men" enough to understand all of history. Higher education was the privilege of only the rich; it must have seemed quite natural to believe that only the elites could move history. These ideas began to change, however, if slowly. In the early nineteenth century, a new school of thought called Romanticism emerged. The Romantics believed there was greatness in everyday life. Even a small flower was worthy of a poem, and the plight of a lowly squire was as important as the worries of the great lord of the manor, for both were essential actors in the human experience. The advent of Romantic art, poetry, music, and novels paved the way for a broad reexamination of what was worth knowing and studying. Writing a little later, in 1860, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy argued that there is more to history than the actions of one person. In his novel *War and Peace*, he contended that the "general mass of men" who participate in history are the ones who truly cause events.

Dueling Voices

Great Men, or Everyone?

In an 1840 lecture on heroes, Thomas Carlyle coined the term "Great Men" to describe the kind of history he considered worthy, the study of elite men in positions of power. In his novel *War and Peace*, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy argued that there is far more to history than the actions of one person. In the following excerpts, consider the viewpoint of each writer.

> *As I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. [. . .]*
>
> *We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them.*
>
> *—Thomas Carlyle, "Lecture on Heroes"*

> *In historical events (where the actions of men are the subject of observation) the first and most primitive approximation to present itself was the will of the gods and, after that, the will of those who stood in the most prominent position—the heroes of history. But we need only penetrate to the essence of any historic event—which lies in the activity of the general mass of men who take part in it—to be convinced that the will of the historic hero does not control the actions of the mass but is itself continually controlled. It may seem to be a matter of indifference whether we understand the meaning of historical events this way or that; yet there is the same difference between a man who says that the people of the West moved on the East because Napoleon wished it and a man who says that this happened because it had to happen, as there is between those who declared that the earth was stationary and that the planets moved round it and those who admitted that they did not know what upheld the earth, but knew there were laws directing its movement and that of the other planets. There is, and can be, no cause of an historical event except the one cause of all causes. But there are laws directing events, and some of these laws are known to us while we are conscious of others we cannot comprehend. The discovery of these laws is only possible when we have quite abandoned the attempt to find the cause in the will of some one man, just as the discovery of the laws of the motion of the planets was possible only when men abandoned the conception of the fixity of the earth.*
>
> *—Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace*

- Which kind of history do you prefer, the "great man" kind or what we might call the "everyone" kind? Why?
- Whose argument is more convincing, Carlyle's or Tolstoy's? Why?

While on one hand historians began to look at people of the lower classes as more integral to the human story, history as a discipline became dominated by the same set of colonial powers that were conquering much of the globe in the nineteenth century. Therefore, two divergent streams of thought were operating simultaneously, and the picture of history both expanded in terms of

class and contracted in terms of diversity. One of the early European schools of thought was progressive history, which viewed history as a straight line to a specific destination. Historians with this "progressive" view believed societies were becoming more democratic over time and that the advance of republican governments was inevitable. Their perspective might also be considered a form of *teleological* history, which proposes that history is moving to a particular end, a culmination of the human experience. Progressive historians believed in the betterment of people and of society, so long as it occurred on a European model. Progress looked only one way: the Western way. Consider what Chinua Achebe (quoted in Chinua Achebe on the Value of Indigenous History) would have said about European democracy and republicanism.

In the twentieth century, particularly after World War I, the idea of inevitable human progress seemed laughable. People grew more willing to question the authority of elites because these leaders were of little help once war began. Historians became more interested in the irrational aspects of the human condition, the psychology behind people's choices. This is one reason for the rise of contemporary intellectual history, which looks at the ideas that drive people to make certain choices and focuses on philosophical questions and the history of human thought.

The counterculture of the 1960s in the West deepened people's desire to challenge existing norms, such as the lack of rights for women and for racial minorities. The field of social history, guided by the concept that history is made by all people and not just elites, became much more important during this period (Figure 1.14). In this context, young historians and sociologists began to develop new ideas. In their 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*, for example, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that our belief systems are informed by social constructs, ideas that have been created and accepted by the people in a society, such as the concepts of class distinction and gender. Social constructs influence the ways people think and behave.

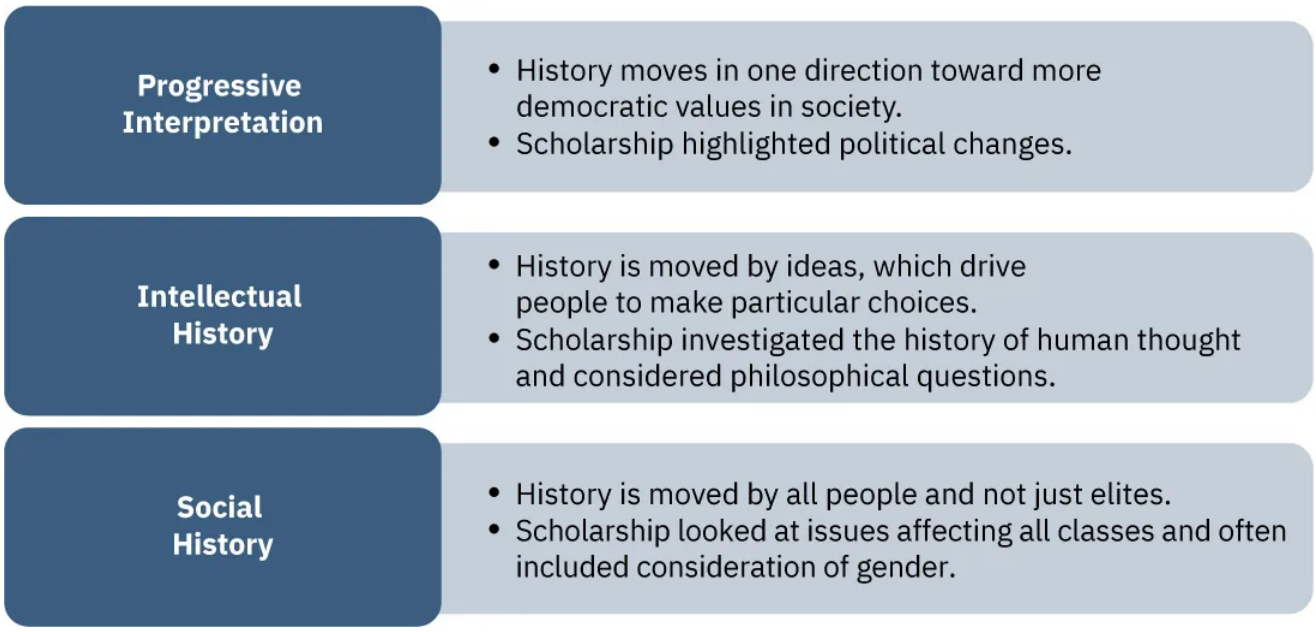


Figure 1.14 Trends in Historical Thought. Historians' thinking has led from the progressive school of interpretation to the more contemporary fields of intellectual and social history. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

To understand history, you must understand the social construction of reality, which is the way people define roles and perceive themselves within a social context. Consider our earlier thought exercise. You believe education is important. Why? Who has said that to you in the past? How did you come to believe it? In other words, what is your social construction of education, and where did it come from?

Social constructs exist everywhere and inform many decisions we make, often on a subconscious level. For example, consider the following questions:

1. What do you buy a five-year-old girl for her birthday? What do you buy for a boy the same age? What influenced your decision?
2. What would you wear to a job interview? What would you wear to a party? Why?

3. To which person standing at the front of a classroom would you give more respect: a woman dressed in a tailored suit, or a man wearing jeans and a t-shirt? Why?

In addition to examining reality as socially constructed, twentieth-century historians made interpretations through the lenses of Marxism, which considers history to be driven by class struggle, women's history (now usually referred to in the context of gender history), which sees history as driven by power differences between men and women, and postcolonialism, which focuses on the history of places formerly occupied by colonial powers. In the process we call revisionism, each additional lens revised the great man story of history, adding new key players and viewpoints.

Let us look at one more example. How would each school of historical thought approach the story of colonial Latin America between the Spanish conquest that began in 1493 and the independence movements of the 1820s? The progressive historian might explore the growth of democratic legal systems or people's increased interest in republican forms of government. The intellectual historian might consider the Indigenous literature and philosophy of the period. The social historian would look at what conquered people ate, how they worked, and what they looked for in marriage partners. A Marxist historian would examine unfair labor practices and moments of class conflict like rebellion or riot. The gender historian would focus on the role that social constructs of gender played in the lives of people in the past. And the postcolonialist would highlight why aspects of colonialism, such as racism and poverty, remain influential after independence. All these interpretative elements help us weave a more complete picture of the past.

The variety of interpretations open to historians also helps us put in the final piece, which is the practice of historical empathy, the ability to meet the past on its own terms and without judgment or the imposition of our own modern-day attitudes. To fully embrace the study of the past, the student of history must be able to set aside the assumptions of the modern era. Everyone has a set of biases, generated by the people who influence our lives and the experiences that shape who we become. Historians must spend the time necessary to investigate these biases and understand how they affect their interpretations. It is not the historian's job to pass judgment on the past, but to present it as clearly as possible and to preserve that clarity for future generations. This may mean reflecting impartially on historical positions, attitudes, or decisions we might find abhorrent as viewed from today's world. However, the more strands of history we can investigate and bring together, the more accurate the picture will be. And there is still much work to be done. For example, recent and ongoing research into LGBTQ+ studies, Indigenous studies, and the history of the Global South will continue to sharpen our image of the past.

The bottom line is that interpretation plays a central role in the field of history. And changes in our interpretation increase the number of ways we can get a clearer picture of those who lived before us. The danger lies in using only one lens. Yes, historians choose some causes as more important than others, but only after considering all the information available.

1.5.5: Key Terms

chronological approach
an approach to history that follows a timeline from ancient to modern

global citizen
a person who sees themselves as responsible to a world community rather than only a national one

great man theory
the view that it is enough to study the deeds and impact of important leaders to paint an accurate picture of the past

historical empathy
the ability to see the past on its own terms, without judgment or the imposition of our own modern-day attitudes

historiography
the study of how historians have already interpreted the past

iconography
the use of images and symbols in art

intellectual history
the history of ideas, which looks at the philosophies that drive people to make certain choices

primary cause
the most immediate reason an event occurred

primary source
a document, object, or other source material from the time period under study

progressive history
a school of thought that views history as a straight line to a specific and more democratic destination

revisionism
the process of altering our interpretation of historical events by adding new elements and perspectives

rhetoric
the way words are used and put together in speaking or writing

secondary source
a document, object, or other source material written or created after the time period under study

social constructs
ideas such as class and gender created and accepted by the people in a society that influence the way they think and behave

social history
a field of history that looks at all classes and categories of people, not just elites

1.5.6: Section Summary

1.1 Developing a Global Perspective

Knowing the past, the human story, has long been considered a mark of civilization, and its study has never been more important. The study of world history provides the skills necessary to meet global workforce needs while at the same time developing a sense of self and place in our global community. You will gain critical-thinking and analysis skills that will help you fulfill the role of a global citizen in our interconnected world. This text will help you approach history with an open mind, and it will engage you in meaningful ways, often highlighting content that remains relevant in today's society.

1.2 Primary Sources

Primary sources are the first-hand evidence with which historians form a foundation of knowledge of the past. Interpreting them requires attention to four key areas: the author, the audience, the intent, and the context. Secondary sources offer valuable starting points for inquiry and context, but students must be aware of any bias they contain. Despite the efforts of generations of historians, there are still people and regions we do not know much about. We must hope that new generations of historians will continue to hone our interpretation of the past.

1.3 Causation and Interpretation in History

The historian's main job is to discover why history happened as it did. What caused the events that have shaped our shared human past? To answer this question, historians apply rigorous interpretative methodology rooted in the search for causation. They study events for both immediate causation and contributing factors, while avoiding judgment and remaining open to revision. You now have the tools you need to fully engage with the material in this text and begin your journey into the human past.

1.5.7: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What is an example of a primary source?

a. a diary entry by a person who lived in the period under discussion
b. a modern biography of a person in the period under discussion
c. an account of a nineteenth-century battle in a twenty-first century textbook
d. an article in an academic journal

2.
Whom do the Chinese view as the Father of History?

a. Homer
b. Santayana
c. Herodotus
d. Sima Qian

3.
What interpretation of history assumes that history can be viewed primarily through the lives and choices of leaders?

a. great man theory
b. progressive interpretation
c. gender interpretation
d. Marxist interpretation

4.
The belief that history is moved primarily by class struggle is the _____ of history.

a. social interpretation theory
b. revisionist view
c. progressive interpretation
d. Marxist interpretation

5.
What is the most immediate motivator of a historical event?

a. the tertiary cause
b. the primary cause
c. the action of a great man
d. the social construct

6.
Our perspectives are deeply rooted in _____, which we learn from our upbringing and environment.

a. education
b. social constructs
c. historical empathy
d. causation

1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What does it mean to be a global citizen?
2.
What are the features of this textbook, and how will they enhance your learning experience?
3.
What is a primary source, and what are some examples of primary sources?
4.
What are the four types of questions we should ask about textual sources and why?
5.
Define causation as it is used in the study of history.
6.
Describe the process you would go through to establish the primary, secondary, and tertiary causes of a historical event.

1.5.9: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
How do you see your knowledge of world history helping you achieve life goals? What do you hope to learn from this text?
2.
Why is it important to consider competing sources about the same topic?
3.
What primary source materials do you think you will leave behind for later generations? How would you want them to be interpreted?
4.
If you could suggest a revisionist addition to the history you have been taught so far, what would it be? Why?
5.
Provide three examples of social constructs that affect the way you view the world and explain why.
6.
Which historical interpretation interests you most? Why?
7.
Choose a recent event you have followed in the news or on social media and establish a history of that event. In a few short paragraphs, tell the story and rank the causes in order of importance. Then write the history again, using one of the major interpretive theories in the chapter (progressive, intellectual, gender, etc.). Your goal is to produce a different viewpoint on the same story.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies

2.1: Introduction
2.2: Early Civilizations
2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia
2.4: Ancient Egypt
2.5: The Indus Valley Civilization
2.6: Key Terms
2.7: Section Summary
2.8: Review Questions
2.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
2.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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2.1: Introduction

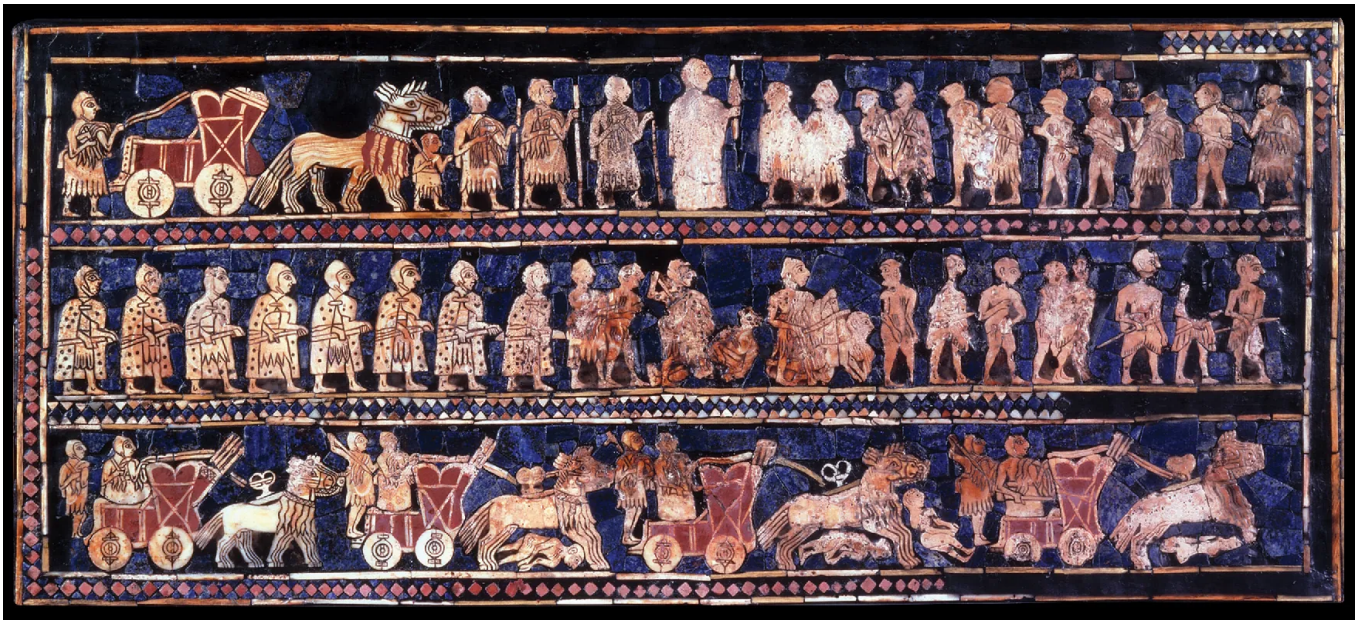


Figure 3.1 The Art of **Ur**. This intricately ornamented box of mosaic-covered wood was found in a royal tomb in the ancient city of Ur. It dates from about 2550 BCE and exhibits several markers of this era's civilizations, such as a hierarchical society (as the scenes illustrate) and the presence of wealth, leisure, and specialized skills needed to make such an elaborate decorative object. (credit: modification of work "Standard of Ur" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

3.1 Early Civilizations
3.2 Ancient Mesopotamia
3.3 Ancient Egypt
3.4 The Indus Valley Civilization

The land of Sumer, in today's southern Iraq, was home to some of the largest early cities in human history. In one of these ancient settlements, Ur, a beautiful wooden box was laid in a royal tomb in about 2550 BCE (Figure 3.1). It measures roughly nine by twenty inches (a little bigger than a laptop) and is inlaid with elaborate mosaic figures and borders composed of bits of red limestone, lapis lazuli, and marine shell. This kind of specialized craftsmanship was a hallmark of societies that no longer depended on hunting and gathering for food but rather produced crops capable of sustaining large populations. In turn, they gained enough time and prosperity for some members to focus on artisanal crafts.

The box indicates at least three important things about the civilization that produced it. First, a highly skilled artisan constructed the box and created the mosaics, indicating the presence of specialization of labor. Second, the mosaics show someone who is presumably the king at the center of the top row, directing the soldiers below. These power dynamics suggest new social hierarchies. Finally, the soldiers all appear smaller in the scene than the king, symbolically reflecting their subordinate position and telling us that social stratification had come into existence. All these developments took place gradually over time, bringing slow but enduring change to the lives of the people in Ur and those who lived nearby. Similar changes occurred in the world's other ancient cities.





Figure 3.2 Timeline: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies. (credit "3000 BCE, cuneiform": modification of work "Sumerian Cuneiform Clay Tablet" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit "3000 BCE, Dynastic Rule": "La palette de Narmer" by "Jean88"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit "3000 BCE, Indus Valley": modification of work "Harappan (Indus Valley) Pottery" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit "2500 BCE, Giza": "All Gizah Pyramids" by Ricardo Liberato/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5; credit "2500 BCE, Stonehenge": "Stonehenge" by "thegarethwiscombe"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit "1750 BCE": "Prologue of the code of Hammurabi" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Figure 3.3 Locator Map: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies. (credit: modification of work "World map blank shorelines" by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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2.2: Early Civilizations

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the attributes of early civilizations
- Analyze the way human relationships changed with the development of urban areas

Early civilizations, most of which arose along large rivers, were marked by an agriculturally sustained population that remained settled in one area and could number in the tens of thousands. The stability of the population allowed for the development of a discernible culture, which consists of all the different ways a distinct group of people interact with one another and their environment and pass these ways down from generation to generation over time. This is not to say that earlier groups of people lacked social identities. But there were important differences between them and the early civilizations that followed.

The development of early civilizations occurred between 10,000 and 8,000 BCE in just a few specific areas of the world that historians have labeled the "cradles of civilization." In these locations—today's Mexico, Peru, China, India/Pakistan, Iraq, and Egypt—the introduction of farming allowed larger populations to settle in one place, and the ability to produce and distribute surpluses of food enabled some people to specialize in such tasks as manufacturing handicrafts, tending to the spiritual world, and governing. The peoples of these cultures experienced radical changes in their lifestyles as well as in the ways their communities interacted with each other and their environments.

Attributes of Early Civilizations

Even after the Neolithic Revolution, many people continued to lead a nomadic or seminomadic existence, hunting and gathering or herding domesticated animals. People produced or gathered only enough materials to meet the immediate food, shelter, and clothing needs of their family unit. Even in societies that adopted farming as a way of life, people grew only enough for their own survival. Moreover, the family unit was self-sufficient and relied on its own resources and abilities to meet its needs. No great differences in wealth existed between families, and each person provided necessary support for the group. Group leaders relied primarily on consensus for decision-making. Order and peace were maintained by negotiations between community elders such as warriors and religious leaders. Stability also became dependent on peaceful relationships with neighboring societies, often built on trade.

Early civilizations, by contrast, arose where large numbers of people lived in a relatively small, concentrated area and worked to produce a surplus of food and other materials, which they distributed through a system of exchange. For farming communities, this food surplus meant family size grew to six or seven children and caused the global human population to skyrocket. Population growth rooted in agricultural production led to larger cities, in which the food produced by farmers in outlying rural areas was distributed among the population of the urban center, where food was not produced. This system of specialization was a key feature of early civilizations and what distinguished them from previous societies. Individuals performed specific tasks such as farming, writing, or performing religious rituals. People came to rely on the exchange of goods and services to obtain necessary supplies. For example, artisans specializing in craft production relied on farmers to cultivate the food they needed to thrive. In turn, farmers depended upon artisans to produce tools and clothing for them. A weaver acquired wool from a shepherd and produced cloth that might then be given to a physician in exchange for medicine or a priest as payment for conducting a religious ritual.

The system of exchange, however, created hierarchies within society. Those who could accumulate more goods became wealthy, and they passed that wealth from one generation to the next. This wealth led, in turn, to the accumulation of political and religious power, while those who continued to labor in production remained lower on the social scale. This social stratification, another characteristic of early civilizations, means that families and individuals could vary greatly in their wealth and status. Those who share the same level of wealth and status make up a distinct class or strata, and these strata or classes are ordered from highest to lowest based on their social standing.

The nature of government also changed as populations grew. In smaller groups, decisions about war and migration were made in concert because no individual or family was likely to survive without the others. Also, in small communities, order and peace were often enforced at the family level. If someone acted badly, the customs of the society were brought to bear on them to correct the offending behavior. For example, the San of South Africa held a ritual dance to contact their elders for advice on how to correct a

difficult situation. The act of coming together was often enough for the community to heal. In larger civilizations, officials such as priests and kings possessed the authority to command the obedience of subjects, who relied on the powerful to protect them. In return for physical protection and the promise of prosperity, farmers and artisans provided food and goods and, eventually, paid taxes. This exchange served to reinforce both the developing social hierarchy and the specialization of labor.

As civilizations developed around the world in this way, they shared the features noted. Their existence did not mean the end of older ways of living, however. Nomadic and seminomadic peoples not only remained an integral part of the ancient world, they also provided crucial resources and a vehicle for the exchange of knowledge and culture. They were particularly important as a means of connecting one large city to another.

The First Urban Societies

Around 10,000 BCE, wheat was first domesticated in what is today northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, and western Iran, and also in Syria and Israel. This region is commonly called the Fertile Crescent (because of its shape). It includes Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), southern Anatolia (modern Turkey), and the Levant (modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine) and has yielded the earliest evidence of agriculture (Figure 3.4). This same region saw the rise of the first urban areas in the Neolithic Age, often called Neolithic cities. Examples include Jericho (8300–6500 BCE) along the Jordan River in what is today the Palestinian Territories, and Çatalhöyük (7200–6000 BCE) in southeastern Turkey. Archaeologists have established that these early urban areas had populations as high as six thousand.



Figure 3.4 The Fertile Crescent. This broad swath of land (shown in green) in what is now Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Turkey was home to the world's first cities, including Çatalhöyük and Jericho. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Link to Learning

Hunter-gatherer cultures also built large structures, such as the monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe in southeast Turkey and at Poverty Point in Louisiana in the United States. Listen to this TEDx Talk lecture by the archaeologist who excavated at Göbekli Tepe to find out more about the site. You can learn more about the Poverty Point culture by exploring the Poverty Point website. Look especially at "History and Artifacts."

Neolithic settlements depended upon the transition to agricultural production to sustain their populations. Such developments were also accompanied by increasing complexity in other areas of life, such as religion. An agricultural surplus enabled religious specialists to devote time to performing bull sacrifices at Çatalhöyük, for example, and freed artisans to hone their skills to create the frescoes that decorated the interior space where these sacrifices occurred. Some form of government must have organized the labor and materials necessary to construct the walls and tower at Jericho, which may have served as an observatory to mark the passage of the solar year. In both Jericho and Çatalhöyük, a shared belief system, or unity behind a leader, must have inspired the inhabitants to labor in the fields and distribute their agricultural surplus. At Jericho, the community may have been united by its veneration of ancestors, whose skulls were decorated and revered as idols. The people of Çatalhöyük may have offered their bull sacrifices to a mother-deity, possibly represented by small figurines of a woman that archaeologists have discovered there.

Beyond the Book

Interpreting Evidence from Neolithic Cities

Prehistoric peoples left no writings behind, and historians and archaeologists can only attempt to understand their beliefs and attitudes by studying the artifacts they produced. This is challenging because ancient societies had very different religious and social systems from our own. But even the most convincing interpretations may not persuade everyone. We may simply never know what certain artifacts meant to the people who created them.

Consider the famous tower of Jericho, built around 8000 BCE (Figure 3.5). Careful excavation has revealed that the tower likely took more than thirty years to build and had stairs for climbing to the top through the center. Some believe it was made for defensive purposes; others think it was a religious monument or even an observatory. Regardless of its use, it seems likely the city had some type of governing system that served to organize the labor. But that assumption too could be in error.



Figure 3.5 The Tower of Jericho. Built around 8000 BCE, this twenty-eight-foot-tall tower at the Neolithic city of Jericho is one of the earliest stone monuments in the world, but its precise purpose remains unclear. (credit: "Tower of Jericho" by Reinhard Dietrich/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As another example, consider a decorated skull found in Neolithic Jericho (Figure 3.6). An ancient artisan made it by plastering over a human skull and placing pieces of shell in the eye sockets. Historians and archaeologists have speculated that the people of Jericho venerated such skulls, which may have been seen as relics of ancestors and objects of worship. But perhaps the skull meant something else entirely.



Figure 3.6 Skull from Jericho. More than nine thousand years ago, an artisan at Jericho covered this human skull with plaster and placed shells in the eye sockets, possibly to celebrate a distant ancestor. (credit: "A plastered skull from the ancient city of Jericho in Palestine 7000 BCE" by Mary Harrsch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Evidence from the Neolithic city of Çatalhöyük demonstrates that its people venerated bulls. Archaeologists have discovered numerous bucranium (bull heads and horns) at the site (Figure 3.7). But what did these bull symbols mean? Popular interpretation suggests they symbolize the son and lover of an important mother-deity. Other explanations call them female symbols of life and rebirth. Still others propose different interpretations.



Figure 3.7 Bull Decorations at Çatalhöyük. This reconstruction of a room at Çatalhöyük depicts several bucranium decorating the walls. Interpretations of their meaning vary. (credit: "A reconstructed sanctuary of Catal Hüyük" by Stipich Béla/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

- What do scholars' interpretations suggest about the way these artifacts are studied?
- Do their interpretations sound convincing to you? What others can you think of, given what you have read and seen?

The Neolithic cities of Jericho and Çatalhöyük were some of the earliest to emerge. But they are not the only such sites. As early as 7000 BCE, a Neolithic settlement appeared in modern Pakistan, at a site today known as Mehrgarh, whose inhabitants engaged in long-distance trade, grew barley, and raised goats and sheep. Comparable Neolithic settlements in China emerged around 8000 BCE along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, where people cultivated millet and rice. A few thousand years later in the Americas, Neolithic settlements sprang up in both Mesoamerica and the Andes Mountains region.

Not all the Neolithic settlements endured. Çatalhöyük, for example, was ultimately abandoned around 6000 BCE and never reoccupied. Jericho, on the other hand, was abandoned and resettled a few times and is still a functioning city today. What is important about these Neolithic settlements is what they can tell us about the long transition between the emergence of agriculture and the eventual rise of early civilizations thousands of years later in places like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River valley.

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2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of civilization in Ancient Mesopotamia
- Discuss the political history of Mesopotamia from the early Sumerian city-states to the rise of Old Babylon
- Describe the economy, society, and religion of Ancient Mesopotamia

In the fourth millennium BCE, the world's first great cities arose in southern Mesopotamia, or the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, then called Sumer. The ancient Sumerians were an inventive people responsible for a host of technological advances, most notably a sophisticated writing system. Even after the Sumerian language ceased to be spoken early in the second millennium BCE, Sumerian literary works survived throughout the whole of Mesopotamia and were often collected by later cities and stored in the first libraries.

The Rise and Eclipse of Sumer

The term *Mesopotamia*, or "the land between the rivers" in Greek, likely originated with the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and has become the common name for the place between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now Iraq. The rivers flow north to south, from the Taurus Mountains of eastern Turkey to the Persian Gulf, depositing fertile soil along their banks. Melting snow and rain from the mountains carry this topsoil to the river valleys below. In antiquity, the river flow was erratic, and flooding was frequent but unpredictable. The need to control it and manage the life-giving water led to the building of cooperative irrigation projects.

Agricultural practices reached Mesopotamia by around 8000 BCE, if not earlier. However, for about two millennia afterward, populations remained quite small, typically living in small villages of between one hundred and two hundred people. Beginning around 5500 BCE, some had begun to establish settlements in southern Mesopotamia, a wetter and more forbidding environment. It was here that the Sumerian civilization emerged (Figure 3.8). By around 4500 BCE, some of the once-small farming villages had become growing urban centers, some with thousands of residents. During the course of the fourth millennium BCE (3000s BCE), urbanization exploded in the region. By the end of the millennium, there were at least 124 villages with about one hundred residents each, twenty towns with as many as two thousand residents, another twenty small urban centers of about five thousand residents, and one large city, Uruk, with a population that may have been as high as fifty thousand. This growth helped make Sumer the earliest civilization to develop in Mesopotamia.



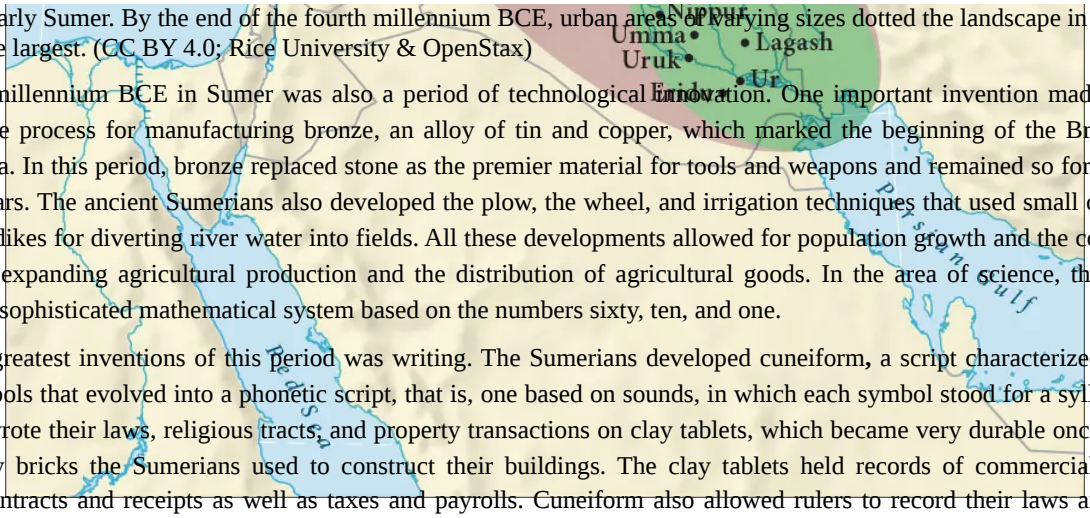


Figure 3.8 Early Sumer. By the end of the fourth millennium BCE, urban areas of varying sizes dotted the landscape in Sumer. Uruk was the largest. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The fourth millennium BCE in Sumer was also a period of technological innovation. One important invention made after 4000 BCE was the process for manufacturing bronze, an alloy of tin and copper, which marked the beginning of the Bronze Age in Mesopotamia. In this period, bronze replaced stone as the premier material for tools and weapons and remained so for nearly three thousand years. The ancient Sumerians also developed the plow, the wheel, and irrigation techniques that used small channels and canals with dikes for diverting river water into fields. All these developments allowed for population growth and the continued rise of cities by expanding agricultural production and the distribution of agricultural goods. In the area of science, the Sumerians developed a sophisticated mathematical system based on the numbers sixty, ten, and one.

One of the greatest inventions of this period was writing. The Sumerians developed cuneiform**,** a script characterized by wedge-shaped symbols that evolved into a phonetic script, that is, one based on sounds, in which each symbol stood for a syllable (Figure 3.9). They wrote their laws, religious tracts, and property transactions on clay tablets, which became very durable once baked, just like the clay bricks the Sumerians used to construct their buildings. The clay tablets held records of commercial exchanges, including contracts and receipts as well as taxes and payrolls. Cuneiform also allowed rulers to record their laws and priests to preserve their rituals and sacred stories. In these ways, it helped facilitate both economic growth and the formation of states.



Figure 3.9 Sumerian Cuneiform. Cuneiform, from the Latin *cuneus* (meaning “wedge”), was created by pressing a stylus of reed into wet clay to create a meaningful arrangement of wedge shapes. This clay cone from circa 1934–1924 BCE includes a dedication to the ruler of the city of Isin in southern Mesopotamia. (credit: "Votive cone with cuneiform inscription of Lipit-Eshtar" by Anonymous Gift, 1971/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Dueling Voices

The Invention of Writing in Sumer

Writing developed independently in several parts of the world, but the earliest known evidence of its birth has been found in Sumer, where cuneiform script emerged as a genuine writing system by around 3000 BCE, if not earlier. But questions remain about how and why ancient peoples began reproducing their spoken language in symbolic form.

Archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat argued in the 1990s that small clay representations of numbers and objects, often called “tokens,” date from thousands of years before the development of cuneiform writing and were its precursor. These tokens, she believed, were part of an accounting system, and each type represented a different good: livestock, grains, and oils. Some were found within hollow baseball-sized clay balls now called “bullae,” which were marked with pictures of the tokens

inside. Schmandt-Besserat believed the pictures portray the type of transaction in which the goods represented by the tokens were exchanged, and thus they were a crucial step toward writing. Over time, she suggested, the marked bullae gave way to flat clay tablets recording the transactions, and the first truly written records emerged (Figure 3.10).



(a)



(b)

Figure 3.10 Sumerian Clay Tablet. One theory holds that the antecedents of Sumerian clay tablets inscribed with writing like this one (a) were small clay tokens (b) and the pictures of them on the clay “bullae” vessels that held them. (credit a: modification of work "Sumerian Cuneiform Clay Tablet" by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work "Clay accounting tokens Susa Louvre" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Schmandt-Besserat’s linear interpretation is still one of the best-known explanations for the emergence of writing. But it is hardly the only one. One scholar who offers a different idea is the French Assyriologist Jean-Jacques Glassner. Glassner believes that rather than being an extension of accounting techniques, early writing was a purposeful attempt to render the Sumerian language in script. He equates the development of writing, which gives meaning to a symbol, to the process by which Mesopotamian priests interpreted omens for divining the future. Writing allowed people to place language, a creation of the gods, under human control. Glassner’s argument is complex and relies on ancient works of literature and various theoretical approaches, including that of postmodernist philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Many disagree with Glassner’s conclusions, and modern scholars concede that tokens likely played an important role, but probably not in the linear way Schmandt-Besserat proposed. Uncertainty about the origin of writing in Sumer still abounds, and the scholarly debate continues.

- Why do you think Schmandt-Besserat’s argument was once so appealing?
- If you lived in a society with no writing, what might prompt you to develop a way to represent your language in symbolic form?

Cuneiform was a very complex writing system, and literacy remained the monopoly of an elite group of highly trained writing specialists, the scribes. But the script was also highly flexible and could be used to symbolize a great number of sounds, allowing subsequent Mesopotamian cultures such as the Akkadians, Babylonians, and many more to adapt it to their own languages. Since historians deciphered cuneiform in the nineteenth century, they have read the thousands of clay tablets that survived over the centuries and learned much about the history, society, economy, and beliefs of the ancient Sumerians and other peoples of Mesopotamia.

The Sumerians were polytheists, people who revered many gods. Each Sumerian city had its own patron god, however, one with whom the city felt a special connection and whom it honored above the others. For example, the patron god of Uruk was Inanna, the goddess of fertility; the city of Nippur revered the weather god Enlil; and Ur claimed the moon god Sin. Each city possessed an immense temple complex for its special deity, which included a site where the deity was worshipped and religious rituals were

performed. This site, the ziggurat, was a stepped tower built of mud-brick with a flat top (Figure 3.11). At its summit stood a roofed structure that housed the sacred idol or image of the temple's deity. The temple complex also included the homes of the priests, workshops for artisans who made goods for the temple, and storage facilities to meet the needs of the temple workers.



Figure 3.11 The Ziggurat of Ur. The partially reconstructed remains of the once-great ziggurat of Ur (near the modern city of Nasiriyah in Iraq) demonstrate the size of these huge temples and the enormous human resources spent on their construction. When it was completed in the twenty-first century BCE, this structure had additional tiers upon the large base shown and was about one hundred feet high. (credit: "Ziggarat of Ur" by "Tla2006"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Sumerians were clearly eager to please their gods by placing them at the center of their society. These gods could be fickle, faithless, and easily stirred to anger. If displeased with the people, they might bring famine or conquest. Making sure the gods were praised and honored was thus a way of ensuring prosperity. Praising them, however, implied different things for different social tiers in Sumer. For common people, it meant living a virtuous life and giving to the poor. For priests and priestesses, it consisted of performing the various rituals at the temple complexes. And for rulers honoring the gods, it meant ensuring that the temples were properly funded, maintained, and regularly beautified and enlarged if possible.

By the Early Dynastic Period (c. 2650 BCE–2400 BCE), powerful dynasties of kings called *lugals* had established themselves as rulers of the cities. In each city, the *lugals* rose to power primarily as warlords, since the Sumerian cities often waged war against each other for control of farmland and access to water as well as other natural resources. *Lugals* legitimized their authority through the control of the religious institutions of the city. For example, at Ur, the daughter of the reigning *lugal* always served as the high priestess of the moon god Sin, the chief deity at Ur.

The *lugals* at Ur during this period, the so-called First Dynasty of Ur, were especially wealthy, as reflected in the magnificent beehive-shaped tombs in which they were buried. In these tombs, precious goods such as jewelry and musical instruments were stored, along with the bodies of servants who were killed and placed in the tomb to accompany the rulers to the Land of the Dead. One of the more spectacular tombs belonged to a woman of Ur called Pu-Abi, who was buried wearing an elaborate headdress and might have been a queen (Figure 3.12). The most famous *lugal* in all Sumer in this early period was Gilgamesh of Uruk, whose legendary exploits were recounted later in fantastical form in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.



Figure 3.12 Sumerian Gold Headdress. The striking beauty and quality of this gold and lapis lazuli headdress from circa 2600 BCE have convinced some that the woman wearing it in the Ur tomb where it was found might have been a queen. Others believe she was simply an attendant, though an elaborately dressed one. (credit: modification of work "Headdress" by Dodge Fund, 1933/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the world's earliest examples of epic literature. To understand this ancient tale, first written down in the form we know today around 2100 BCE, read the overview of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has a notable collection of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts.

The Rise of the World's First Empire

Around 2300 BCE, the era of the independent Sumerian city-state, a political entity consisting of a city and surrounding territory that it controls, came to an end. Sumer and indeed all of Mesopotamia was conquered by Sargon of Akkad, who created the first-known empire, in this case, a number of regional powers under the control of one person. The word "Akkad" in his name was a reference to the Akkadians, a group that settled in central Mesopotamia, north of Sumer, around the ancient city of Kish. Over time, the Akkadians adopted Sumerian culture and adapted cuneiform to their own language, a language of the Semitic family that includes the Arabic and Hebrew spoken today. They also identified their own gods with the gods of the Sumerians and adopted Sumerian myths. For example, the Akkadians identified the fertility goddess Inanna with their own goddess Ishtar.

Sargon conquered not only Sumer but also what is today northern Iraq, Syria, and southwestern Iran. While the precise details of his origin and rise to power are not known, scholars believe the story Sargon told about himself, at least, has likely been accurately preserved in the *Legend of Sargon*, written two centuries after his death as a purported autobiography. It is a familiar story of a scrappy young hero born in humble circumstances and rising on his own merits to become a great leader. The *Legend* relates how, when Sargon was a baby, his unwed mother put him in a basket and cast it on the Euphrates River. A farmer found and raised him, and Ishtar loved Sargon and elevated him from a commoner to a great king and conqueror.

This interesting tale would have certainly been a powerful piece of propaganda justifying Sargon's rule and endearing him to the common people, and some of it may even be true. But from what historians can tell, Sargon's rise to power likely occurred during a period of turmoil as his kingdom of Kish, of which he had likely seized control, came under attack by another king named Lugalzagesi. Sargon's eventual defeat of Lugalzagesi and conquest of all of Sumer proved to be the beginning of a larger conquest

of Mesopotamia. The Akkadian Empire that Sargon created lasted for about a century and a half, officially coming to an end in the year 2193 BCE (Figure 3.13).



Figure 3.13 The World's First Empire. The Akkadian Empire reached its greatest geographic extent under its first emperor, Sargon of Akkad. At Sargon's death in 2279 BCE, it included all of Mesopotamia, and his armies were marching into Syria and Anatolia. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

One of the rivals of the Akkadian Empire was the city-state of Ebla, located in northwestern Syria. At some point, its people had adapted Sumerian cuneiform to their own language, which, like Akkadian, belonged to the Semitic family of languages, and archaeologists have discovered thousands of cuneiform tablets at the site. These tablets reveal that Ebla especially worshipped the storm god Adad, who was honored with the title "Ba'al" or lord. More than one thousand years later in the Iron Age, people in this region still worshipped Baal, who was the main rival of Yahweh for the affections of the ancient Israelites.

Other rivals of the Akkadians were the Elamites, who inhabited the region to the immediate southeast of Mesopotamia in southwest Iran and whose city of Susa arose around 4000 BCE. The art and architecture of the Elamites suggest a strong Sumerian influence. They developed their own writing system around 3000 BCE, even though they adapted Sumerian cuneiform to their language later in the third millennium BCE. The Elamites also worshipped their own distinct deities, such as Insushinak, the Lord of the Dead. Both Elam and Ebla eventually suffered defeat at the hands of the Akkadians.

In the year 2193 BCE, however, the Akkadian Empire collapsed. The precise reason is not entirely clear. However, some ancient accounts point to the incursions of the nomadic Guti tribes, whose original homes were located in the Zagros Mountains of northwestern Iran, northwest of Mesopotamia. These Guti were originally pastoralists, who lived off their herds of livestock and moved from place to place to find pasture for their animals. While the Guti tribes certainly did move into the Akkadian Empire toward its end, modern scholarship suggests that the empire was likely experiencing internal decline and famine before this. The Guti appear to have exploited this weakness rather than triggering it. Regardless, for around a century, the Guti ruled over Sumer

and adopted its culture as their own. Around 2120 BCE, however, the Sumerians came together under the leadership of the cities of Uruk and Ur and expelled the Guti from their homeland.

Later Empires in Mesopotamia

While Sargon's empire lasted only a few generations, his conquests dramatically transformed politics in Mesopotamia. The era of independent city-states waned, and over the next few centuries, a string of powerful Mesopotamian rulers were able to build their own empires, often using the administrative techniques developed by Sargon as a model. For example, beginning about 2112 BCE, all Sumer was again united under the Third Dynasty of Ur as the Guti were driven out. The rulers of this dynasty held the title of *lugal* of all Sumer and Akkad, and they were also honored as gods. They built temples in the Sumerian city of Nippur, which was sacred to the storm god Enlil, the ruler of the gods in the Sumerian pantheon. The most famous *lugal* of this dynasty was Ur-Nammu (c. 2150 BCE), renowned for his works of poetry as well as for the law code he published.

At its height, the Third Dynasty extended its control over both southern and northern Mesopotamia. But by the end of the third millennium, change was on the horizon. Foreign invaders from the north, east, and west put tremendous pressure on the empire, and its rulers increased their military preparedness and even constructed a 170-mile fortification wall to keep them out. While these strategies were somewhat effective, they appear to have only postponed the inevitable as Amorites, Elamites, and other groups eventually poured in and raided cities across the land. By about 2004 BCE, Sumer had crumbled, and even Ur was violently sacked by the invaders.

Link to Learning

The sack of Ur by the Elamites and others was the inspiration for a lament or song of mourning that became a classic of Sumerian literature. Read *The Lament for Urim* and pay attention to the way the writer attributes the destruction to the caprice of the gods; the actual invaders are merely tools. For descriptions of the destruction itself, focus on lines 161–229.

In the centuries after 2004 BCE, the migration of Amorites into Mesopotamia resulted in the gradual disappearance of Sumerian as a spoken language. People in the region came to speak Amorite, which belonged to the family of Semitic languages. Nonetheless, scribes continued to preserve and write works in Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform. Sumerian and Akkadian became the languages of religious rituals, hymns, and prayers, as well as classic literary works such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Consequently, the literary output of these earlier cultures was preserved and transmitted to the new settlers. When nomadic Amorite tribes settled in Mesopotamia, they eventually established new cities such as Mari, Asshur, and Babylon, and they adopted much of the culture they encountered. The ancient Sumerian cities of Larsa and Isin of this era also preserved these cultural traditions, even as they came under the rule of Amorite kings.

Hammurabi, the energetic ruler of Babylon during the first half of the eighteenth century BCE, defeated the kings of the rival cities of Mari and Larsa and created an empire that encompassed nearly all of Mesopotamia. To unify this new empire, Hammurabi initiated the construction of irrigation projects, built new temples at Nippur, and published his legal edicts throughout his realm. Hammurabi had these edicts inscribed on stone pillars erected in different places in the empire to inform his subjects about proper behavior and the laws of the land. Being especially clear, the Code of Hammurabi far outlived the king who created it. It also provides us with a fascinating window into how Mesopotamian society functioned at this time.

In Their Own Words

The Law in Old Babylon

Remarkable for its clarity, the Code of Hammurabi may have introduced concepts like the presumption of innocence and the use of evidence. It informed legal systems in Mesopotamia for many centuries after Hammurabi's death (Figure 3.14).



Figure 3.14 The Code of Hammurabi. This stele found in Susa (modern Iran) is the most complete example of Hammurabi's code. An engraving of Hammurabi standing before the sun-god Shamash tops the column, with a statement that the code is to "bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; [and] to further the well-being of mankind." (credit: "Stele of Hammurabi" by "Rlunaro"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Code of Hammurabi promoted the principle that punishment should fit the crime, but penalties often depended on social class:

> *199. If [a man] put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.*
>
> *202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.*
>
> *Many edicts concern marriage, adultery, children, and marriage property.*
>
> *129. If a man's wife be surprised with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.*
>
> *150. If a man give his wife a field, garden, and house and a deed therefor, if then after the death of her husband the sons raise no claim, then the mother may bequeath all to one of her sons whom she prefers, and need leave nothing to his brothers.*

A good number of the code's edicts concern the settling of commercial disputes:

> *9. If anyone lose an article, and find it in the possession of another [who says] "A merchant sold it to me, I paid for it before witnesses," . . . The judge shall examine their testimony—both of the witnesses before whom the price was paid, and of the witnesses who identify the lost article on oath. The merchant is then proved to be a thief and shall be put to death. The owner of the lost article receives his property, and he who bought it receives the money he paid from the estate of the merchant.*
>
> *48. If anyone owe a debt for a loan, and a storm prostrates the grain, or the harvest fail, or the grain does not grow for lack of water; in that year he need not give his creditor any grain, he washes his debt-tablet in water and pays no rent for this year.*
>
> *—"Hammurabi's Code of Laws," c. 1780 BCE, translated by L.W. King*

- What do these edicts suggest about the different social tiers in Babylonian society? How were they organized?
- Was marriage similar to or different from marriage today?
- Do the edicts for resolving economic disputes seem fair to you? Why or why not?

While Hammurabi's empire lasted a century and a half, much of the territory he conquered began falling away from Babylon's control shortly after he died. The empire continued to dwindle in size until 1595 BCE, when an army of Hittites from central Anatolia in the north (modern Turkey) sacked the city of Babylon. Shortly thereafter, Kassites from the Zagros Mountains of northwestern Iran conquered Babylon and southern Mesopotamia and settled there, unlike the Hittites who had returned to their Anatolian home. The Kassites established a dynasty that ruled over Babylon for nearly five hundred years, to the very end of the Bronze Age. Like the Guti and the Amorites before them, over time, the Kassite rulers adopted the culture of their Mesopotamian subjects.

Society and Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia

Thanks to the preservation of cuneiform clay tablets and the discovery and translation of law codes and works of literature, historians have at their disposal a wealth of information about Mesopotamian society. The study of these documents and the archaeological excavations carried out in Mesopotamia have allowed them to reconstruct the empire's economy.

We know now that temples and royal palaces were not merely princely residences and places for religious rituals; they also functioned as economic redistribution centers. For example, agricultural goods were collected from farmers as taxes by civic and religious officials, who then stored them to provide payments to the artisans and merchants they employed. Palaces and temples thus needed to possess massive storage facilities. Scribes kept records in cuneiform of all the goods collected and distributed by these institutions. City gates served as areas where farmers, artisans, and merchants could congregate and exchange goods. Precious metals such as gold often served as a medium of exchange, but these goods had to be weighed and measured during commercial exchanges, since coinage and money as we understand it today did not emerge until the Iron Age, a millennium later.

Society in southern Mesopotamia was highly urban. About 70 to 80 percent of the population lived in cities, but not all were employed as artisans, merchants, or other traditional urban roles. Rather, agriculture and animal husbandry accounted for a majority of a city's economic production. Much of the land was controlled by the temples, kings, or other powerful landowners and was worked by semi-free peasants who were tied to the land. The rest of the land included numerous small plots worked by the free peasants who made up about half the population. A much smaller portion was made up of enslaved people, typically prisoners of war or persons who had committed crimes or gone into debt. A man could sell his own children into slavery to cover a debt.

Much of the hard labor performed in the fields was done by men and boys, while the wives, mothers, and daughters of merchants and artisans were sometimes fully engaged in running family businesses. Cuneiform tablets tell us that women oversaw the business affairs of their families, especially when husbands were merchants who often traveled far from home. For example, cuneiform tablets from circa 1900 BCE show that merchants from Ashur in northern Mesopotamia conducted trade with central Anatolia and wrote letters to their female family members back home. Women were also engaged in the production of textiles like wool and linen. They not only produced these textiles in workshops with their own hands, but some appear to have held managerial positions within the textile industry.

Free peasant farmers, artisans, and merchants were all commoners. This put them in a higher social position than the semi-free peasants and slaves but lower than the elite nobility, who made up a very small percentage of the population and whose ranks included priests, official scribes, and military leaders. This aristocratic elite often received land in payment for their services to the kings and collected rents in kind from their peasant tenants. Social distinctions were also reflected in the law. For example, aspects of Hammurabi's law code called for punishments for causing physical harm to another to be equal to the harm inflicted. This principle is best summarized in the line "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." However, the principle applied only to victims and perpetrators of the same social class. An aristocrat convicted of the murder of a fellow noble paid with their life, while an aristocrat who harmed or murdered a commoner might be required only to pay a fine.

Men and women were not equal under the Code of Hammurabi. A man was free to have multiple wives and divorce a wife at will, whereas a woman could divorce her husband only if she could prove he had been unkind to her without reason. However, a woman from a family of means could protect her position in a marriage if her family put up a dowry, which could be land or goods. Upon marriage, the husband obtained the dowry, but if he divorced or was unkind to his wife, he had to return it to her and her family.

Cuneiform tablets have also allowed historians to read stories about the gods and heroes of Mesopotamian cultures. Mesopotamians revered many different gods associated with forces of nature. These were anthropomorphic deities who not only had divine powers but also frequently acted on very human impulses like anger, fear, annoyance, and lust. Examples include Utu, the god of the sun (Figure 3.15); Inanna (known to the Akkadians as Ishtar), the goddess of fertility; and Enlil (whose equivalent in other Mesopotamian cultures was Marduk), the god of wind and rain. The ancient Mesopotamians held that the gods were visible in the sky as heavenly bodies like stars, the moon, the sun, and the planets. This belief led them to pay close attention to these bodies, and over time, they developed a sophisticated understanding of their movement. This knowledge allowed them to predict astronomical events like eclipses and informed their development of a twelve-month calendar.



Figure 3.15 The God Utu. This limestone relief of the Mesopotamian god Utu (known as Shamash among the Akkadians) is part of the larger Tablet of Shamash created in the early ninth century BCE. Here Utu is shown seated, holding the rod-and-ring, an ancient symbol reflecting the balance of power between the palace and the temple. (credit: "Tablet of Shamash" by "Katolophyromai"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

People in Mesopotamia believed human beings were created to serve the gods (Figure 3.16). They were expected to supply the gods with food through the sacrifice of sheep and cattle in religious rituals, and to honor them with temples, religious songs or hymns, and expensive gifts. People sought divine support from their gods. But they also feared that their worship might be insufficient and anger the deity. When that happened, the gods could bring death and devastation through floods and pestilence. Stories of gods wreaking great destruction, sometimes for petty reasons, are common in Mesopotamian myths. For example, in one Sumerian myth, the storm god Enlil nearly destroyed the entire human race with a flood when the noise made by humans annoyed him and kept him from sleep.



Figure 3.16 A Sumerian Worshiper. This one-foot-tall Sumerian statue of a worshiper with clasped hands from circa 2900–2600 BCE was placed in a temple to perpetually worship the god to whom it was dedicated. (credit: "Standing male worshiper" by Fletcher Fund, 1940/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The ancient Mesopotamians' belief that the gods were fickle, destructive, and easily stirred to anger is one reason many historians believe they had a generally pessimistic worldview. From the literature they left behind, we can see that while they hoped for the best, they were often resigned to accept the worst. Given the environment in which Mesopotamian civilization emerged, this pessimism is somewhat understandable. River flooding was common and could often be unpredictable and destructive. Wars between city-states and the destruction that comes with conflict were also common. Life was difficult in this unforgiving world, and the profiles of the various gods of the Mesopotamians reflect this harsh reality.

Evidence of Mesopotamians' pessimism is also present in their view of the afterlife. In their religion, after death all people spent eternity in a shadowy underworld sometimes called "the land of no return." Descriptions of this place differ somewhat in the details, but the common understanding was that it was a gloomy and frightening place where the dead were consumed by sorrow, eating dust and clay and longing pitifully and futilely to return to the land of the living.

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2.4: Ancient Egypt

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the unification of Ancient Egypt and the development of a distinct culture there
- Analyze the accomplishments of the pharaohs under the Old Kingdom
- Describe the changes in government and society in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom

The rich agricultural valleys historians refer to as the “Fertile Crescent,” due to the shape of this region on the map, witnessed the development of an early civilization as long ago as the fourth millennium BCE. Adjacent to this region was another fertile river valley formed by the Nile in northeast Africa. Here arose another civilization that was quite unique. Unlike the city-states of Sumer, which were not organized into an empire until the time of Sargon of Akkad, the peoples of the Nile River valley were brought together under a single ruler around 3150 BCE. Although brief intervals of disunity occurred, Egypt remained a united and powerful kingdom, the great superpower of the ancient Near East, until the end of the Bronze Age in about 1100 BCE.

The Origins of Ancient Egypt

Aside from the Nile, Egypt and the areas around it are today part of the expansive and very arid Sahara. But around 10,000 BCE, as the Neolithic Revolution was getting underway in parts of southwestern Asia, much of North Africa including Egypt was lush, wet, and dotted with lakes. The region was highly hospitable to the many Paleolithic peoples living there and surviving on its abundant resources.

However, beginning around 6000 BCE the grasslands and lakes began to give way to sand as the once green environment was transformed into the Sahara we recognize today. As the environment became more difficult for humans to survive in, they retreated to oases and rivers on the fringes. One of these areas was the Nile River valley, a long thin area of fertility running through the deserts of eastern North Africa and made possible by the regular flooding of the Nile. The Nile is the longest river in Africa, and the second-longest in the world after the Amazon. It originates deep in central Africa and flows thousands of miles north through Egypt before it spills into the Mediterranean Sea.

It was around this same time, about 7000 to 6000 BCE, that agricultural technology and knowledge about the domestication of wheat, barley, sheep, goats, and cattle were introduced into the Nile River valley, likely through contact with the Levant. The earliest evidence for the emergence of Egyptian culture dates from this era as well. Two related but different Neolithic cultures arose: one in the Nile delta, where the river runs into the Mediterranean, and the other upriver and to the south of this location. The people of these cultures lived in crude huts, survived on fishing and agriculture, developed distinctive pottery styles, and even practiced burial rituals. Over thousands of years, they developed into two separate kingdoms, Lower Egypt or the delta region, and Upper Egypt or the area upriver (Figure 3.17).



Figure 3.17 The Upper and Lower Kingdoms of Egypt. The fertile Nile River valley became home to two different but related early Egyptian cultures, the Lower Kingdom in the north and the Upper Kingdom in the south. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

A major political and cultural shift occurred in about 3150 BCE when Upper and Lower Egypt were unified into a single powerful kingdom. Some evidence suggests this achievement belongs to a king named Narmer. More recent records attribute it to a king called Menes, but many scholars now believe Menes and Narmer are one and the same (Figure 3.18).



Figure 3.18 The Narmer Palette. Often called the Narmer palette, this two-foot-high siltstone Egyptian artifact appears to depict Egypt's unification, which would place it from around 3150–3000 BCE. The large figure on one side (left image) is believed to be King Narmer wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt and striking a prisoner, and the tall, left-most figure in the upper row on the other side (right image) is likely Narmer wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt in a procession. Two mythical creatures stand below, their necks artfully entwined. (credit: "La palette de Narmer" by "Jean88"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Unification gave rise to what scholars refer to as the Early Dynasty Period (about 3150 to 2613 BCE), or the era of the earliest dynasties to rule a unified Egypt. The powerful kings of these dynasties established a bureaucratic system, possibly influenced by the palace/temple redistributive economic system in place in ancient Sumer. But unlike Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt in the Bronze Age was now a single state instead of a number of warring rivals. Also unlike Mesopotamia, which was subject to periodic invasion, Egypt was protected by its geography. On both east and west, the Nile River valley was surrounded by large deserts that were difficult to cross and that made the kingdom into a kind of island in a hot, dry sea. During this time, many of the best-known cultural characteristics of ancient Egypt emerged in their earliest forms. They include the institution of the pharaoh, distinctive religious practices, and the Egyptian writing system.

The Pharaoh

The king of the united Egypt, the pharaoh, governed a kingdom much larger than any contemporary realm. Historians estimate that the population of the Egyptian state, when first united in about 3150 BCE, numbered as many as two million people, whereas a typical Sumerian *lugal* ruled about thirty thousand subjects. The temple/palace system in Egypt therefore operated on a much vaster scale than anywhere in Mesopotamia.

The term pharaoh in ancient Egyptian is translated as "big house," likely a reference to the size of the palaces along the Nile valley where the pharaoh resided and administered the lands. As in ancient Mesopotamia, the palace included large facilities for storing taxes in kind, as well as workshops for artisans who produced goods for the palace. Also, as in Mesopotamia, a large portion of the

population were peasant farmers. They paid taxes in kind to support the artisans and others working in the pharaoh's palaces and temples and living nearby, inside the city. The ruling elite included scribes, priests, and the pharaoh's officials.

The pharaoh was not merely a political figure but also served as the high priest and was revered as a god. In the role of high priest, the pharaoh united the lands by performing religious rituals to honor the different gods worshipped up and down the Nile River valley. As a deity, the pharaoh was the human form or incarnation of Horus, the god of justice and truth. Egyptians believed the divine presence of the pharaoh as Horus maintained justice throughout the land, which, in turn, maintained peace and prosperity, as evidenced by the welcome annual flooding of the Nile.

Egyptian Religion

Like the people of Mesopotamia, Ancient Egyptians were polytheists and worshipped many deities who controlled the forces of nature. For example, Re was the god of the sun, and Isis was the earth goddess of fertility. Osiris was associated with the Nile. The annual flooding of the river, the central event of the Egyptian year, was explained through the myth of Osiris, who was murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the desert wind, but then resurrected by his devoted wife Isis. The Nile (Osiris) was at its lowest in the summer when the hot desert wind was blowing (Seth), but then it was "resurrected" when it flooded its banks and brought life-giving water to the earth (Isis). Horus (the pharaoh) was the child of Isis and Osiris. Since Osiris was a god who had died, he was also the lord of the underworld and the judge of the dead. Ancient Egyptians believed Osiris would reward people who had lived a righteous life with a blessed afterlife in the underworld, whereas he would punish wicked evildoers.

As these gods and myths indicate, the Nile played an important role in the development of Egyptian religion. Whereas the unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in southern Mesopotamia commonly brought destruction along with fresh alluvial deposits, the Nile's summer flooding, predictable as clockwork, brought only welcome deposits of rich sediment. It provided Egyptians with a sense that the world was harmonious and organized around cycles. In later centuries, this notion developed into the concept of Ma'at (also personified as a goddess), which combined the ideas of order, truth, justice, and balance. In contrast to the apparently pessimistic people in Mesopotamia, Egyptians drew from their environment a feeling that their world was orderly, balanced, and geared toward a sense of cosmic justice. It was an Egyptian's responsibility to live in harmony with this order.

In Their Own Words

Flooding, Stories, and Cosmology in Ancient Egypt and Sumer

Ancient Egypt (the first excerpt that follows) and Ancient Sumer (the second) both depended on life-giving rivers, but their reactions to periodic flooding were quite different. Note the way each discusses the flooding, those responsible, and the reasons for it.

> *Hymn to the flood. Hail flood!*
> *emerging from the earth, arriving to bring Egypt to life,*
> *hidden of form, the darkness in the day,*
> *the one whose followers sing to him, as he waters the plants,*
> *created by Re to make every herd live,*
> *who satisfies the desert hills removed from the water,*
> *for it is his due that descends from the sky*
> *—he, the beloved of Geb, controller of Nepri,*
> *the one who makes the crafts of Ptah verdant.*
> *Lord of fish, who allows south marsh fowl,*
> *without a bird falling from heat.*
> *Maker of barley, grower of emmer grain,*
> *creator of festivals of the temples.*

> *When he delays, then noses are blocked,*
> *everyone is orphaned,*
> *and if the offerings of the gods are distributed,*
> *then a million men perish among mankind. . . .*
> *Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood.*
> *Verdant the spirit at your coming.*
> *Come to Egypt,*
> *make its happiness.*
> *Make the Two Riverbanks verdant, . . .*
> *Men and herds are brought to life by your deliveries of the fields, . . .*
> *Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood.*
>
> *—Author unknown, Hymn to the Nile, 2000–1700 BCE*

> *I will reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, the mysterious story,*
> *And one of the mysteries of the gods I will tell you.*
> *The city of Shurippak, a city which, as you know,*
> *Is situated on the bank of the river Euphrates. The gods within it*
> *Decided to bring about a flood, even the great gods,*
> *As many as there were. . . .*
> *I saw the approach of the storm,*
> *And I was afraid to witness the storm;*
> *I entered the ship and shut the door.*
> *I entrusted the guidance of the ship to the boat-man,*
> *Entrusted the great house, and the contents therein.*
> *As soon as early dawn appeared,*
> *There rose up from the horizon a black cloud,*
> *Within which the weather god thundered,*
> *And the king of the gods went before it. . . .*
> *The storm brought on by the gods swept even up to the heavens,*
> *And all light was turned into darkness. It flooded the land; it blew with violence;*
> *And in one day it rose above the mountains.*
> *Like an onslaught in battle it rushed in on the people.*
> *Brother could not save brother.*
> *The gods even were afraid of the storm;*
> *They retreated and took refuge in the heaven of Anu.*
> *There the gods crouched down like dogs, in heaven they sat cowering.*
>
> *—Author unknown, Epic of Gilgamesh, translated by R. Campbell Thompson and William Muse Arnold and compiled by Laura Getty*

- What do these excerpts reveal about each people's view of their world and the supernatural?
- What do they suggest about each culture's relationship to its river(s)?

Egyptian Writing

Egyptians developed their own unique writing system, known today by the Greek word hieroglyphics (meaning “sacred writings”), though the Egyptians called it *medu-netjer* (“the god’s words”). The roots of hieroglyphic writing can be traced to the time before the Early Dynastic Period when the first written symbols emerged. But by at least 3000 BCE, the use of these symbols had developed into a sophisticated script. It used a combination of alphabetic signs, syllabic signs, word signs, and pictures of objects. In this complicated system, then known only to highly trained professional scribes, written symbols represented both sounds and ideas (Figure 3.19). The Egyptians also developed a simplified version of this hieroglyphic script known as hieratic, which they often employed for more mundane purposes such as recordkeeping and issuing receipts in commercial transactions.



Figure 3.19 Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The hieroglyphics in this Egyptian stele from circa 1944 BCE are far more stylized than the Egyptian writing produced a thousand years earlier. It took many centuries for the Egyptian script to evolve into the style of writing seen here. (credit: modification of work "Stela of the Steward Mentuwoser" by Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1912/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Egyptian scribes recorded their ideas in stone inscriptions on the walls of temples and painted them on the walls of tombs, but they also used the fibers from a reed plant growing along the banks of the Nile to produce papyrus, a writing material like paper that could be rolled into scrolls and stored as records. Some of these papyrus rolls have survived for thousands of years because of the way the dry heat preserved them, and they proved very useful for modern historians and archaeologists after hieroglyphics were deciphered in the nineteenth century. They preserved Egyptian myths and poetry, popular stories, and lists of pharaohs, along with records of the daily life of ancient Egyptians.

The Age of Pyramid Building

By the 2600s BCE, the power of the pharaohs and the sophistication of the state in Egypt were such that the building of large-scale stone architecture became possible. Historians in the nineteenth century believed the significance of these developments was so great that it required a different name for the period. Today we call it the Old Kingdom (2613–2181 BCE), and it is best known for the massive stone pyramids that continue to awe visitors to Egypt today, many thousands of years after they were built (Table 3.1).

6000–3150 BCE	Pre-Dynastic Egypt
3150–2613 BCE	Early Dynastic Egypt
2613–2181 BCE	Old Kingdom Period
2181–2040 BCE	First Intermediate Period
2040–1782 BCE	Middle Kingdom Period
1782–1570 BCE	Second Intermediate Period
1570–1069 BCE	New Kingdom Period
1069–525 BCE	Third Intermediate Period

Table 3.1 The Ages of Egypt. These names for the different eras of ancient Egypt's history were developed by scholars in the nineteenth century. "Kingdom" describes a period of high centralized state organization. "Intermediate" describes a time of weak centralized state organization. While flawed in some ways, the labels continue to influence the way we understand the expansive chronology of ancient Egyptian history. (source: https://www.worldhistory.org/egypt/)

The pyramids were tombs for the pharaohs of Egypt, places where their bodies were stored and preserved after death. The preservation of the body was important and was directly related to Egyptian religious beliefs that a person was composed of a number of different elements. These included the *Ka*, *Ba*, *Ahk*, and others. A person's Ka was their spiritual double. After the physical body died, the Ka remained but had to stay in the tomb with the body and be nourished with offerings. The Ba was also a type of spiritual essence, but it separated from the body after death, going out in the world during the day and returning to the body each night. The duty of the Ahk, yet another type of spirit, was to travel to the underworld and the afterlife. The belief in concepts like the Ka and Ba was what made the practice of mummification and the creation of tombs important in Egyptian religion. Both elements needed the physical body to survive.

Before the pyramids, tombs and other architectural features were built of mud-brick and called *mastabas*. But during the Early Dynastic reign of the pharaoh Djoser, just before the start of the Old Kingdom, a brilliant architect named Imhotep decided to build a marvelous stone tomb for his king. Originally, it was intended to be merely a stone mastaba. However, Imhotep went beyond this plan and constructed additional smaller stone mastabas, one on top of the other. The result was a multitiered step pyramid (Figure 3.20). Surrounding it, Imhotep built a large complex that included temples.



Figure 3.20 The Pyramid of Djoser. The Pyramid of Djoser, sometimes called the step pyramid, is composed of six stone *mastabas* set atop each other, each slightly smaller than the one below. Built by the architect Imhotep during the reign of Pharaoh Djoser, it is the earliest large stone building in Egypt. (credit: " Pyramid of Djoser (Step Pyramid)" by Jorge Láscar/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The step pyramid of Djoser was revolutionary, but the more familiar smooth-sided style appeared a few decades later in the reign of Snefru, when three pyramids were constructed. The most impressive has become known as the Red Pyramid, because of the reddish limestone revealed after the original white limestone surface fell away over the centuries. It had smooth sides and rose to a height of 344 feet over the surrounding landscape. Still an impressive sight, it pales in comparison to the famed Great Pyramid built by Snefru's son Khufu at Giza near Cairo (Figure 3.21). The Great Pyramid at Giza was 756 feet long on each side and originally 481 feet high. Its base covers four city blocks and contains 2.3 million stone blocks, each weighing about 2.5 tons. Even more than the Pyramid of Djoser, the Great Pyramid is a testament to the organization and power of the Egyptian state.



Figure 3.21 The Great Pyramid at Giza. The Giza pyramid complex, located just outside modern Cairo, includes three large pyramids and many other monuments and minor pyramids. From left to right, the large pyramids shown here are the Great Pyramid, the Pyramid of Khafre, and the Pyramid of Menkaure, all built between 2600 and 2500 BCE. (credit: "The Giza-pyramids and Giza Necropolis, Egypt" by “Robster1983”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Later pharaohs of the Old Kingdom built two additional but slightly smaller pyramids at the same location. All align with the position of the Dog Star Sirius in the summer months, when the Nile floods each year. Each was also linked to a temple along the Nile dedicated to the relevant pharaoh.

Egyptian rulers invested heavily in time and resources to construct these tombs. In the mid-fifth century BCE, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus recorded that the pyramid of Khufu took 100,000 workers twenty years to construct. Herodotus lived two thousand years after this pyramid was built, however, so we might easily dismiss his report as exaggeration. Modern archaeologists suspect that a much smaller but still substantial workforce of around twenty thousand was likely employed. Excavations at the site reveal that these workers lived in cities built nearby that housed them as well as many others dedicated to feeding and caring for them. The workers were not enslaved, as is commonly assumed. Indeed, they likely enjoyed a higher standard of living than many other Egyptians at the time.

As the pyramid and temple complexes became larger and more numerous during the Old Kingdom, so too did the number of priests and administrators in charge of managing them. This required that ever-increasing amounts of wealth be redirected toward these individuals from the central state. Over time, the management of the large Egyptian state also required more support from the regional governors or nomarchs and administrators of other types, which meant the pharaohs had to delegate more authority to them. By around 2200 BCE, priests and regional governors possessed a degree of wealth and power that rivaled and sometimes surpassed that of the nobility. For all these reasons and more, centralized power in Old Kingdom Egypt weakened greatly during this time, and scholars since the nineteenth century have referred to it as the First Intermediate Period.

Scholars once claimed that this was a time of chaos and darkness. As evidence, they noted the decline in the building of large-scale monuments like the giant pyramids as well as a drop in the quality of artwork and historical records during these decades. Modern

research, however, has demonstrated that this is a gross simplification. Power wasn't necessarily lost so much as redistributed from central to regional control. From the perspective of the reigning noble families, this may have seemed like chaos and disorder. But it was not necessarily the dark age older generations of historians believed it to be.

A Second Age of Egyptian Greatness

The First Intermediate Period came to an end around 2040 BCE as a series of powerful rulers, beginning with Mentuhotep II, was able to reestablish centralized control in Egypt. This led to the rise of what we now call the Middle Kingdom Period, which lasted nearly 260 years.

In the year 1991 BCE, Amenemhat, a former vizier (adviser) to the line of kings who established the Middle Kingdom, assumed control and founded a line of pharaohs who ruled Egypt for two centuries. Under the leadership of these pharaohs, Egypt acquired its first standing army, restarted the large-scale building projects known in earlier times, made contacts with surrounding peoples and kingdoms in the Levant and in Kush (modern Sudan), and generally held itself together with a strong centralized power structure.

Link to Learning

New Kingdom pharaohs circulated a work of literature that foretold the rise of Amenemhat, who would bring an end to disorder and restore Egypt to prosperity. This ancient work was called the Prophecy of Neferty and is presented as an English translation by University College London.

During the Middle Kingdom Period, pharaohs introduced the cult of the deity Amon-Re at Thebes. Amon-Re was a combination of the sun-god Re, the creator god worshipped in the north of Egypt, and Amon, a sky god revered in the south. He was portrayed as the king of the gods and the father of each reigning pharaoh. The pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom no longer constructed massive pyramids for their tombs. Instead, they focused on erecting massive temples to Amon-Re and his wife, the mother-goddess Mut, at Thebes (Figure 3.22). The ruins of these temples are located at Karnak in southern Egypt. Amon-Re's temples featured immense halls in which multiple columns or colonnades supported the roof, courtyards, and ceremonial gates. They housed the sacred images of the deities, which on festival days were brought out in ritual processions.



Figure 3.22 Temple of Amon-Re. The temple of Amon-Re, built around 2055 BCE, was plundered in ancient times for its stone. What remains are these ruins. The large ceremonial gates still stand, towering above the visitors who walk beneath them. (credit: modification of work "Karnak Temple Complex at Luxor, Egypt" by Daniel Csörföly/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Middle Kingdom Egypt reached its height in the 1870s and 1860s BCE during the reign of Senusret III, a powerful warrior pharaoh and capable administrator of the centralized state. He greatly expanded Egypt's territorial control, leading armies up the Nile into Kush and into the Levant. These efforts not only strengthened Egypt's ability to protect itself from invasion but also greatly increased the flow of trade from these regions. Kush was known for its rich gold deposits and capable warriors, and Senusret III's several campaigns there brought Egypt access not only to the gold but also to mercenaries from Kush.

Senusret also dramatically increased the degree of centralized power held by the pharaoh, reducing the authority and even the number of the nomarchs. Overall, Egypt now grew wealthier, safer, more centralized, and more powerful than it had ever been. As a result, his reign was also a time of cultural flourishing when Egyptian art, architecture, and literature grew in refinement and sophistication (Figure 3.23).



Figure 3.23 The Art of the Middle Kingdom. This pectoral, a form of jewelry worn over the chest, is an excellent example of the fine artwork of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom Period. It once belonged to an Egyptian princess called Sithathoryunet and is made of gold and semiprecious stones. (credit: modification of work "Pectoral and Necklace of Sithathoryunet with the Name of Senwosret II" by Purchase, Rogers Fund and Henry Walters Gift, 1916/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The deaths of Senusret III and his son Amenemhat III led indirectly to a rare but not unprecedented transfer of royal power to an Egyptian woman. Possibly Amenemhat IV's wife, sister, or both, Sobekneferu, the daughter of Amenemhat III, was the first woman to rule Egypt since before the Old Kingdom. She reigned for only a few years, and little is known of her accomplishments. But scholars have determined that she was the first pharaoh to associate herself with the Egyptian crocodile god Sobek. She may even have commissioned the construction of the city of Crocodilopolis to honor this important god. Because she died without having had children, she was the last in the long series of pharaohs in the line of Amenemhat I.

Even before the reign of Sobekneferu, Egypt was already experiencing some degree of decline. Over the next century, the pharaohs and their centralized control became steadily weaker. Increasing numbers of Semitic-speaking peoples from the Levant flowed into Egypt, possibly the result of increased trade between Egypt and the Levant at first. But by the late 1700s BCE, these Semitic-speaking groups had grown so numerous in the Nile delta region and centralized control of Egypt had grown so weak that some of their chieftains began to assert control in a few areas. The Egyptians called these Semitic-speaking chieftains *Heqau-khasut* (rulers of foreign lands). Today they are more commonly called Hyksos, a Greek corruption of this Egyptian name.

By the time the Hyksos were asserting their control over parts of the Nile delta, Egypt was already well into what historians of the nineteenth century dubbed the Second Intermediate Period. Like the First Intermediate Period, the second was a time of reduced centralized control. Not only did the Egyptian nobles, ruling from their capital in Thebes, lose control of the delta, they also lost territory upriver to an increasingly powerful kingdom of Kush in the south. This meant that the territory once controlled by the powerful centralized state bureaucracy was effectively split into three regions: one ruled by Hyksos in the north, one by Kushite in the south, and one by the remnants of the Egyptian nobility in the center.

Despite the fragmentation, for most of this period, the three regions of Egypt appear to have maintained peaceful relationships. That changed, however, beginning in the 1550s BCE when a string of Theban Egyptian rulers was able to go on the offensive against the Hyksos. After the Hyksos were defeated and the Nile delta recaptured, the emboldened Egyptians turned their attention

south to Kush, eventually extending their control over these regions as well. These efforts ushered in a new period of Egyptian greatness called the New Kingdom, the highest high-water mark of Egyptian power and cultural influence in the ancient world.

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2.5: The Indus Valley Civilization

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Analyze the growth, development, and decline of the Indus valley culture
- Describe the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa
- Identify key themes in Indus valley religion and culture

More than fifteen hundred miles east of Mesopotamia, in the fertile valley of the Indus River, another early civilization developed in the early third millennium BCE as a peer of ancient Sumer. Early in the second millennium BCE, however, the cities of this Indus valley culture experienced decline. Lacking written records, historians have only cultural artifacts on which to base any speculation about the rise and fall of this spectacular culture, which undoubtedly influenced subsequent civilizations that arose in South Asia.

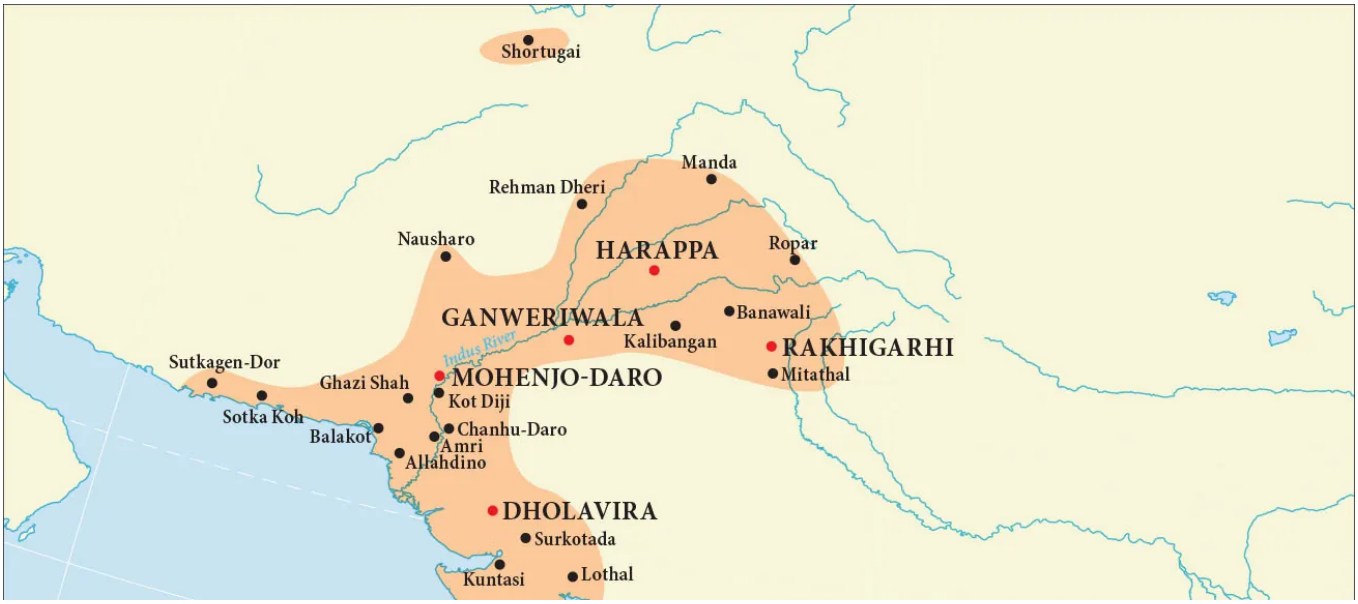
The Origins of the Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus River flows from the Himalayan Mountains south into the Indian Ocean, depositing rich alluvial soil from the mountains along its banks. Its valley (in modern Pakistan and India) thus provided a hospitable environment for population growth for the emerging Indus valley civilization (c. 2800 BCE–1800 BCE).

Evidence for the domestication of plants and animals in this region dates to about 7000 BCE, but the process may have begun earlier. It is likely that agriculturalists in the region adopted barley and wheat cultivation techniques from the Near East, where people had been practicing agriculture for thousands of years by this point. However, it is also possible that the people of the Indus valley developed some of these techniques independently. Regardless, by about 5000 BCE, they were clearly in contact with the civilizations in Egypt and Sumer.

The farmers of the Indus valley cultivated wheat and barley as well as raised cattle and sheep, as did the farmers of Mesopotamia and western Asia. They also domesticated and cultivated bananas and cotton for cloth production, which were both unknown in ancient Mesopotamia. Thanks to the Neolithic Revolution, which secured a stable food source and stimulated population growth, people began living in settled communities along the Indus River valley as a new early civilization developed.

Beginning around 2800 BCE, the Indus valley entered a new phase in its development with the growth of a great number of urban centers. The two largest cities emerged at what are now the archaeological sites of Harappa in the northeast and Mohenjo-Daro to the southeast and downriver. Other large urban centers existed at Dholavira, Ganeriwala, and Rakhigarhi, along with many smaller but similarly organized cities scattered across the valley. By the time this civilization reached its height around 2000 BCE, more than one thousand urban centers of varying sizes were spread across the expansive region (Figure 3.24).



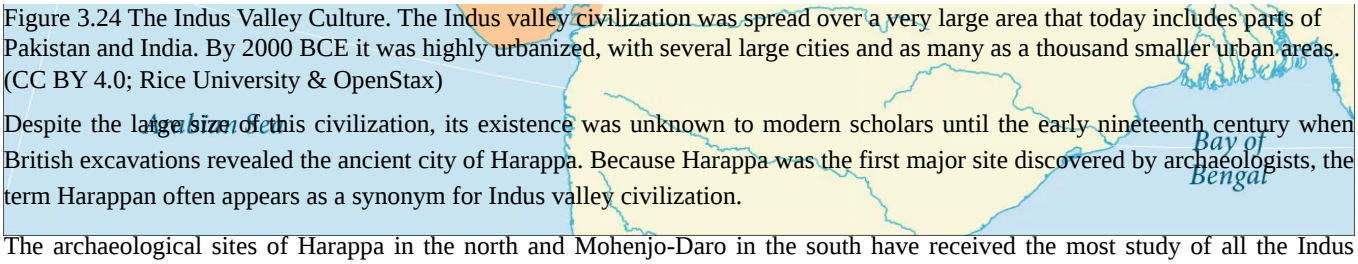


Figure 3.24 The Indus Valley Culture. The Indus valley civilization was spread over a very large area that today includes parts of Pakistan and India. By 2000 BCE it was highly urbanized, with several large cities and as many as a thousand smaller urban areas. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Despite the large size of this civilization, its existence was unknown to modern scholars until the early nineteenth century when British excavations revealed the ancient city of Harappa. Because Harappa was the first major site discovered by archaeologists, the term Harappan often appears as a synonym for Indus valley civilization.

The archaeological sites of Harappa in the north and Mohenjo-Daro in the south have received the most study of all the Indus valley cities and remain the best known. At their height, they likely had populations of about thirty thousand people each. The political organization across the Indus valley remains imperfectly understood, but it may have consisted of a collection of independent city-states, such as existed in ancient Sumer. It is equally plausible, however, that the few large cities functioned as regional capitals ruling over the surrounding smaller ones. The fact that the sites all possessed a similar structural organization, with a sophisticated grid of well-laid-out city streets, lends credibility to theories that some form of central authority was operating.

Link to Learning

There is much to explore at the sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Take a look at these walkthrough slideshows on Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro to better understand how these cities were organized and what they look like today.

All the cities are divided into two sections: a lower city that was largely a residential area, and an upper city or citadel that was walled off from the rest of the settlement (Figure 3.25). This citadel may have served as a monumental ceremonial center for ritual activities and the residence of the ruling elite, like the palaces and temples of Egypt and Mesopotamia. At Harappa, the wall of mud-brick enclosing the citadel was forty-two feet thick at its base and nearly fifty feet high (about as tall as a five-story building today), with rectangular towers at regular intervals. Within the citadels stood platforms built of mud-brick where ritual activities such as animal sacrifices may have been performed; at Harappa, the platform was twenty-three feet high. At the site of Kalibangan, in northwestern India, archaeologists uncovered a pit on top of the platform containing burned cattle bones.



Figure 3.25 The Citadel Mound at Mohenjo-Daro. The stupa at Mohenjo-Daro, located in present-day Pakistan, was built circa 2500 BCE. The identification and dating of the stupa in 1923 by Indian archaeologist Rakhal Das Banerji led to the first major excavations at the site in the 1920s and 1930s. (credit: "Stupa at Mohenjo-Daro" by Omair Anwer/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)]

The citadels also included public baths. At Mohenjo-Daro, the tank of the bath was forty feet long and twenty-three feet wide and entered by staircases on either side. A nearby well provided the water. Archaeologists have uncovered a large hall supported by pilasters composed of mud-brick at Mohenjo-Daro, as well as a multistory residence built around an open courtyard. This evidence suggests that ritual specialists, perhaps priests, lived and performed religious functions in the citadels that may have required them to bathe in the large public bath and congregate in the hall. An extensive granary for grain storage was found at Mohenjo-Daro. Farmers from outlying rural areas undoubtedly produced the surplus crops that were stored here to provide sustenance for the elite, religious specialists, and other city residents such as merchants and artisans, just as in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The lower sections of the Indus valley cities consisted of residential quarters and workshops. At Mohenjo-Daro and Kalibangan, the houses typically consisted of four to six rooms built around a central courtyard and were equipped with wells to provide running water to a bathroom. Larger homes in the cities were multistory with as many as thirty rooms. There is also evidence of devices attached to some of the roofs that pumped wind into homes and other large buildings to cool them.

Link to Learning

Some of the most intriguing evidence at the large Indus valley civilization sites indicates the residents had sophisticated knowledge of water engineering and built citywide drainage systems with covers for servicing. Evidence was found of indoor toilets that connected to this drainage network that ran throughout the city.

The Indus valley cities also included an industrial area where workshops were located. At Harappa, this district included quarters for the laborers who worked there. The ancient city at the site of Lothal near the Indian Ocean included a dockyard and a warehouse for incoming trade goods. The inhabitants of these cities may have included the artisans and merchants who provided goods for the ruling elite. As in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, the majority of the population were probably farmers who lived in the outlying rural areas surrounding each city.

Trade, Writing, and Religion

Archaeological work has revealed that a considerable amount of trade flowed between Mesopotamia and the Indus valley. Cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia refer to the Indus valley as *Meluhha* and document that precious stones such as lapis lazuli and carnelian, as well as marine shells from the Indian Ocean, were imported from there. Merchants traveled by sea across the Indian Ocean and by land over the Iranian plateau (Figure 3.26).



Figure 3.26 Indus Valley Trade with Mesopotamia. From the work of archaeologists, we know that significant trade took place between the inhabitants of the Indus River valley and their contemporaries in Mesopotamia. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The influence of Mesopotamia on the Indus valley culture is evident in the use of seals. The Indus valley seals were inscribed with depictions of human figures and animals such as bulls and goats, likely totems for families or lineages, and brief inscriptions that likely indicate names, titles, or occupations. Merchants marked ownership of goods by making an impression of the seal on the soft clay that covered the mouth of the jar or other vessel that held the objects, or on clay tags attached to sacks of grain (Figure 3.27). A similar practice occurred in contemporary Mesopotamia, where the seal was in the shape of a cylinder that could be rolled to leave an impression. Archaeologists have found seals from the Indus valley in ancient Sumerian cities such as Ur.



Figure 3.27 An Indus Valley Seal. On the left is a seal from the Indus valley civilization, and on the right is a modern clay impression made from it. Such seals typically showed animals and a script that remains to be deciphered. (credit: modification of work "Stamp seal and modern impression: unicorn and incense burner (?)" by Dodge Fund, 1949/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The script that appears on many of the seals is unique to the people of the Indus valley civilization, and scholars have yet to decipher it. It seems to consist of phonograms, signs for the sounds of syllables, and there appear to be about four hundred such signs. Many speculate that the language written in this script may be related to the Dravidian languages still spoken across southern India today. It may also be similar to the script invented by the Elamites of southwestern Iran. Unlike the case in Mesopotamia and Egypt, archaeologists have not uncovered clay tablets or papyrus rolls in the Indus valley.

The Past Meets the Present

Deciphering Indus Valley Script

One of the great mysteries surrounding Indus valley script is what exactly it represents. Was it a means of capturing spoken language, or did the marks simply indicate whether taxes had been paid on an item or signify the quality of a particular good (in the same way we use stars to rate products and services online today)?

Rajesh Rao, a professor of computer science at the University of Washington who became fascinated with the Indus valley civilization as a child in India, created a computer program to help him answer this question by measuring conditional entropy in Indus valley writing. Conditional entropy measures the degree of randomness in a sequence. In a system of writing that encodes language, there is a fairly low level of randomness. Letters appear frequently in some combinations and rarely or never in others. For example, in the English language, the letter *q* is usually followed by the letter *u* and never by the letter *k*. At the beginning of a word, the letter *h* is never followed by a consonant.

Rao tested the conditional entropy of the Indus valley script along with that of several natural languages including English, artificial languages such as those written for computers, and other sequences not related to language such as human DNA sequences. He discovered that the Indus valley script has a degree of randomness similar to that of natural languages, leading him to the conclusion that the symbols do represent a language and are not simply marks of quality or signs that something has been taxed. He also concluded that the rate of conditional entropy in Indus valley writing resembled that of Old Tamil, an

earlier form of the Tamil language currently spoken in southern India that belongs to the Dravidian language family. This idea angered many Indians, especially those who speak Hindi, a language derived from Sanskrit that is the first language of many people in northern India. This issue is both historical and modern. If the language of the ancient Indus valley was Dravidian in origin, it calls into question the ancestry of the people who lived there, and given the evolution of the caste system, it raises questions about social identities that have existed for centuries. The issue remains in question, and the controversy about ancestral origins is far more complex than the single issue of language.

- Why do you think the origin of language matters so much to the people of India?
- If Indus valley writing were deciphered, what could historians learn about the culture that we cannot currently know?
- In what other ways could computers help historians learn about the past?

Bronze technology probably also entered the Indus River valley by the third millennium BCE through trade with Mesopotamia. Merchants from the Indus valley may even have exported tin from Afghanistan to Mesopotamia, since this metal was in demand for the manufacture of bronze.

Notwithstanding the many obvious Mesopotamian influences and trading connections, the people of the Indus valley civilization developed their own unique culture. Their distinctive religion may have shaped later cultures in India. For example, clay figurines from the Indus valley that are believed to depict deities are often interpreted as portraying a goddess whose female attributes are similar to those of the Hindu goddess Durga, consort of the god Shiva. Some seals depict a horned three-faced figure surrounded by animals, which closely resembles the Hindu deity Shiva when represented as the Lord of the Animals (Figure 3.28). Archaeologists have also found stones molded into shapes that resemble *lingams* and *yonis*, which are representations of male and female sexual organs associated with the worship of Shiva. The people of the Indus valley buried their dead with modest grave goods such as clay pots, which suggests a belief in an afterlife. However, there is no evidence of temples or monumental tombs such as the Egyptian pyramids or the royal tombs of Ur in Mesopotamia.



(a) (b)

Figure 3.28 Possible Influence of Indus Valley Religious Imagery. Historians speculate that the religion of the Indus valley might have influenced later Indian cultures. For example, a seal from 2600–1900 BCE discovered at Mohenjo-Daro (a) shows a seated figure with three faces surrounded by animals. A much later sixth-century CE portrayal of Shiva from the Elephanta Caves in western India (b) shows the Hindu god seated, also with three faces and surrounded by animals. (credit a: modification of work "Shiva Pashupati" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Elephanta Caves" by Christian Haugen/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The artisans of the Indus valley created unique sculptures in clay, stone, and bronze. One of the more spectacular stone works from Mohenjo-Daro depicts a serene bearded man who may be a priest or leader in the community. A tiny bronze figure appears to represent a young woman dancing (Figure 3.29). Her bracelets and necklaces indicate that the people of this culture employed artisans to manufacture such adornment, which may have indicated high social status. Artisans of the Indus valley were also very busy manufacturing pottery and seals. Their artistic designs influenced artisans in neighboring cultures over a wide area, from the upper Ganges River valley in what is today northwestern India to Baluchistan in western Pakistan and southeastern Iran.



Figure 3.29 The Mohenjo-Daro Dancer. This four-inch-tall bronze statue of a young woman discovered at Mohenjo-Daro and dated to circa 2300–1750 BCE could depict a goddess or a woman of the elite class who is dancing. If she is dancing, we can also conclude that music and dance may have been incorporated into social and religious rituals. (credit: modification of work "Bronze 'Dancing Girl,' Mohenjo-daro, c. 2500 BC" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Merchants from the Indus valley were undoubtedly active in exchanging such wares in these regions. In the absence of coinage, they used a common system of stone cubical weights to assess goods in commercial exchanges that required barter. The cities of the Indus valley could have also used these weights to assess taxes in kind that they collected for their granaries.

The Era of Decline

Beginning around 1800 BCE, the centuries of trade between the Indus valley and Mesopotamia came to an end. Over the next four centuries, the cities of the Indus River valley were slowly depopulated, and the civilization declined, likely in stages. Why and how this decline occurred remains unknown. One common view is that it was related to regional climate change. Around 2000 BCE, the floodplain of the Indus River shifted dramatically, creating dry river beds where cities had been and water once flowed. Changes in the pattern of seasonal wind and rainfall, known as the monsoon in South Asia, may have caused these environmental effects. Without a secure source of water for drinking and irrigation, the cities would have suffered declines in population. Another theory suggests that centuries of environmental degradation caused by urbanization and large population growth made the land unsuitable

to human populations. Still other views point to the possibility of tectonic activity that changed the course of the rivers, or even epidemic disease that decimated the population.

Before these environmental factors began to be considered, the view for many years was that the Indus valley civilization was violently destroyed in a conquest by nomadic Indo-European speakers calling themselves Aryans, a Sanskrit-speaking group of nomadic pastoralists who raised cattle and horses. Some Aryans began migrating from the Eurasian Steppe north of the Black and Caspian Seas around 3500 BCE. Over time, different groups spread into Europe, Anatolia, Iran, and eventually Pakistan and India.

The Aryan invasion theory of decline depends heavily on Indo-European works of religious literature like the *Rigveda*, produced sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE in northwestern India. This work includes a great number of hymns, rituals, descriptions of deities, and other largely religious topics geared toward understanding the origin of the universe and the nature of the divine. But in parts it also discusses the arrival of the Aryans and describes them attacking the walled cities and forts of the indigenous population. While some of these descriptions were likely developed centuries after the fall of the Indus valley civilization and may be unrelated to it, some scholars continue to hold that these passages describe the conquest of Mohenjo-Daro. Archaeological evidence attesting to the fact that Mohenjo-Daro was attacked around 1500 BCE and mostly destroyed lends some credibility to these claims.

We may never know what best explains the collapse of the Indus valley civilization. A few or all these causes may have played a role. For example, environmental degradation caused by years of resource exploitation and high population density certainly had an effect. These issues could have been compounded by climate change and disease. And in a weakened state, the people of the region would have been far more vulnerable to attack by raiding groups like the Aryans.

However it happened, by around 1500 BCE, the social and political systems had broken down, and the sophisticated culture of the Indus valley civilization had collapsed. The architectural styles that characterized the cities at their height were abandoned, as was the writing system, the sophisticated metalworking, and other artisanal crafts. The Indus valley civilization had come to an end.

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2.6: Key Terms

Bronze Age
the period from 3500 to 1110 BCE when bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was the preferred material for manufacturing tools and weapons

city-state
an independent political entity consisting of a city and surrounding territory that it controls

Code of Hammurabi
a list of judicial decisions that the Babylonian king Hammurabi had inscribed on stone pillars throughout his kingdom

culture
all the ways in which members of a human society interact with one another and with their environment and pass these ways from generation to generation

cuneiform
a phonetic writing system based on the sounds of words and invented by the Sumerians in about 3000 BCE

Harappan
a term describing the ancient Indus valley civilization, named for one of its largest cities and the first to be discovered by archaeologists

hieratic
a simplified form of hieroglyphics employed by Egyptian scribes for recording everyday documents such as receipts and contracts

hieroglyphics
a complex writing system developed around 3000 BCE in which written symbols represented both sounds and ideas

lugal
the Sumerians' term for their ruler

monsoon
the seasonal pattern of wind and rainfall across South Asia

nomarchs
regional governors in ancient Egypt

papyrus
a type of paper Egyptians made from a common reed plant growing along the Nile

pastoralists
nomadic people who rely on herds of domesticated animals for subsistence

pharaoh
the title of the Egyptian ruler, translated as "big house"

polytheists
people who worship multiple gods, usually associated with different aspects of the natural world

social stratification
the hierarchical order of society in which people sharing the same level of wealth and status make up a distinct class or strata

specialization

a societal characteristic in which people perform specific tasks, such as farming (farmer) or producing tools and clothing (artisan), that contribute to the well-being of the community

ziggurat

an immense stepped tower with a flat top built of mud-brick that served as a temple in Sumerian cities

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2.7: Section Summary

3.1 Early Civilizations

For tens of thousands of years, humans lived largely as mobile, subsistence hunter-gatherers. But with the innovation of agricultural production in a few areas around the world, some groups began to settle, and a new agricultural and sedentary lifestyle gave rise to early civilizations characterized by urban settings, the specialization of labor, and increasing social stratification. The earliest examples appeared in Neolithic settlements like Jericho, Çatalhöyük, Mehrgarh, and others in China, Mesoamerica, and the Andean region of South America.

3.2 Ancient Mesopotamia

The city of Uruk in the land of Sumer was one of the first true cities in world history. Advances in technology such as the invention of bronze-making techniques, a writing system called cuneiform, and a sophisticated religion with a pantheon of deities spread and facilitated the development of a complex Mesopotamian culture and the rise of other city-states there. The Sumerian city-states under the rule of their *lugals* or kings commonly waged war against one another and against a stream of foreign invaders.

The period of independent city-states came to an end with the rise of the world's first empire, the Akkadian Empire of Sargon of Akkad. While it lasted only about a century and a half, this empire inaugurated a new era in the region, which later saw the emergence of other powerful realms. These included the Third Dynasty of Ur and the famous Babylonian Empire of Hammurabi, who created an influential law code. These later empires preserved many elements of the earlier Sumerian civilization, including cuneiform and works of literature like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

3.3 Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt arose as an early civilization along the Nile River valley in the fourth millennium BCE. A polytheistic society with a great assortment of deities and its own writing system, Egypt was united under the pharaohs for much of its ancient history. Its people held that order, truth, and justice (Ma'at) ruled the day and ordered the universe.

The Old Kingdom was the era of pyramid building. The Middle Kingdom was a time of renewed strength and territorial expansion. "Intermediate" periods of weakened centralized control followed and preceded these kingdoms. The First Intermediate Period was a time when regional governors gained power at the expense of the pharaohs. During the Second Intermediate Period, traditional Egyptian nobles lost control of the Nile delta to the Hyksos people and control of far upper Egypt to the kingdom of Kush. These areas were later reconquered with the inauguration of the New Kingdom.

3.4 The Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus valley culture emerged as an early civilization in the early third millennium BCE. It drew inspiration from contacts with Mesopotamia, but its people also developed large well-planned cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro that were quite different from contemporary cities in ancient Sumer. Since the written script of the Indus peoples remains undeciphered, historians can only speculate about how these great cities arose and why they fell in the early second millennium, perhaps as a result of trade disruptions, changes in the course of rivers, the arrival of Indo-European–speaking nomads, climate change, environmental degradation, disease, or some combination of these factors.

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2.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What is a characteristic of early civilizations?

a. nomadic lifestyle
b. egalitarian society
c. specialization
d. subsistence economy

2.
What does the construction of the tower at Jericho suggest about that Neolithic settlement?

a. It likely revered ancestors.
b. It likely had some type of government.
c. It likely performed animal sacrifices.
d. It likely had a small population.

3.
The population of what Neolithic town in today's Turkey may have shared a belief in a mother-deity?

a. Çatalhöyük
b. Jericho
c. Caral
d. Anyang

4.
The earliest known script, cuneiform, was written by pressing a stylus made of reed into what type of material?

a. wet clay
b. hot bronze
c. dry papyrus
d. gold plates

5.
How large do scholars estimate the population of the city of Uruk may have been by the end of the fourth millennium BCE?

a. twenty thousand
b. thirty thousand
c. forty thousand
d. fifty thousand

6.
Who is credited with establishing the first-known empire in world history?

a. Hammurabi
b. Ur-Nammu
c. Naram-Sin
d. Sargon of Akkad

7.
What two adjectives best describe the gods of Mesopotamia?

a. pleasant and helpful
b. fickle and easily angered
c. distant and unconcerned
d. weak and cautious

8.
What adjective best describes the afterlife, according to the Sumerian belief system?

a. gloomy

b. happy
c. exciting
d. scary

9.
Who do scholars believe was the first pharaoh to unite all Egypt?

a. Narmer
b. Amenemhat I
c. Djoser
d. Khufu

10.
What was another role of the pharaoh, in addition to being the political head of the state?

a. merchant
b. scribe
c. high priest
d. farmer

11.
Imhotep built a large stone step pyramid for what pharaoh?

a. Djoser
b. Khufu
c. Menkaure
d. Snefru

12.
What role did the nomarchs play in the decline of the Old Kingdom and beginning of the First Intermediate Period?

a. They instituted important religious practices.
b. They assumed more control over their regions.
c. They allowed for greater Hyksos immigration.
d. They rejected the authority of the priests.

13.
What was significant about the reign of Sobekneferu?

a. She was both pharaoh and priest.
b. She was the last pharaoh of the Middle Kingdom.
c. She gave unprecedented power to the nomarchs.
d. She was the first woman to rule since before the Old Kingdom.

14.
The Mesopotamians called the Indus valley civilization by what name?

a. Meluhha
b. Harappa
c. Mohenjo-Daro
d. Dholavira

15.
What may have served as the monumental ceremonial center in Indus valley cities?

a. a ziggurat
b. a pyramid
c. a citadel
d. a sunken court

16.
What was the likely purpose of the large baths at Mohenjo-Daro?

a. watering of livestock

b. ritual cleansing
c. storage of drinking water
d. the king’s use only

17.
What was a common trade item exported from the Indus valley to Mesopotamia?

a. lapis lazuli
b. diamonds
c. rubies
d. sapphires

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2.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
In what ways did the nomadic and seminomadic peoples beyond the borders of early civilizations contribute to these civilizations?
2.
What do the artifacts and other archaeological finds from Jericho and Çatalhöyük suggest about life in these early urban environments?
3.
What was the *Legend of Sargon*, and how does it explain Sargon of Akkad's rise to power?
4.
In what way did the palace and temple complex in ancient Mesopotamian cities function as an economic redistribution center?
5.
How were gods honored and served in the Sumerian religion?
6.
In what respects were the Sumerian *lugals* and Egyptian pharaohs different?
7.
What do ancient sources and modern analyses suggest about the labor required to build the large pyramids of the Old Kingdom?
8.
Why is the reign of Pharaoh Senusret III considered the high point of Middle Kingdom Egypt?
9.
What evidence suggests that the walled citadel areas in Indus valley cities may have been used for religious purposes?
10.
What suggests that the religion of the Indus valley civilization may have survived for many centuries in a different form?
11.
What are some of the theories about the decline of the Indus valley civilization?

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2.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
Imagine that you lived through a transition from a nomadic to a settled way of life. What in your life would have changed the most? Do you think your standard of living would be better or worse? Why?

2.
What may have motivated the people of the Neolithic towns of Jericho and Çatalhöyük to produce an agricultural surplus? How was this surplus likely used?

3.
The Code of Hammurabi identifies different punishments and expectations for people based on their social position. Why do you think this was the case? Why wouldn't everyone have faced the same types of punishments and expectations?

4.
Why did the rise of the Akkadian Empire bring an end to the era of independent city-states in Mesopotamia? Why didn't the city-states simply reassert their independence after the empire collapsed?

5.
Many scholars have explained the capricious actions of the Mesopotamian gods and the generally pessimistic worldview of the people as consequences of a difficult environment. Does this sound convincing? Why or why not? Can you think of an alternate explanation?

6.
Terms like Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and Intermediate Period were developed in the nineteenth century by scholars seeking to organize Egyptian chronology into distinct ages. Despite some flaws, this naming convention is still used. Do you think it should be? Why or why not? What other type of chronological organization might you suggest? Why?

7.
While Egypt was unified early (about 3150 BCE), Mesopotamia was not unified until the rise of Sargon almost a thousand years later. What do you think accounts for this difference? Why didn't Egypt emerge as a number of independent city-states and Sumer as an empire early on?

8.
We know there was trade between the Indus valley civilization and that of Mesopotamia. But it remains unclear to what extent the rise of the Indus valley culture can be attributed to connections with Mesopotamia. What elements of Indus valley culture may have been influenced by Mesopotamia? What elements are unique to the cities of the Indus valley?

9.
In what ways do the Indus valley cities resemble those of Mesopotamia? In what ways do they resemble modern cities?

10.
Historians' inability to read the writing of the Indus valley civilization means that we know less about this culture than we do about Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. What elements of a culture are difficult to understand without the help of written documents? Why is this the case? What kinds of things are impossible to know until the script is deciphered?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: The Near East

3.1: Introduction
3.2: From Old Babylon to the Medes
3.3: Egypt’s New Kingdom
3.4: The Persian Empire
3.5: The Hebrews
3.6: Key Terms
3.7: Section Summary
3.8: Review Questions
3.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
3.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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3.1: Introduction



Figure 4.1 An Army at War. This seventh-century BCE stone relief from an Assyrian palace shows the army of King Ashurbanipal fighting against nomadic Arabian desert groups. (credit: modification of work “Assyrian Arabian Battle” by “LaLouvre”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Chapter Outline

4.1 From Old Babylon to the Medes
4.2 Egypt’s New Kingdom
4.3 The Persian Empire
4.4 The Hebrews

At the dawn of the Iron Age, which began around 1200 BCE in the Near East, highly trained Assyrian armies with bronze and iron weapons expanded out of northern Mesopotamia. Within a few centuries, their conquests had provided the Assyrians with an empire larger than the Near East had ever seen. Relying on archaeological finds like this detailed relief as well as textual documentation from the Bible and other sources, historians have pieced together the history of this once-mighty state (Figure 4.1). The Assyrians conquered the kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE, added Egypt to their lands in the seventh century BCE, and held it all together with a combination of ruthless military tactics, efficient state organization, and a wide network of royal roads. They left a powerful regional legacy, yet theirs is just one of many empires that rose and fell in the complicated and dangerous world of the ancient Near East. Though these local power brokers were linked by the shared heritage of a Sumerian past, including influences such as cuneiform and Hammurabi’s law code, their rapid succession speaks to the level of rivalry and conflict experienced by the people of the area. Yet the same chaos led to important innovations in all aspects of society, particularly military technology.



Figure 4.2 Timeline: The Near East. (credit “1792 BCE”: modification of work “Louvre - Hammurabi's Code” by “Erin”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit “1400 BCE”: modification of work “Persepolis, Tripylon, eastern gate (2)” by Marco Prins/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “1258 BCE”: modification of work “Treaty of Kadesh” by Iocanus/Museum of the Ancient Orient/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0; credit “670 BCE”: modification of work “Ancient Assyria Bas-Relief of Lion Hunt, Nimrud, 883-859 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit “484 BCE”: modification of work “Marble bust of Herodotos” by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1891/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

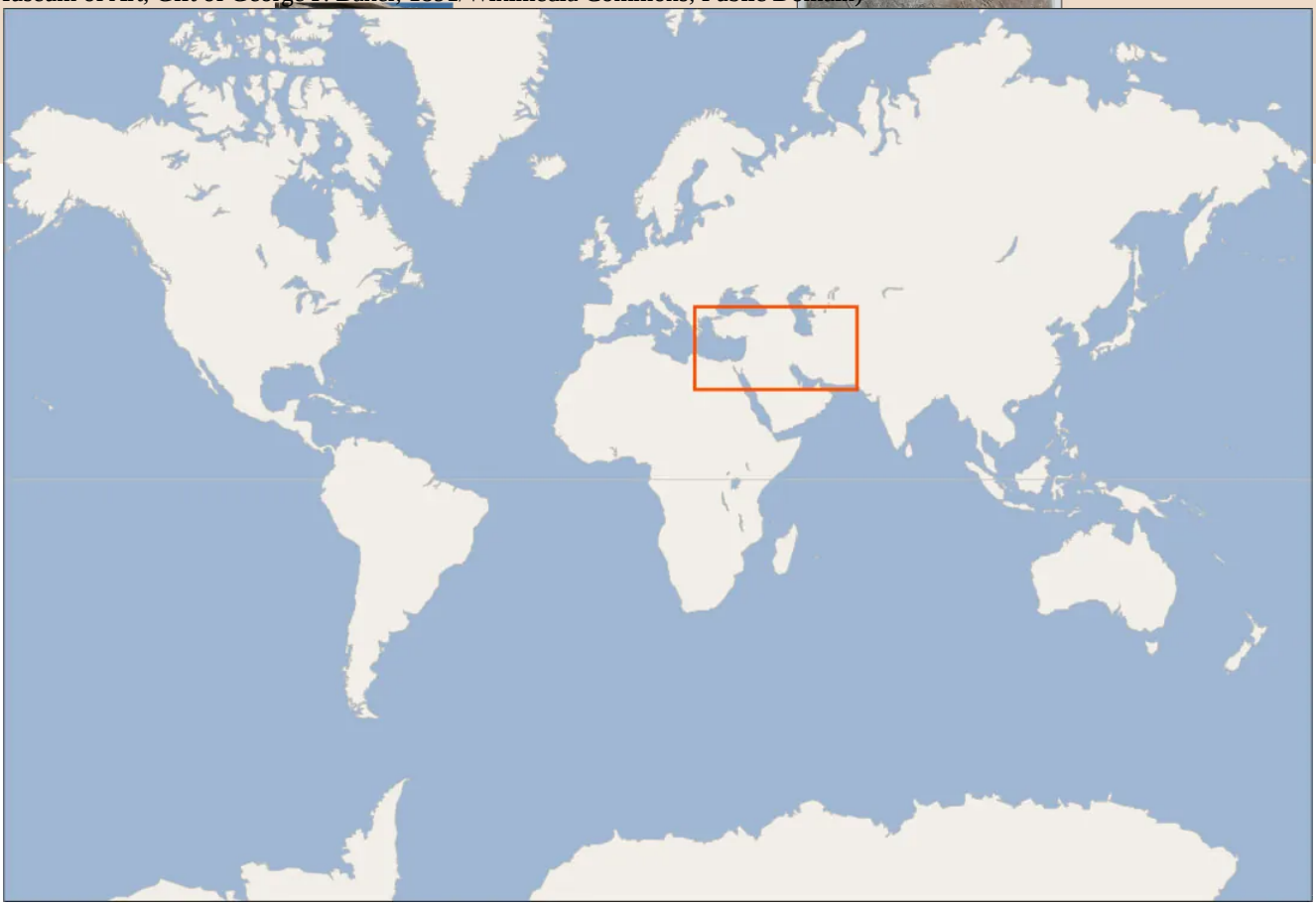


Figure 4.3 Locator Map: The Near East. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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3.2: From Old Babylon to the Medes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the geography of the Ancient Near East
- Discuss the political norms, technological innovations, and unique social attributes of the major city-states of the Ancient Near East
- Explain how city-states of the Ancient Near East interacted with their neighbors

When Sargon of Akkad built Mesopotamia's first empire in approximately 2300 BCE, he inaugurated a new era in the Near East. Though it lasted only about a century and a half, his model of imperial expansion and administration was followed by a number of successive regional powers in the region. The Third Dynasty of Ur and Hammurabi's Babylonian kingdom were in many ways imitators of Sargon's earlier example. Later powers like the Hittites, Neo-Assyrians, and Neo-Babylonians continued to borrow from earlier empires and added unique traits as well. Within these different empires existed a diverse assortment of peoples, social classes, religions, and daily practices. From the archaeological record and surviving documents, historians have cataloged these groups and learned a little about how they lived.

Power Politics in the Near East

The end of the third millennium BCE was a transformative, if sometimes chaotic, period in Mesopotamia. Foreign invaders from the north, east, and west put tremendous pressure on the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the last Sumerian dynasty. One of the greatest threats came from nomadic peoples then living in the desert regions of Syria. Raiding by these Amorites was considered such a problem that in approximately 2034 BCE, Shu-Sin, ruler of Ur, constructed a 170-mile wall from the banks of the Euphrates to the Tigris to keep them out. The strategy ultimately failed, and in the reign of Shu-Sin's son Ibbi-Sin, the Amorites breached the wall and began attacking cities. They were soon joined by the Elamites from the east. As raids by these groups increased in volume and intensity, city after city fell, and the Third Dynasty of Ur disintegrated. By around 2004 BCE, all that remained of Ibbi-Sin's empire was the city of Ur itself. In that year, it too was sacked by the Elamites and others.

Amorites then spread out across Mesopotamia, establishing powerful cities of their own. They adopted the region's existing religious traditions, its local customs, and the Akkadian language. They also embraced the political culture of rivalry, and their two most prominent cities, Isin and Larsa, fought for supremacy. The drive for dominance stoked the same kinds of innovation and expansion that had characterized the first city, Ur.

The Rise of Babylon

During the later stages of the competition between Isin and Larsa, a new power emerged in southern Mesopotamia. This was the city of Babylon. Unlike Ur, Babylon had not previously been an important city-state. Its name is of unknown origin and was likely pronounced *Babil*. Akkadian speakers of the area called it *Bab-ili*, which meant "gateway of the gods." In 1894 BCE, an Amorite chieftain named Sumu-adum took the city and installed himself as ruler. His successors expanded their control over the surrounding area, building public works projects and digging canals. But this expansion was modest, and by about 1800 BCE, Babylon controlled only a relatively small territory around the city itself. Indeed, at this time, it was just one of a handful of small states making up a loose coalition in Mesopotamia.

It was during the reign of Hammurabi in eighteenth century BCE that Babylon rose as a center of power and the administrative capital of a new Mesopotamian empire (Figure 4.4). Early in his reign, Hammurabi made an alliance with the powerful Assyrians to the north. This pact gave him the protection he needed to expand his kingdom, taking control of Isin, Uruk, and other key cities of southern Mesopotamia. Soon Babylon had become a major center of power in the south and the target of rival kingdoms. In approximately 1764 BCE, a coalition led by the city-states of Elam and Eshunna invaded Babylonian territory, hoping to capture Hammurabi's powerful realm, but it failed, and Hammurabi turned his attention to the south. Eventually, he sent his armies even against his former ally, Assyria. By 1755 BCE, he had transformed the small kingdom he inherited into the center of a Mesopotamian empire to rival any that had come before it.



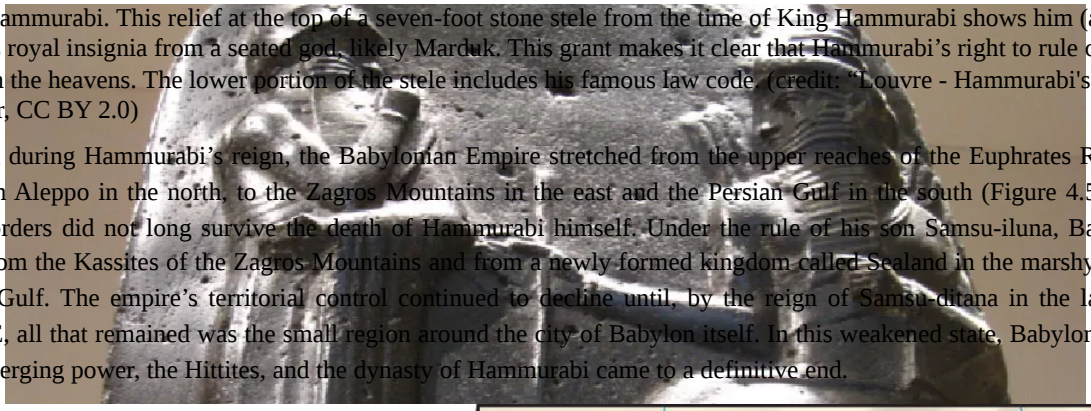


Figure 4.4 Hammurabi. This relief at the top of a seven-foot stone stele from the time of King Hammurabi shows him (at left) receiving his royal insignia from a seated god, likely Marduk. This grant makes it clear that Hammurabi's right to rule comes directly from the heavens. The lower portion of the stele includes his famous law code. (credit: "Louvre - Hammurabi's Code" by "Erin"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

At its height during Hammurabi's reign, the Babylonian Empire stretched from the upper reaches of the Euphrates River, not far from modern Aleppo in the north, to the Zagros Mountains in the east and the Persian Gulf in the south (Figure 4.5). But these extensive borders did not long survive the death of Hammurabi himself. Under the rule of his son Samsu-iluna, Babylon faced resistance from the Kassites of the Zagros Mountains and from a newly formed kingdom called Sealand in the marshy region near the Persian Gulf. The empire's territorial control continued to decline until, by the reign of Samsu-ditana in the late sixteenth century BCE, all that remained was the small region around the city of Babylon itself. In this weakened state, Babylon was sacked by a new emerging power, the Hittites, and the dynasty of Hammurabi came to a definitive end.



Figure 4.5 Hammurabi's Realm. Under Hammurabi, the Babylonians expanded out of Babylon to conquer much of Mesopotamia and construct the region's first empire, shown here in green. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Hittites

Unlike the Babylonians, the Hittites were not from Mesopotamia, nor were they members of the Semitic language group. Rather, they were an Indo-European-speaking group that emerged as a powerful force in Anatolia starting in the 1600s BCE. Their precise origins are not known, but they were likely immigrants to Anatolia who blended into the local population and adopted much of its culture and religion. By 1650 BCE, the Hittites dominated central Anatolia from their capital at Hattusas. Their expansion across Anatolia and into Syria continued into the early sixteenth century BCE under the reign of Mursilis, during which time the growing kingdom also set its sights on Babylon.

Possibly as a demonstration of military might or simply to seize an opportunity, the Hittite army descended into Mesopotamia and took the city of Babylon. Despite the success of the campaign, Mursilis's power in Anatolia began to weaken during his absence. He was assassinated soon after he returned, and the Hittite Empire began to crumble as its subject kingdoms rebelled and it was consumed by war. By 1500 BCE, order had been restored, but the new rulers struggled to return the Hittites to their former glory.

Beginning with the rise of the Hittite king Tudhaliyas I in 1420 BCE, the Hittite Empire experienced a revival and new imperial growth (Figure 4.6). By the reign of Suppiluliumas I in the mid-fourteenth century BCE, it had become arguably the most powerful empire in the Near East and a major rival of New Kingdom Egypt. The two realms vied for control of the eastern Mediterranean in the 1300s and 1200s BCE, eventually facing off in the epic Battle of Qadesh in 1274 BCE.



Figure 4.6 The Hittite Empire. Shown in green at its greatest extent in the thirteenth century BCE, the Hittite Empire included all of Asia Minor to the borders of Assyria and parts of Syria. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Generally accepted as a draw or possibly a narrow Hittite victory, the fighting at Qadesh is most memorable for ultimately leading the two forces to recognize that they had more to gain from peace than war. In 1258 BCE, the Hittite king Hattusilis II and the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II signed one of early history's greatest peace treaties (Figure 4.7). The agreement confirmed Hittite control of Syria and Egyptian dominance over the Phoenician ports of the eastern Mediterranean. However, little more than fifty years later, the once-powerful Hittite Empire collapsed, never to reappear.



Figure 4.7 The Egypto-Hittite Peace Treaty. These carved fragments are from one of many copies of the Egypto-Hittite Peace Treaty of 1258 BCE. (credit: “Treaty of Kadesh” by Iocanus/Museum of the Ancient Orient/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

The Hittite Empire was not the only important Near Eastern power to disintegrate during this period. Across the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia beginning around 1200 BCE, kingdoms and empires from Greece to Mesopotamia went into a decline so extensive it is now called the Late Bronze Age Collapse. Although its trigger remains unknown, the collapse coincided with widespread regional famine, epidemic disease, war, and waves of destructive migrations across the eastern Mediterranean. By the time calm returned around 1100 BCE, the region had entered a new era, the Iron Age. This was a period in which iron replaced bronze as the metal of choice for tools and weapons, and new and more sophisticated empires expanded across the Near East.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire

For a few centuries after the Late Bronze Age Collapse, Mesopotamia experienced transformations that dramatically reshaped the region and set the stage for a new imperial era. During the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE, decline came to both Assyria and especially to Babylonia, where dynasties competed for control. Complicating the situation for the Babylonians, a Semitic group of unknown origin called the Chaldeans took control of far southern Mesopotamia during this period. Assyria in the north fared a little better but also struggled to reestablish control over northern Mesopotamia. One of the major factors limiting Assyria’s ability to grow was the presence of a group of West-Semitic seminomads called Aramaeans. The Aramaeans likely emerged first in southern Syria; they exploited Assyrian and Babylonian weakness to expand into Mesopotamia, disrupting Assyrian trading routes as they went. By the tenth century BCE, they had become the dominant population in western Mesopotamia and controlled a number of powerful kingdoms there.

It was only around 900 BCE that Assyria was able to reestablish control over northern Mesopotamia. This marks the birth of what historians often refer to as the Neo-Assyrian Empire (to distinguish it from the Old Assyrian Empire of 2000–1600 BCE and the

Middle Assyrian Empire of 1400–1100 BCE). Beginning in the reign of Ashurnasirpal II in the early ninth century BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire began a steady march toward imperial dominance across the Near East, asserting control over many Aramaean kingdoms in Syria and eventually over Babylonia itself. By the end of Tiglath-Pileser III's reign in 727 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire had become the dominant power in the Near East. Over the next several decades, successive Assyrian kings were able to build an expansive empire across Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean through wars of conquest. In 671 BCE, King Esarhaddon invaded Egypt and added that center of wealth and power to his kingdom.

With this conquest, the Neo-Assyrian Empire achieved a degree of territorial control far surpassing that of any earlier empire of the region (Figure 4.8). But its supremacy was not to last. Beginning in the last decades of the seventh century BCE, two growing powers threatened and eventually overthrew Assyria. These kingdoms were Babylonia and Media.



Figure 4.8 The Neo-Assyrian Empire. This map shows the Neo-Assyrian Empire (in orange) at its height, around 670 BCE. Note the major cities and peoples consumed by its conquests. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

During the period of Assyrian expansion, Babylonia had been reduced to a vassal state of the empire, meaning it was nominally independent in the running of its internal affairs but had to bow to imperial demands and provide goods and soldiers when commanded. But in 616 BCE, the Chaldean Babylonian ruler Nabopolassar attempted to take advantage of a period of Assyrian weakness by launching a bold attack against the Old Assyrian capital of Asshur. Although the attack failed, it encouraged the Median dynasty to risk its own attack into Assyria. The Median Empire, a kingdom in northwestern Iran, had only recently unified and strengthened, largely because Assyria had devastated the rival kingdoms around it, such as Elam. The attack on Assyria proved successful, and Asshur was destroyed in 614 BCE. Shortly afterward, the Babylonians and the Medes entered into an alliance to overthrow Assyria. Assyria received support from Egypt, but it was unable to prevent the Babylonian-Median alliance from

overwhelming its forces and capturing its cities. In 612 BCE, the Babylonians and the Medes reduced the once-great Assyrian city of Nineveh to rubble, killing the Assyrian king in the process. The remaining Assyrian forces fled west and held out for a few more years. By 605 BCE, however, the Assyrian Empire had been defeated and its people carried off into slavery.

The victors divided the spoils. The Median Empire took the areas to the east, north, and northeast and expanded its control to central Anatolia, much of western Iran, and the southern area between the Black and Caspian Seas.

The Babylonians, often called the Neo-Babylonians to distinguish them from Hammurabi's subjects in the Old Babylonian period, took control of the western portion of the former Neo-Assyrian Empire. This included much of Mesopotamia, Syria, and the important Phoenician ports along the Mediterranean (Figure 4.9). Under king Nebuchadnezzar II, they waged war in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean to weaken Egypt's power. Then, in 601 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar attempted a bold invasion of Egypt itself, only to be repulsed by strong resistance.



Figure 4.9 The Neo-Babylonian Empire. By 550 BCE, the Neo-Babylonian Empire (shown in green) had extended its control over Mesopotamia, Syria, and Judah, and even into the Arabian Peninsula. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Foreign Affairs and Trade

The many city-states, kingdoms, and empires of Mesopotamia operated in a complex world in which both risks and rewards for rulers were extremely high. War was especially common, and diplomatic mistakes could have costly consequences. Kings preferred to avoid war if possible and maintain healthy diplomatic relationships with others instead. A smaller kingdom, for example, might find it advantageous to seek an alliance with a large regional power like Assyria, Babylonia, or the Hittite Empire. Sending sons and daughters to rival kingdoms in marriage also helped forestall war and build cultural and familial bridges between competitors.

The Hittite king Suppiluliumas attempted to marry one of his sons into the Egyptian royal family, which would have united these two regional powers and competitors. That marriage never took place, but many others did.

Ambassadors were a key part of Mesopotamia's complex diplomatic world. Kings frequently sent their representatives to friendly and even rival kingdoms to mend or strengthen relationships, a vital task frequently performed under extreme pressure. A wrong move could start a war. As they are today, however, such emissaries were guaranteed certain protections. In ordinary situations, they could expect to be free to leave unharmed when the situation demanded it, to be exempt from certain taxes, and to have their property respected. But if war broke out between the two kingdoms, an ambassador could get caught in the middle.

Gift giving was an important part of the ambassadors' role. When sent to another kingdom, emissaries frequently carried with them an offering of high value for the king who received them, and on their return home, their king expected a present of equal or greater worth. This exchange of gifts demonstrated respect and goodwill between the rulers. Returning empty-handed suggested the foreign king was breaking off diplomatic relations or had even become hostile. Occasionally an ambassador might be unable to return home, either because the relationship between the two kingdoms had gone sour or because the foreign king refused to supply an appropriate gift.

Rulers did not rely only on ambassadors for collecting intelligence in Ancient Mesopotamia. They often employed spies to inform them of what was happening inside both rival and friendly foreign kingdoms. These could be merchants, sailors, artisans, or refugees fleeing foreign lands. Hammurabi, for example, made frequent use of espionage. Not only did he recruit agents of all types to keep tabs on other kings, but he even established a special intelligence bureau in the palace at Mari to collect, translate, and analyze documents provided by his many spies. The most common uses of this intelligence were to anticipate war, learn about troop movements, and assess the strength of a foreign kingdom before putting an army into the field. Using spies was risky, however, because the very nature of the work suggested that such agents were never to be trusted, and betrayal was always a possibility. An even greater risk was borne by the spies themselves, who could expect a painful death if caught.

Long-distance trade was another important point of contact between different kingdoms around the region. Archaeological work has unearthed a wealth of information about the trading networks that crisscrossed the Near East and beyond. As early as the empire of Sargon of Akkad, Mesopotamian traders operating in the Persian Gulf sailed as far as modern-day Pakistan to trade with the people of the Indus River valley. Large empires had an interest in encouraging trade and maintained roads and bridges across the Near East for that purpose. The Assyrians were productive builders of roads and bridges that carried people and goods into and across their territory. Roads in the enormous Neo-Assyrian Empire were managed by a central government authority to ensure that the movement of goods and especially of soldiers proceeded unhindered.

By today's standards, the long-distance roads that crisscrossed this landscape were often of poor quality. They were generally unpaved and were maintained by local authorities, who would frequently carve a new road alongside the old one after years of wear. In the desert regions where soil was firm, the roads might be straight, while in more diverse terrain, they might wind around mountains and other imposing obstacles like swamps. Traveling between cities on such roads could take several weeks, even over relatively short distances. Traders could expect some form of protection from local rulers, however, in exchange for paying custom fees and duties.

Access to foreign goods and raw materials was a major concern of empires in the Near East. In Mesopotamia in particular, vital resources like stone, timber, and metal ores were scarce, and they had to be procured in large quantities from distant locations. The flow of these goods into imperial centers often took the form of tribute payments, much like a tax, from vassal or subjugated kingdoms (Figure 4.10). However, tribute was not the only mechanism for international trade. During the Old Assyrian period (c. 2000–1600 BCE), for example, Assyrian traders traveled between Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and even Afghanistan trading in valuable goods like copper, tin, and textiles. Copper and tin were especially important because they are the ingredients needed to make bronze, the primary material for manufacturing metal tools and weapons in this period. The Assyrians even established merchant colonies in Anatolia where they exchanged tin and textiles for silver and gold.



Figure 4.10 Receiving Tribute. In this relief from the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, Assyrian king Shalmaneser III is shown receiving tribute from Jehu, the king of Israel, bowing before him. The limestone obelisk was erected in 825 BCE as a public monument and is one of only two complete Assyrian obelisks that have been discovered to date. (credit: "First depiction of Hoshea on the Black Obelisk" by The British Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Explore this website, created by the British Museum, about trade and contraband in Ancient Assyria.

Daily Life and the Family in the Near East

The ability to purchase luxury trade items was the privilege of the elites, who were also treated differently under the law. Hammurabi's Code, the list of judicial decisions issued by Hammurabi and inscribed on stone pillars erected throughout his kingdom, identified three social classes during the Old Babylonian period: nobles (*awelum*), commoners (*mushkenum*), and the enslaved (*wardum*). These classes were not fixed but were important for understanding how individuals were treated under the law. For example, if a commoner put out the eye or broke the bone of a noble, the noble was empowered to do the same to the offending commoner. However, a noble who injured a commoner could expect to merely pay a fine.

Social distinctions also applied in the treatment of women under the law. For example, if a husband divorced his wife because she had not given birth to sons, he was required to return her dowry and pay her a sum equal to the bride price paid upon marriage. If no bride price had been paid and the husband was a noble, he was required to pay his wife one mina of silver, the equivalent of about a year's wage for an average worker. However, if he were a commoner, he was expected to pay only one-third of a mina of silver.

The homes of Babylonians in this period reflected these social distinctions. Commoners' dwellings were typically windowless and made of mud with thick walls that protected the occupants from the oppressive summer heat. Some were of baked brick with a type of plaster along the walls to keep out moisture and preserve the brick. They were very simply furnished and usually contained a set of interior stairs leading to the roof, where occupants could dry vegetables or perform religious rituals. The homes of the wealthy, by contrast, were larger structures built around a central courtyard and included several rooms for different purposes, such as kitchens, bathrooms, reception rooms, and storage rooms. They contained various types of wooden furniture, and walls were

decorated with paintings of animals or even insects. Enslaved people commonly lived within the home, especially women and girls who worked as servants.

All Babylonians were expected to serve the gods, who were regarded as an aristocracy of powerful lords ruling over all. These deities tended to take human forms and express human emotions and desires such as love, hate, and envy. By the time of Hammurabi, the large pantheon included gods of Sumerian origin as well as gods introduced by other groups that had influenced Mesopotamian religious practices, such as the Akkadians and the Amorites. During Hammurabi's dynasty, the storm god Marduk was elevated to the highest tier of the pantheon and accepted as the patron god of Babylonia. Other powerful deities included Ea (Enki) (Figure 4.11), the god of fresh waters; Sin (Nanna), the god of the moon; and Shamash (Utu), the god of the sun and justice. Each city had its own patron god and corresponding temple. Individuals worshipped their city's patron god but also believed they had their own personal deity who offered protection in exchange for daily worship and service.



Figure 4.11 The Babylonian God Ea. In this detail from the Adda Seal, an ancient cylinder seal dating to approximately 2300 BCE and housed at the British Museum, the Babylonian god Ea, also known as Enki, is depicted wearing a horned helmet and surrounded by a river of flowing water. (credit: "Enki (detail of the Adda seal)" by British Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The temples dedicated to the gods supported complex administrations consisting of singers, scribes, diviners, snake charmers, stone carvers, guards, exorcists, and male and female priests. Temple rituals included the carefully choreographed serving of meals for the gods accompanied by music, during which the gods were believed to consume the essence of the food provided. (Afterward, the actual food was consumed by the temple staff and the king.) The temple staff also participated in elaborate religious festivals performed in the cities, such as the New Year Festival. During these events, the divine images of the gods were carried from the temples and throughout the town in a grand procession where everyone might catch a glimpse of the deity.

Since Assyria was also part of the larger Mesopotamian world, there were many social and cultural similarities between the Babylonians and the Assyrians. The Assyrian population was made up of four hierarchically organized classes: the nobility, the professional class, the peasantry, and the enslaved. The nobility occupied the highest position and controlled large estates. Members of this class could expect to receive a thorough education in preparation for serving in elite positions within the empire, such as military officers, governors, and high-ranking priests. Priests were important not only as interpreters of divine will but also as points of connection between the center of political power and the rest of the empire.

The large professional class included a host of skilled groups, from bankers and physicians to scribes and merchants. Each group maintained its own guild, which enforced high professional standards and saw to it that proper taxes were paid. The largest class, and the least well documented, was the peasantry. Most in this group were almost certainly poor farmers who worked the lands of

the higher classes. At the very bottom of the social order were the enslaved, the majority of whom had been captured during war. They often worked the most dangerous jobs and had almost no rights. Those enslaved not by war but by unpaid debt had a somewhat higher status and could own property, conduct business, and even buy their way out of slavery in rare instances.

Above all these classes was the household of the Assyrian king. The kings of Assyria were considered viceroys of the gods, especially the chief deity Asshur. They were expected to emulate the gods through their own virtuous behavior and to act in accordance with divine omens interpreted by religious advisers. In acting on the omens, the ruler was fulfilling the dual role of defender of order against chaos and representative of humanity's interests. When times were difficult and the gods displeased, the king might be expected to subject himself to penalties in order to calm the heavenly ire. For example, during the annual New Year Festival, the king underwent a form of ritual humiliation intended to satisfy the gods and protect his people from harm. In extreme situations, he might even need to symbolically die in order to appease the gods. In these instances, the king would step back and allow a substitute king to rule in his place for a period of weeks or months. Once that time was over, the substitute king was killed and the actual king returned to power.

The constant wars of conquest undertaken during the Neo-Assyrian Empire necessitated a highly skilled and well-organized standing army. This army included charioteers, cavalry, archers, and wielders of slings and spears (Figure 4.12). All Assyrian men were expected to serve some period of military service. The king was the official head of the army, and his chief officials were high-ranking military officers. The Neo-Assyrian Empire was effectively a military state, and it was demonstrably efficient at expanding its territory and keeping its vassals in line.



Figure 4.12 The Victorious Assyrian Army. These large stone reliefs from the late eighth century BCE were carved to decorate an Assyrian palace or public building. They depict victorious Assyrian soldiers returning from battle carrying the heads of their enemies and standing on their headless bodies. (credit: "Orthostats showing Assyrian soldiers, Tell Tayinat, Amuq Valley, Iron Age, 738 BC, limestone" by "Daderot"/Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Those who defied the Assyrian war machine could expect swift and devastating consequences, including public torture and mutilation to demonstrate the price of rebellion (a response scholars have called "calculated frightfulness"). Another tactic to shut down regular or particularly difficult rebellions was the forced deportation of entire populations to other parts of the empire. The elite and skilled in a city were compelled to move to a previously depopulated region, there to be steadily assimilated into the surrounding culture until they became culturally indistinguishable from other Assyrians.

Beyond the Book

The Neo-Assyrian War Machine

Inscriptions, art, and even the Bible attest that the Neo-Assyrian military at its height was the most modern and efficient in the ancient world. Unlike other armies whose farmer-soldiers could fight only in summer, the Neo-Assyrians were a highly trained professional standing army of both male citizens and subject peoples. Training and the ability to fight year-round gave a considerable advantage and transformed the waging of war in the Near East.

Specialized groups worked together in battle. A standard Neo-Assyrian infantry team included spear fighters as well as archers and slingers who provided cover in battle (Figure 4.13).



Figure 4.13 Assyrian Spear Fighters. This large seventh-century BCE stone relief from the wall of a palace in Nineveh shows a line of Assyrian soldiers with large shields and spears. (credit: modification of work “Gypsum Wall Panel Relief, North Palace, Nineveh, Iraq, 645-635 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

The archers used composite bows, a design capable of firing accurately at a range of four hundred feet (Figure 4.14).



Figure 4.14 Neo-Assyrian Archers. Helmeted Neo-Assyrian archers carry large bows in this relief from about the eighth century BCE, which once decorated the Palace of Sennacherib. (credit: modification of work “Ancient Assyria Bas-Relief of Armed Soldiers, Palace of King Sennacherib (704-689 BC)” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Four-wheeled chariots had featured in Mesopotamian warfare since at least 3000 BCE, but the two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariot that appeared around 2000 BCE proved far superior (Figure 4.15). Neo-Assyrian fighters often assembled in squadrons of fifty chariots, each with a driver and an archer carrying swords and clubs for close combat.



Figure 4.15 Assyrian Charioteers. This Assyrian stone relief from the ninth century shows charioteers on a lion hunt; a similar vehicle served in battle. (credit: modification of work “Ancient Assyria Bas-Relief of Lion Hunt, Nimrud, 883-859 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Though mighty, the Neo-Assyrians tried to avoid warfare, usually by demanding a besieged city surrender without a fight. But if forced, they used “calculated frightfulness” to demonstrate the price of resistance, inflicting various forms of torture on the conquered peoples (Figure 4.16).

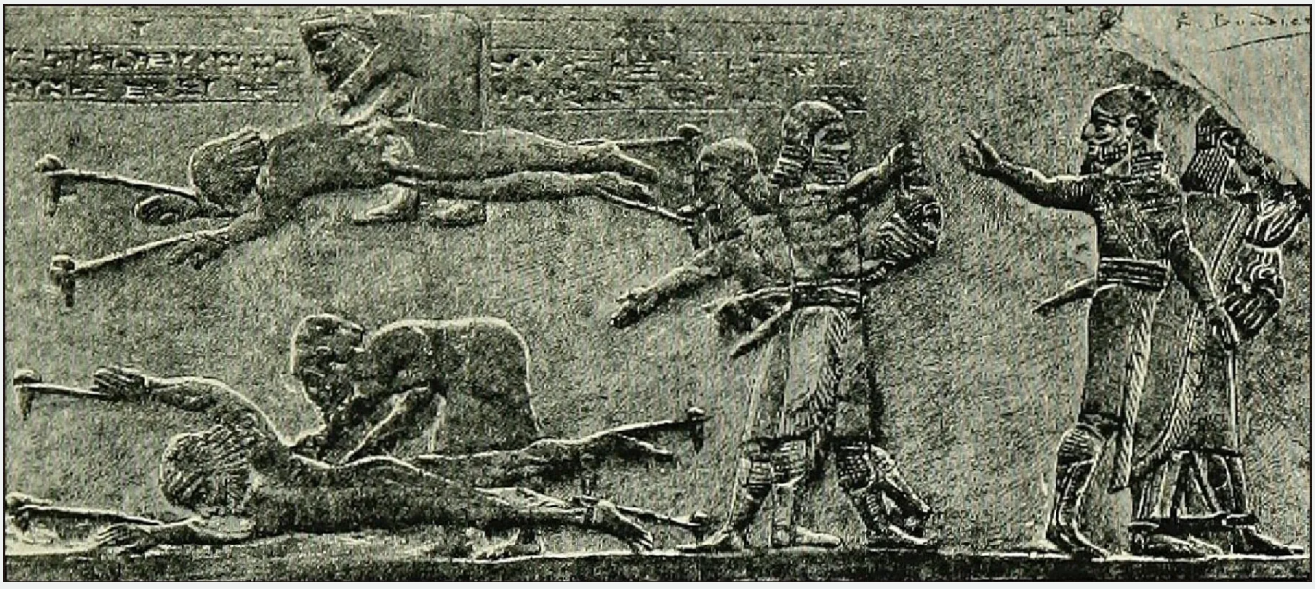


Figure 4.16 Resistance to Neo-Assyrian Rule. This stone relief made after a battle against the Elamites in 653 BCE shows two rebellious chiefs staked to the ground and being flayed alive. Such displays would remind other chiefs of what awaited resistance to Neo-Assyrian rule. (credit: modification of work “Image from page 248 of ‘History of Egypt, Chaldea, Syria, Babylonia and Assyria’ (1903)” by Internet Archive Book Images/Flickr, Public Domain)

- Why might some rulers have resisted Neo-Assyrian control despite knowing the cost?
- What set the military of the Neo-Assyrians apart from their rivals? How did their use of technology increase the severity and frequency of warfare in the Near East?

Hittite society differed dramatically from that of the Assyrians and Babylonians. The entire empire included only a few large cities, like Hattusas, and most people lived in small rural villages or towns. With the exception of some leased acreage, village land was mostly held in common and worked by the people. Early in Hittite history, enslaved people had been relatively rare, but they became more numerous later on as the number of war captives rose. The Hittites practiced chattel slavery, meaning enslaved people were considered property and could be sold at will. They were frequently put to work in agricultural settings to free Hittite citizens for military service.

The religion of the Hittites incorporated elements from a number of different religious traditions, including that of Mesopotamia. Divination rituals, for example, were essentially Mesopotamian in origin and included studying the organs of sacrificed animals, consulting female soothsayers, and observing the movement of birds. Among the most important gods were the sun goddess Arinna and her consort the weather god Tarhunna (Figure 4.17). The former oversaw the government of the king and queen, the latter the rains and war. The king was the high priest and was responsible for performing specific rites at major religious festivals, such as the New Year Festival when gods laid out the course of events for the coming year. The people were expected to do their part by performing religious rites at cult centers, such as giving sacrificed animals and food and drink to the gods.



Figure 4.17 The Hittite Weather God Tarhunna. This stone relief made between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE depicts the Hittite weather god Tarhunna. He is holding his traditional symbols, an axe in one hand and a three-pronged thunderbolt in the

other. (credit: “God of Thunder. Hittite relief from Samal (now Zincirli)” by “Maur”/Pergamonmuseum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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3.3: Egypt's New Kingdom

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the causes and consequences of the Hyksos invasion
- Analyze the successes and failures of key New Kingdom pharaohs
- Discuss Egypt's interaction with its neighbors via immigration and trade
- Identify the political and religious innovations of Egypt's New Kingdom

During the New Kingdom period, Egyptian pharaohs reunited Upper and Lower Egypt following two centuries of foreign rule. They also ended the isolation that had been typical of the Old and Middle Kingdoms and embarked on expansionist conquests. The New Kingdom pharaohs were among the greatest warriors and builders in Egyptian history. As a result of their conquests, trade flourished with the Near East and other areas, and significant advances took place in the arts.

The Hyksos in Egypt

As centralized power in Egypt declined during the late Middle Kingdom, Egyptians were less able to enforce their borders and preserve their state's integrity. The result was that Semitic-speaking immigrants from Canaan flowed into the Nile delta. It is not entirely clear to historians what prompted these Hyksos to leave Canaan, but some suspect they were driven into Egypt by foreign invasion of their land. Others suggest the early Hyksos may have been traders who settled in Egypt and later brought their extended families and others. However it happened, by about 1720 BCE, they were so numerous in Lower Egypt that some of their chieftains began to assert control over many local areas. This transformation coincided with the onset of the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1720–1540 BCE) and the general collapse of centralized Egyptian rule.

Over the next several decades, many more Canaanite migrants made their way across the Sinai and into Lower Egypt. During this period, several Egyptian princes held onto power despite the changes occurring around them. Then, around 1650 BCE, one group of recently arrived Canaanites challenged the remaining princes, overthrew them, and assumed control of the entire delta, inaugurating an important new period in Egyptian history.

These Canaanites are often referred to as the Hyksos. While that name is a much later Greek corruption of the Egyptian *hekau khasut*, meaning "chieftains of foreign lands," it has stuck. The Hyksos ruled the delta for more than a century, from approximately 1650 to 1540 BCE. After they had been defeated, Egyptian tradition described their rule as one of wanton destruction, including the enslavement of Egyptians, the burning of cities, and the desecration of shrines. However, these descriptions are almost certainly rooted more in later New Kingdom propaganda than in reality. Like many others who came to Egypt, the Hyksos readily adopted Egyptian culture, art, language, writing, and religion. They established their own dynasty but relied on Egyptian patterns of rule and even included Egyptians in their bureaucracies.

Hyksos rule appears to have benefited Egypt in a number of ways. It was likely the Hyksos who brought sophisticated bronze-making technology into Egypt from Canaan, for example. The advantages of bronze over softer materials like copper were obvious to Egyptians, and the metal soon became the material of choice for weapons, armor, and other tools where hardness was desired. The Hyksos also introduced composite-bow technology (which made archery faster and more accurate), new types of protective armor, and most importantly, the horse-drawn, lighter-weight chariot with spoked wheels. They may have brought the horse itself to Egypt in this period, but we do not know for sure. The chariot, however, was an especially important arrival. By the 1500s BCE, horse-drawn chariots with riders armed with powerful and highly accurate composite bows had become a staple of Egyptian militaries, just as they were across all the powerful empires and kingdoms of the Near East.

During this Second Intermediate Period, the once-vast domains of Middle Kingdom Egypt were effectively divided into three parts: the Hyksos kingdom in Lower Egypt (nearest the Mediterranean), the kingdom of Kush far upriver beyond the first cataract (an area of shallow rapids), and the Theban kingdom of Upper Egypt (Figure 4.18). Occupying all of Lower Egypt, the Hyksos kingdom had access to Canaan and by extension to the rest of the Near East. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence attest to a considerable flow of trade between Lower Egypt and the Canaanites in Palestine and Syria, though the extent of the Hyksos' political power beyond Egypt was likely limited to a few city-states in Palestine, if that.

Figure 4.18 Three Kingdoms in Egypt. During the Second Intermediate Period, Egypt was effectively divided into three kingdoms, those of the Hyksos, the Kush, and the Thebans. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

In the Theban kingdom, centered on the city of Thebes, indigenous Egyptian rulers still held sway. It is possible that in the early years of their rule in Lower Egypt, the Hyksos were able to exert some indirect control over Thebes, but distance made direct rule nearly impossible. Still, the connections between the two kingdoms continued, perhaps with some intermarrying.

The Theban kings resisted Hyksos control of Lower Egypt. However, an alliance between the Hyksos and the kingdom of Kush in the far south made any effort to oust the Hyksos extremely risky. It was only beginning in the 1550s BCE that a string of Theban Egyptian rulers were able to go on the offensive against the Hyksos. After multiple failed attempts, these rulers eventually succeeded in capturing large portions of Hyksos territory and bringing the fight to the edges of Avaris, the capital of Hyksos Egypt. By approximately 1540 BCE, Pharaoh Ahmose I had broken the defenses around Avaris, destroyed the Hyksos kingdom, and reasserted Egyptian power in Lower Egypt (Figure 4.19). He then turned his attention south to Kush and east to Palestine, extending Egyptian control over these regions as well. His reign ushered in a new period of Egyptian greatness called the New Kingdom.



Figure 4.19 Ahmose I. This colorized image of a decorative feature on the blade of a ceremonial Egyptian axe shows Pharaoh Ahmose I killing a Hyksos. Ahmose's military victories ushered in Egypt's New Kingdom period. (credit: "Pharaoh Ahmose I slaying a Hyksos (axe of Ahmose I, from the Treasure of Queen Aahhotep II) Colorized per source" by Georges Émile Jules Daressy/Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte /Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Pharaohs of the New Kingdom

The New Kingdom period (c. 1550–1069 BCE) represents the pinnacle of Egyptian power and influence in the Near East. During this time, Egypt not only reconquered the territory it had lost following the collapse of the Middle Kingdom, but it also extended its reach deep into the Libyan Desert, far south into Nubia, and eventually east as far as northern Syria. This expansion made Egypt the Mediterranean superpower of its day. So it is not surprising that the pharaohs of this period are some of the best known. They

include the conqueror Amenhotep I, the indomitable Queen Hatshepsut, “the magnificent” Amenhotep III, the transformative Akhenaten, and the highly celebrated Ramesses II, also known as Ramesses the Great. Many came to power at a young age and ruled for an extended period of time that allowed for many accomplishments. They also commanded massive and highly trained armies and had at their disposal a seemingly endless supply of wealth, with which they constructed some of the most impressive architectural treasures of the entire Near East.

The New Kingdom began with the reign of Ahmose, the pharaoh who recovered not only Lower Egypt but also Nubia and Palestine. When he died in 1525 BCE, his oldest surviving son, Amenhotep I, assumed control. Amenhotep then married one of his sisters, Meritamun, as was common in this period and as the gods of Egyptian myth were believed to have done.

The rise of the early New Kingdom pharaohs coincided with the elevation of a previously minor deity, the Thebans’ patron god Amun. Respect for him merged with regard for Re, the patron of the monarchy, and he became known as Amun-Re. Amenhotep I and his successors built temples and other major public works in his honor, particularly the great Temple of Amun at Karnak. Thebes also had special importance for the New Kingdom pharaohs as the state’s religious capital and the favored royal burial place, commonly called the Valley of the Kings.

Dying without an heir, Amenhotep I was succeeded by Thutmose I, a general who may have been a distant relative. Thutmose I and his son Thutmose II both campaigned in Nubia and Syria. The father marched his armies all the way to the Euphrates River in Syria, likely as a show of force against emerging powers in the region. The son married his sister Hatshepsut, who gave birth to a daughter but not a son. So when Thutmose II died in 1479 BCE, his two-year-old son conceived by a concubine assumed the throne as Thutmose III.

Acting as regent for the infant pharaoh, Hatshepsut inaugurated a very unusual period in Egyptian history. Rather than merely rule in the background as a typical regent would, she proclaimed herself co-regent with her stepson and soon assumed the title of pharaoh. Statues of her from this period depict her wearing the pharaonic headdress and ceremonial beard and give her the broad torso more typical of a male (Figure 4.20). Such masculine features were not an attempt to obscure her femininity but rather a recognition that all the symbolic representations of Egyptian pharaohs were male. Inscriptions clearly indicated that she was a woman. She was called the “Daughter of Re,” and feminine word endings appear in some inscriptions, such as “His Majesty, Herself.”

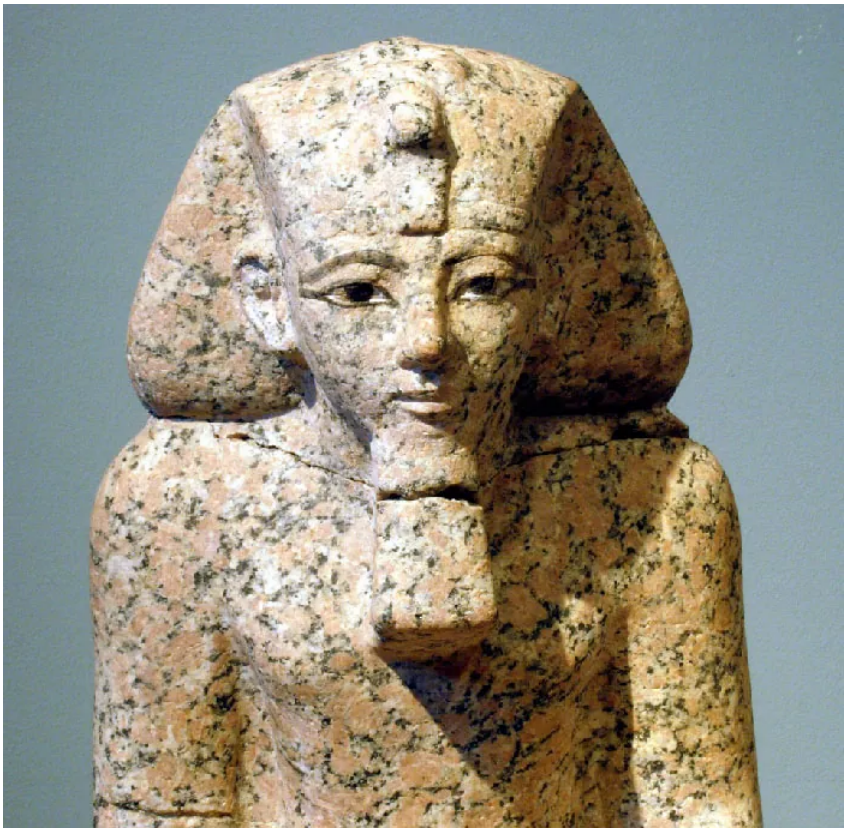


Figure 4.20 Pharaoh Hatshepsut. This granite statue of a kneeling Pharaoh Hatshepsut, carved in the fifteenth century BCE and originally painted, measures just over twenty-seven inches high. As this detail shows, the work depicts her with male features including a flat chest and a beard. (credit: “Kneeling statue of Hatshepsut” by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1923/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As Egyptian pharaohs had done for many centuries, Hatshepsut also claimed divinity. While the reasons for this long-standing belief remain unclear and may never be fully understood, this is one of the features of Egyptian culture that made it very different from that of Mesopotamian contemporaries, who usually held kings to be only viceroys of the gods, not gods themselves. Unlike earlier pharaonic claims of divinity, however, Hatshepsut’s included a detailed account of her heavenly origins in the form of a poem she had inscribed on the walls of her mortuary temple for all to see. In the poem, Amun-Re himself assumes the form of Thutmose I and, after conceiving Hatshepsut with her mother, predicts that his child will rule all Egypt and elevate it to unsurpassed glory. The poem then describes how a council of Egyptian gods proclaimed Hatshepsut’s earthly authority, and how Thutmose I recognized her divinity and named her his rightful successor.

As both a woman and a regent, Hatshepsut was prudent to thus legitimate her rule. And by all accounts, the heavenly prophecies about her reign proved accurate. For twenty-one years she ruled over a prosperous and dominant Egypt, even conducting military campaigns into Nubia and possibly southern Palestine. At one point, she sent a large fleet south into a mysterious land the Egyptians called Punt, likely coastal East Africa near modern Somalia, where her ships collected and brought back a cargo of exotic plants, animals, precious metals, and spices.

Construction of Hatshepsut’s three-tiered mortuary temple began shortly after she took the throne and likely lasted many years. The temple was built into the side of a cliff and included a series of ramps that took visitors through garden courtyards, past large obelisks and statues, and toward a shrine to Amun at the top (Figure 4.21). In the years after her death, elaborate rituals including libations, food offerings to the gods, purification rituals, recitations, and singing were performed by the priests who managed the enormous complex.



Figure 4.21 The Temple of Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut's mortuary temple is located at Deir el-Bahri, beneath cliffs near the Valley of the Kings. Its large ramps and tiers were designed to blend neatly into the cliff behind it. (credit: modification of work "Temple of Hatshepsut" by Hesham Ebaid/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

When Hatshepsut died in 1458 BCE, her stepson Thutmose III took control as sole ruler in Egypt for the first time. He was about thirty years old by then and had extensive military training. This preparation served him well, for soon he faced a Hittite and northern Mesopotamian threat to Egypt's control in Syria and Palestine. Leading his armies himself, he was able to neutralize the threats, launch a major raid across the Euphrates River, and take numerous Canaanite princes hostage so as to deter any uprisings from his vassals.

It was only late in his reign that Thutmose III began to eliminate his predecessor from history. He had Hatshepsut's statues toppled and smashed, her name removed from monuments, and references to her scrubbed from the official king lists. The evidence suggests that he harbored no ill will toward his stepmother. Instead, her erasure from the record was probably part of Thutmose's process of paving the way for his son to rule in his own right in the future, without a dominant female like his stepmother to assert control.

Amenhotep II, son of Thutmose III, continued the successful military campaigns against both Hittite and Mesopotamian threats to Egyptian influence in Palestine and Syria. His rule was followed by the short reign of Thutmose IV, likely a younger son, and the long and especially prosperous rule of Amenhotep III, known as "the Magnificent."

Amenhotep III's nearly forty-year reign in the fourteenth century BCE was a time of extended peace during which numerous monuments to Egyptian greatness were constructed. These included the sumptuous palace at Thebes, the Serapeum—a temple of the god Serapis—at Saqqara, many temples for other gods, Amenhotep's own large mortuary temple, and a great many statues of himself. His reign was also marked by an increased emphasis on the Egyptian sun god Aton, one of many manifestations of Re.

Amenhotep's palace at Thebes and the large royal barge upon which he and his queen glided along the Nile for important religious events were named for Aton. Toward the end of Amenhotep III's reign, he officially proclaimed himself the personification of Aton, and his servants greeted him as such.

Under Amenhotep III's heir Amenhotep IV, the emphasis on Aton reached its fullest extent. Amenhotep IV built a new city downriver from Thebes that he called Amarna, "the place where the solar orb is transformed." It was also known as Akhetaton. The following year, he changed his own name to Akhenaten, meaning "the transfigured spirit of the solar orb," and moved himself and his entire family to the new city. Akhenaten later closed the temples of the other major Egyptian gods and ordered representations of them destroyed and their names chiseled off monuments. The pharaoh and his wife Queen Nefertiti now became the chief priests of a new cult built around Aton (Figure 4.22).



Figure 4.22 Nefertiti. One of the most recognizable New Kingdom artifacts is a nineteen-inch limestone bust of Queen Nefertiti that was made in about 1345 BCE and discovered at Amarna, Egypt, in 1912. (credit: "Nefertiti Statue photo from Rosicrucian Museum, replica from the original at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin" by E. Michael Smith "Chiefio"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In the emerging new religion, people were instructed to worship the pharaoh. This made Akhenaten and Nefertiti intermediaries between the people and their god, eliminating the need for powerful priests like those of Amun (Figure 4.23). Many theories have been proposed to explain Akhenaten's motive for founding a new monotheistic religion, including sincere belief, but most have been discarded. It is possible he was merely attempting to revert to an older model of religious practice in which the king was the primary state deity.



Figure 4.23 Akhenaten and Nefertiti. This small stone engraving made during his lifetime shows Pharaoh Akhenaten at left, sitting beneath the Aton (the solar orb) with his queen, Nefertiti. Akhenaten cradles one of their three daughters, while Nefertiti holds the other two on her lap and her shoulder. (credit: "Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and three daughters beneath the Aten" by Richard Mortel/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Dueling Voices

The Many Strange Faces of Akhenaten

Mystery and debate have surrounded the pharaoh Akhenaten ever since archaeologists first uncovered the lost city of Akhetaton in the 1880s. He has been called a heretic, a revolutionary, a lunatic, and more. Some of the fascination comes from the theory that he gave birth to modern monotheism. Others have seen in him a way to reject monotheism entirely.

In 1910, the British Egyptologist Arthur Weigall published a biography called *The Life and Times of Akhnaton* in which he argued that the Egyptian pharaoh had experienced a "pre-Christian revelation." The book was a bestseller in Europe, drawing Christian readers eager to learn about a possible connection between their religion and Ancient Egypt.

In 1939, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, developed his own interpretation of Akhenaten's significance in his biography of Moses, *Moses and Monotheism*, arguing that Moses was in fact a priest of Akhenaten's new religion. When Akhenaten died and his religion was washed away, Moses was forced to flee Egypt. His religious ideas, according to Freud, passed to the people of Canaan and led to the monotheistic religion of Judaism.

In the 1930s and 1940s, some followers of the Nazi movement in Germany became fascinated with the life of Akhenaten. Eager to reject Christianity because of its connections of Judaism, they supported a revival of pre-Christian paganism rooted in nature worship, which they felt was more authentically German. Reading about Akhenaten and seeing his artifacts on display in the Berlin Museum, they could not help but see similarities between his religion and the pagan sun-worshipping religion they were trying to advance in Germany. Their ideas led to a number of books, like Savitri Devi's 1939 *A Perfect Man: Akhnaton, King of Egypt* and Josef Magnus Wehner's 1944 novel *Akhenaten and Nefertiti: A Tale from Ancient Egypt.*

Devi actually wrote several books about Akhenaten and his religion. Few today find her analysis worth considering, but they are a reminder of the way Akhenaten's religious movement has fascinated and influenced people thousands of years after his death.

- Try developing your own interpretation of Akhenaten's religious motivation. Consider what you learned about the actual Akhenaten as well as any other elements you want to imagine.
- Why do you think early twentieth-century writers saw what they wanted to see in the life and religion of Akhenaten? Can you think of any examples of this phenomenon today?

One reason many questions about him remain is that after Akhenaten died in about 1336 BCE, Egyptians reverted to their older religious traditions and attempted to erase this period from their history. The process was begun by his successor Smenkhkare and accelerated under the pharaoh who followed, Tutankhamun. These two young and short-lived pharaohs ushered Egypt back to the old faith, abandoning the city of Akhetaton, returning to Memphis, and beginning repairs on the temples desecrated under the previous regime. Tutankhamun also sent his armies into Nubia and Canaan to put down revolts and challenge the threat posed by the Hittites. He may have been leading one of these armies when he was killed, at the age of only eighteen or nineteen. The next pharaohs continued restoring the old religions, even scratching out references to the Aton and destroying what remained of Akhetaton.

Link to Learning

In November 1922, British archaeologist Howard Carter became the first person to enter the interior chambers of King Tutankhamun's tomb in thousands of years. The discovery of the tomb caused excitement and fascination around the world and began a years-long excavation and cataloging of its many treasures. Take a look at these colorized images of photos taken during the excavation process to see why. (Note that the excavation techniques you see in the photos were often destructive and would never be used today.)

When Horemheb, the final pharaoh of this first dynasty of the New Kingdom, died childless, a military commander named Ramesses I took control and began a new dynasty. His heirs, sometimes called the Ramesside kings, worked hard to restore Egypt to greatness through impressive military and building campaigns. The greatest pharaoh of this period, and the last great pharaoh of the New Kingdom, was Ramesses II, who ruled Egypt for more than sixty-five years from 1279 to 1213 BCE.

During his long reign, Ramesses II fought several wars with the Hittites in Syria and launched additional wars against the Libyans to the west of Egypt. The threat from the Hittites was especially pronounced in this period. In an attempt to push them back and restore Egyptian influence in Syria, Ramesses II led an army of twenty thousand into Syria to retake the important city of Qadesh. During the fighting, Ramesses himself led several chariots straight into the Hittite lines. It was only by a combination of luck and Hittite negligence that he and his forces survived and were able to ultimately beat back the enemy (Figure 4.24). While the attempt to recapture Qadesh failed, once he was safely home, Ramesses II claimed the campaign was a success.

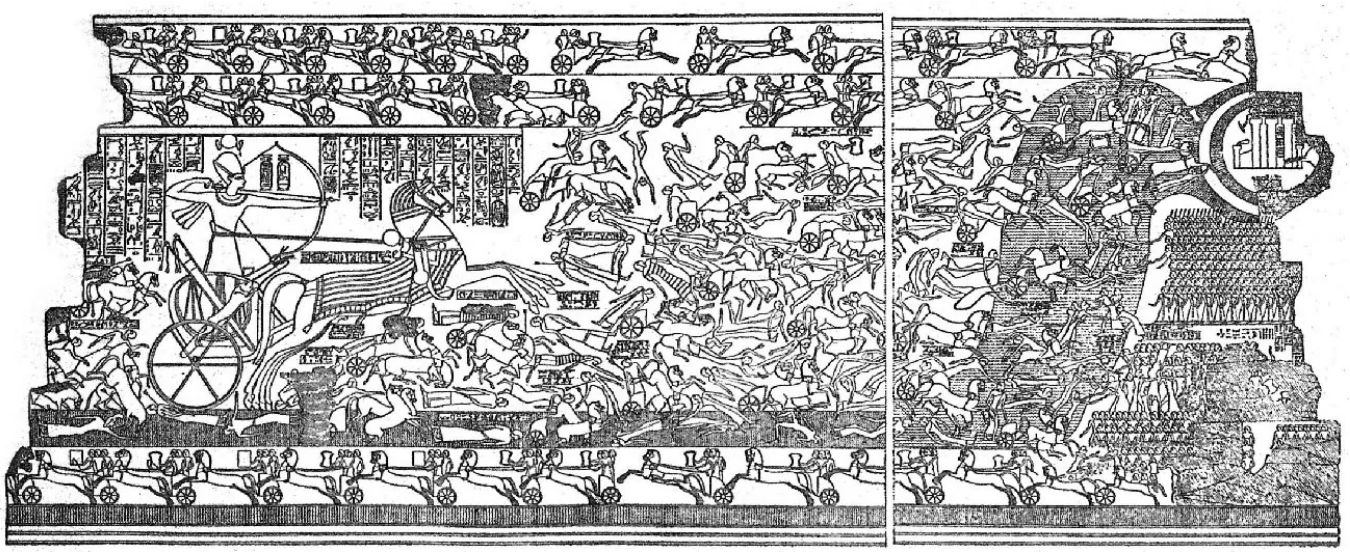


Figure 4.24 Ramses II. This sketch of an engraving on a wall of the mortuary temple of Pharaoh Ramesses II depicts him (on the left) as a larger-than-life charioteer firing arrows into the Hittite army at the Battle of Qadesh. The Egyptian records of the battle note that the pharaoh demonstrated great bravery as he led a small group of chariots into the fray. (credit: modification of work "Battle scene from the Great Kadesh reliefs of Ramses II on the Walls of the Ramesseum" by A History Of Egypt From The Earliest Times To The Persian Conquest by James Henry Breasted/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The failed attempt to retake Qadesh helped convince Ramesses to agree to a peace treaty with the Hittites in approximately 1258 BCE. The threat they continued to pose also motivated him to build a new capital in the Nile delta, much closer to Canaan. Called Pi-Ramesse ("House of Ramesses"), it included a great number of impressive monuments, some with reliefs showing the pharaoh defeating the Hittites. Beyond the building campaigns in Pi-Ramesse, Ramesses II also enlarged and beautified several additional temples in Thebes and other locations. However, the greatest monuments to his rule were the two temples he built at Abu Simbel, far to the south in Nubia. The more impressive of the two is called the Great Temple at Abu Simbel. It was carved into the side of a mountain and includes four massive seated statues of Ramesses II himself. A passageway between the two center statues leads to chambers that stretch hundreds of feet into the sandstone (Figure 4.25). The engineers who designed the temple constructed it such that twice a year, the rays of the sun would enter the building at dawn and bathe the gods placed there in light.



Figure 4.25 The Temple at Abu Simbel. In 1968, Ramesses II's thirteenth-century BCE temple at Abu Simbel was relocated because the creation of a large dam on the Nile was going to flood the original site. This photograph shows the structure as it looks today. (credit: "Abu Simbel Temple of Ramesses II" by "Than217"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Egypt's Foreign Policy

Powerful pharaohs used war beyond their borders to keep their rivals and other major powers in check. Thutmose III had led armies into both Nubia and Canaan for this purpose. In Canaan, his efforts were directed at blunting the growing influence of Mitanni, a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia. The rise of Mitanni led a number of Canaanite leaders who had previously pledged their allegiance to Egypt to instead seek Mitanni protection. By campaigning in Canaan several times, Thutmose III was able to bring the Canaanite regions back into Egypt's orbit. He also directly attacked Mitanni itself in order to weaken its control in the region. His numerous successors continued these efforts, thus ensuring Egypt's influence in Canaan. Amenhotep II brought back thousands of prisoners and a wealth of treasure from his campaigns in the region, for example. Well over a century later, Seti I and Ramesses II were still pursuing these efforts to preserve Egyptian dominance.

Pharaohs also frequently took hostages, usually members of the royal families of subject kingdoms. Thutmose III brought back a number of the sons of Canaanite kings after his campaigns, who were raised and educated in Egypt and learned Egyptian customs. Apart from serving as cultural bridges, hostages also helped strengthen Egypt's relationships with its subject realms by reducing the likelihood their fathers would rebel in the future. Another means of improving relations with other kingdoms was marriage. Thutmose IV married one of the daughters of the Mitanni king as part of an agreement intended to check the power of the Hittites.

While wars in foreign lands could pacify enemies and preserve Egypt's international influence, military campaigns also had a strong economic component. Conquering new territory meant conquering new wealth that could be used to benefit the state. Records of just one of Thutmose III's campaigns in Canaan note that the booty included more than two thousand horses and twenty

thousand sheep, almost two thousand goats, wheat, weapons, equipment, captives, and items made of precious metals, such as copper from mines in the Sinai. Descriptions of campaigns in Nubia recount similar acquisitions. Conquered peoples were also expected to provide annual tribute to the Egyptian state.

And there were benefits from maintaining control over vital trade routes and centers of commerce. The eastern Mediterranean regions of Canaan and Syria included routes connecting Mesopotamia with the sea and Cyprus. Major trading centers included Hazor and Qadesh. Megiddo was located at a mountain pass on the trade routes connecting Mesopotamia with important Canaanite cities on the way to Egypt (Figure 4.26). The value of these trade routes and commercial centers prompted Egypt to launch several campaigns into the area. Battles were fought at Qadesh and Megiddo in an effort to keep the Hittite and Mitanni kingdoms out and maintain Egyptian control over the area. These famous battles came at enormous cost in troops and wealth, and the results were mixed. The Battle of Qadesh was at best a draw. The Battle of Megiddo, fought in the fifteenth century BCE by the forces of Thutmose III, was largely an Egyptian success and led to the kingdom establishing firm control over the larger region.



Figure 4.26 Trade Routes in the Eastern Mediterranean. The regions of Canaan and Syria connected vital trade routes (shown in red) that ran from Mesopotamia to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula as well as Anatolia. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

By maintaining their influence in Canaan, Syria, and Nubia, Egyptian pharaohs preserved the state's access to vital trading resources. Tin and copper were transported from Anatolia via trading routes through Canaan. Phoenicia in northwestern Canaan was a major source of the cedar used to construct Egyptian ships. It was also through the Phoenician port city of Byblos that Egyptian papyrus frequently flowed to other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greek name for book, *biblos*, reflects this connection with Byblos and is the ancient origin of the English word "bible." Ivory, ebony, leopard skins, incense, and gold were procured in Nubia. There were also mines in the Sinai for turquoise, alabaster, and quartzite. Trade goods coming from Egypt to other parts of the world included pottery, grains, papyrus, linen, and many other items. To protect the flow of trade, Egypt provided border protection, supervised toll roads, and generally ensured the safety of merchants. Records from New Kingdom Egypt note frequent deliveries of trade goods from foreign allies such as Mitanni, Babylon, and others. They are described as gifts, but scholars believe they were almost certainly trade.

Toward the end of the New Kingdom era, Egypt's ability to maintain control over the trade routes in Canaan and Syria declined steadily. Instability in the commercial centers and banditry on the roads became more common. One travel report from the tail end of the New Kingdom (c. 1100 BCE) describes some of the problems experienced by an Egyptian envoy sent to Phoenicia to buy a supply of cedar. First he was robbed by his own crew, then he was refused the cedar he was promised in Phoenicia, and finally he was attacked by roving migrants. He appealed to officials in Egypt, but little could be done. In earlier centuries, such difficulties would have been unthinkable, but by 1100 BCE, Egypt's influence in the region was no longer strong.

Many of the problems the envoy described were symptoms of the Late Bronze Age Collapse and were out of Egypt's control. One of the consequences of this larger civilizational decline was that large numbers of migrants, such as those who attacked the envoy, were sweeping across the eastern Mediterranean bringing chaos and destruction. An Egyptian inscription from 1208 BCE described them as "coming from the sea," which has led modern scholars to refer to them as the Sea Peoples (Figure 4.27). It appears that many came from the Aegean area.

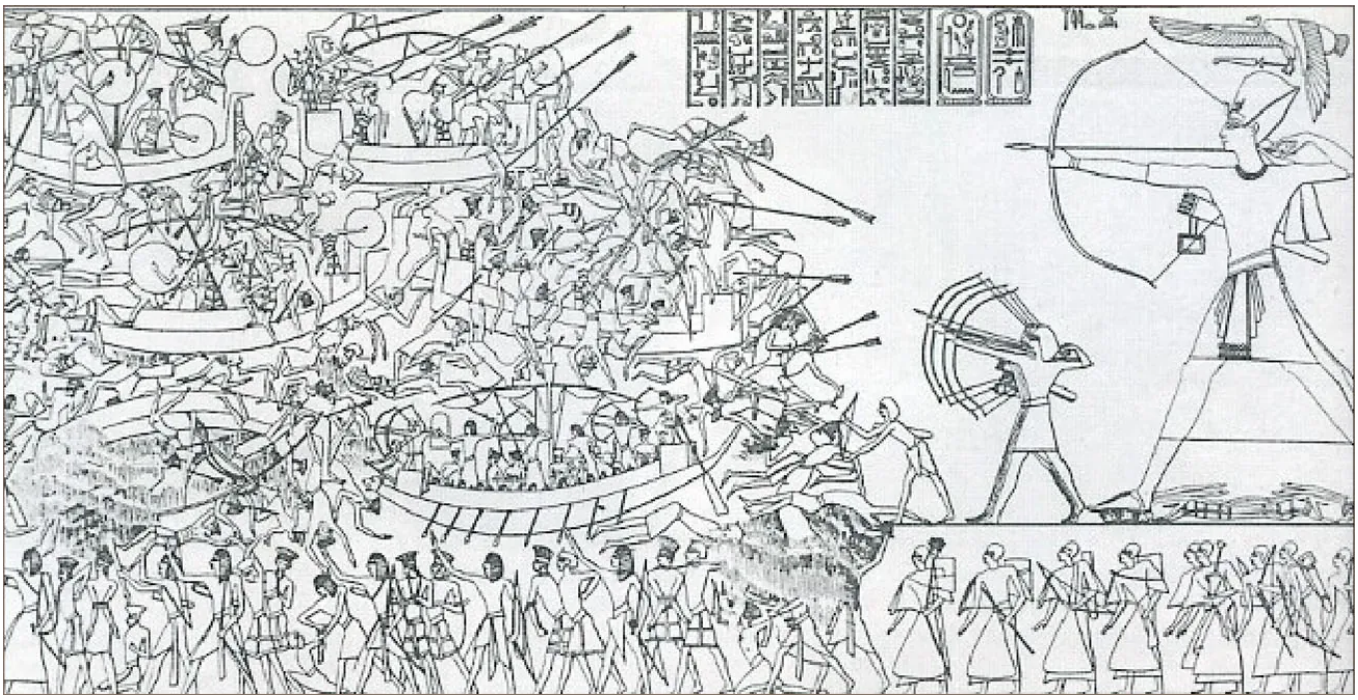


Figure 4.27 An Attack by the Sea Peoples. This redrawing of a wall relief from the Temple of Ramesses III records the arrival of a group of Sea People (on the left) and the Egyptians led by Ramesses (the larger-than-life archer on the right) preparing to defend themselves. (credit: modification of work "A depiction of the army of Ramesses III fighting the Sea Peoples" by "Seebeer"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As inscriptions from the period demonstrate, Egypt resisted the invading forces. Many of the Sea Peoples were likely killed. But many others settled in Egypt and assimilated there, just as they did across the entire eastern Mediterranean. All this disruption took a toll on the region, however. The Mycenaean kingdoms in Greece and the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia suffered greatly and collapsed. City-states across Canaan were especially hard hit. Even kingdoms far from the Mediterranean, like Assyria and Babylon, weakened during this time of troubles.

Though Egypt proved more able to withstand the dangers of the period, it did experience problems. Grain prices, for example, soared during this time. Tomb robbing became common as workers who had not been paid found other ways to support their families. At the same time the Libyans and Sea Peoples were leading their attacks in northern Egypt, Nubian subjects rose up in rebellion to Egypt's south. And the migrating Sea Peoples in Canaan greatly weakened Egypt's control of the region. By 1070 BCE, the challenges had been mounting for years, and the New Kingdom came to an end.

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3.4: The Persian Empire

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

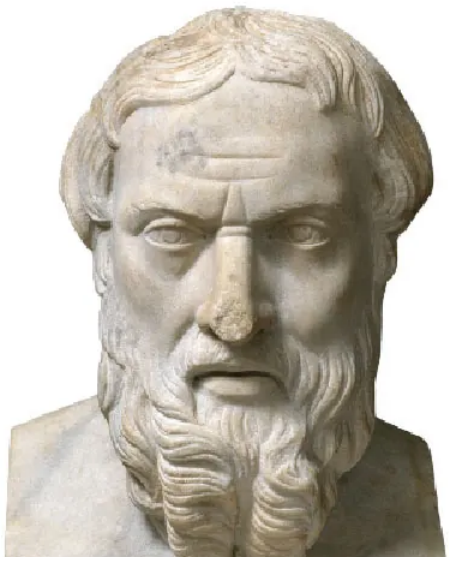
- Discuss the history of Persia through the reign of Darius I
- Describe the origin and tenets of Zoroastrianism
- Identify the achievements and innovations of the Persian Empire

In conquering Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and Egypt, the Neo-Assyrians created the largest empire the Near East had ever seen. Their dominance did not last, however, because Babylonia and Media destroyed the empire and carved up the spoils. But this proved to be a transitional period that set the stage for an empire that dwarfed even that of the Neo-Assyrians. Emerging from the area to the east of Mesopotamia, the founders of the Persian Empire proved to be both excellent warriors and efficient imperial organizers. Their kings commanded power, wealth, and authority over an area stretching from the Indus River to the Nile. Governors stationed in the many conquered regions served as extensions of the king's authority, and trade flowed along a large network of roads under Persian military protection. For two centuries, Persia was the undisputed superpower of the ancient world.

The Rise of Persia

The origins of the Persians are murky and stretch back to the arrival of nomadic Indo-European speakers in the Near East, possibly as early as 2000 BCE. Those who reached Persia (modern Iran) are often described as Indo-Iranians or Indo-Aryans. They were generally pastoralists, relying on animal husbandry, living a mostly migratory life, and using the horse-drawn chariot. The extent to which they displaced or blended with existing groups in the region is not clear. From written records of the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the ninth century BCE, we know the Assyrians conducted military campaigns against and exacted tribute from an Indo-Iranian group called the Persians. The Persians lived in the southern reaches of the Zagros Mountains and along the Persian Gulf, in general proximity to the Medes with whom they shared many cultural traits.

Much of what we know about the early Persians comes from the work of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who was born about 484 BCE (Figure 4.28). According to Herodotus, Persia was made a vassal of Media in the seventh century BCE but freed itself in the sixth century BCE under the leadership of Cyrus II, also called Cyrus the Great. Inscriptions from the period suggest that Cyrus was likely a member of the Persian royal family, the Achaemenid dynasty. Once in power, he reorganized the Persian state and its military to mirror those of the Median Empire. This step included creating divisions for cavalry, archers, and infantry and setting up special training for the cavalry. Then, in 550 BCE, just a few years into his reign, Cyrus sent his military to challenge the Medes, whereupon the Median troops revolted, handed over their king, and accepted Cyrus's rule. He then proceeded to integrate the Median elite and officials into his own government. The Median domains had become the Persian Empire.



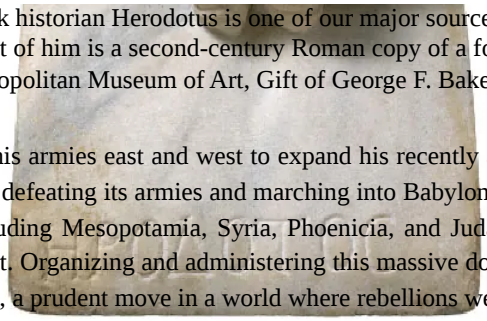


Figure 4.28 Herodotus. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus is one of our major sources for information about the Persian Empire. This roughly life-sized stone bust of him is a second-century Roman copy of a fourth-century BCE bronze statue. (credit: "Marble bust of Herodotos" by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1891/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Between 550 and 539 BCE, Cyrus sent his armies east and west to expand his recently acquired realm. In 539 BCE, he turned his attention to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, defeating its armies and marching into Babylon. His Persian Empire now incorporated the territories controlled by Babylonia, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia, and Judah, and had become the largest empire to have existed in the Near East to that point. Organizing and administering this massive domain required the use of governors, whom Cyrus generally selected from local areas, a prudent move in a world where rebellions were common.

Link to Learning

Cyrus the Great left a record of his conquest of Babylon inscribed on a clay spool about eight inches long. This artifact, now called the Cyrus Cylinder, was created in 539 BCE and promptly buried in the foundation of the city wall, to remain there until its discovery in 1879. Explore this link to the British Museum website to see a high-resolution image of the Cyrus Cylinder and a translation of its inscriptions.

Cyrus died in in battle in 530 BCE, leaving the throne and empire to his son Cambyses II. The first task for Cambyses was to continue preparing for the invasion of Egypt his father had planned. A large fleet was built in the Mediterranean and a massive land force assembled for crossing the Sinai. The invasion began in 525 BCE. The defending Egyptians were soon overwhelmed, and the pharaoh retreated up the Nile but was captured. Having now added Egypt to his already large empire, Cambyses took on the role of pharaoh, adopting the proper titles and caring for the Egyptian religious institutions. This practice of respecting local traditions was a common feature of Persian expansion and helped to win support in newly acquired areas.

Under Cambyses II, the Persian Empire stretched from the edges of India to the shores of the Aral Sea, the Aegean coast of Anatolia, and the Nile River and included everything in between. Then, just as Cambyses was reaching the height of his power, a Persian revolt broke out in 522 BCE in support of his brother Bardiya. On his way to put down the rebellion, Cambyses II died, leaving the future of the empire uncertain but allowing for the rise of possibly Persia's most famous and powerful leader, Darius I.

Darius I and the Reorganization of the Empire

The events surrounding the rebellion of Cambyses II's brother Bardiya are unclear because a handful of different accounts survive. According to Herodotus, Cambyses ordered one of his trusted advisers to secretly murder Bardiya. Since no one knew Bardiya was dead, an impostor pretending to be him launched a rebellion against Cambyses, though after several months the false Bardiya was killed in a palace coup at the hands of Darius, an army officer who claimed descent from the royal house. Afterward, since neither Cambyses nor Bardiya had sons, Darius made himself king. Other accounts differ in some ways, and some scholars have speculated that Darius invented the story about a false Bardiya in order to legitimize his own coup against the real Bardiya and take the throne.

We may never know exactly what happened, but Darius was indeed able to grasp control of the Persian Empire in 522 BCE. However, it took more than a year for him to put down the ensuing rebellions, some possibly instigated by those who refused to recognize the legitimacy of his claim to the throne. Once these had been quelled, Darius commissioned an enormous relief inscription to be made on the cliff face of Mount Behistun. It shows a dominating figure of himself facing a number of bound former rebels, accompanied by lengthy descriptions of the rebellion and, in three different languages, Darius's version of the events that led to his rise to power (Figure 4.29). To further strengthen his claim on the throne, Darius integrated himself deeply into the royal line through a number of marriages, to the daughters of Cyrus II, the widow of Cambyses II, and two of Cambyses's sisters.



Figure 4.29 The Behistun Relief. The massive Behistun Relief, more than eighty feet long and almost fifty feet high, shows a crowned Darius (on the left) with his foot on the impostor he claimed to have overthrown. Captive rebels and a narrative in three languages of Darius's version of events complete the carving. (credit: "Behistun Inscription" by "Hara1603"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Darius now set about reorganizing the empire, carving it into twenty different governing districts called satrapies (Figure 4.30). Each satrapy was administered by a royal governor called a satrap, usually a trusted Persian or Median noble. Satraps answered directly to the king, had their own courts, wielded great power, and possessed vast lands within the satrapy. They often ruled from the large cities of the regions and were responsible for ensuring that their satrapy remained pacified and submitted its allotted taxes, though there were also local rulers within the region who managed affairs related to specific ethnic or religious groups. The only area not made into a satrapy was the Persian heartland, which was governed directly by the king.



Figure 4.30 The Persian Empire. The Persian Empire under Darius I reached from the edge of India in the east to Libya in the west. To manage this large empire, Darius divided it into twenty different satrapies. (credit: modification of work “Achaemenid Empire 500 BCE” by “Cattette”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

Darius I and later kings had a number of tools at their disposal to keep the powerful satraps in line. For example, they frequently sent royal officials, known as the “eyes and ears of the great king,” to arrive unannounced and conduct audits, compiling detailed reports about how the satrapies were being governed that were sent directly to the king for review. If the reports were negative, the satraps could expect either removal or even execution at the hands of the region’s military garrison. These garrisons were used by the satraps to enforce the laws and maintain order, but they ultimately answered to the king and could discipline the satraps when necessary.

Communication between the satraps and the king was carried out through letters dictated to scribes and transmitted along royal roads. These roads constituted an impressive communication system that linked the many key cities of the empire with the Persian heartland and its cities, like Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae. While it was not new—the Neo-Assyrian Empire had its own network of roads that the Persians adopted and improved—it was a valuable tool for administering the large and complicated empire. Along the many royal roads of the empire were inns, resting places, and waystations with stables for horses. Safety was ensured by the troops stationed along the way, especially at key and vulnerable points. To move letters along the roads, a member of the army of mounted royal messengers would travel the roughly twenty miles to the first station, change horses, and continue to the next station. In this way, communication could move roughly two hundred miles in a single day.

The Past Meets the Present

Persia and the U.S. Postal Service

The Persian Empire required a sophisticated communications network to move messages across its vast territory, so it relied on speedy couriers who traveled roads first developed by the Assyrians and then improved. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus commented on Persian communications in his famous *Histories*:

> *There is nothing that travels faster, and yet is mortal, than these couriers; the Persians invented this system, which works as follows. It is said that there are as many horses and men posted at intervals as there are days required for the entire journey, so that one horse and one man are assigned to each day. And neither snow nor rain nor heat*

> *nor dark of night keeps them from completing their appointed course as swiftly as possible. The first courier passes on the instructions to the second, the second to the third, and from there they are transmitted from one to another all the way through, just as the torchbearing relay is celebrated by the Hellenes in honor of Hephaistos. The Persians call this horse-posting system the angareion.*
>
> *—Herodotus, Histories*

Herodotus was not the only ancient author to describe the Persian courier system. The biblical Old Testament Book of Esther notes that not just horses were used:

> *And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus' name, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries.*
>
> *—Esther 8:10 (KJV)*

Even today, many still marvel at the efficiency of the Persian courier system. When the chief architect for the Eighth Avenue post office in New York City came across Herodotus's description, he thought it perfect for a large inscription on the new building (Figure 4.31). His paraphrase of Herodotus is still visible there. Popularly thought of as the U.S. Postal Service's unofficial motto, it reads as follows: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."



Figure 4.31 "Neither Snow nor Rain nor Heat nor Gloom of Night." The unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service, which once also described the Persian Empire's courier system, is inscribed on the face of this New York City building, over the colonnade. (credit: modification of work "Post Office, New York City" by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division/Library of Congress)

- What purposes might the Persian courier system have served? How might the empire have functioned in the absence or breakdown of such a system?
- Why might the chief architect for the Eighth Avenue post office in New York City have selected Herodotus' description?

Building projects were another important expression of Darius's power and authority. During his reign, he undertook the construction of elaborate palaces at Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae (Figure 4.32). These were constructed and decorated by skilled workers from many different locations and reflected artistic influences from around the empire, among them fluted columns designed by Greek stonemasons, Assyrian reliefs carved by Mesopotamians, and a variety of other features of Egyptian, Lydian, Babylonian, Elamite, and Median origin. The many workers—men, women, and children—who built these palaces migrated to the construction sites and often lived in nearby villages or encampments.



Figure 4.32 Persepolis. The ruins of the city of Persepolis, situated thirty-seven miles southwest of modern-day Shiraz (in modern Iran), reveal that the site was an impressive imperial center in Darius's time. (credit: modification of work "HDR image of Persepolis, Iran" by "Roodiparse"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Explore a reconstruction of the palace complex of Persepolis as it may have appeared to a visitor in ancient Persia via the Getty Museum's Persepolis Reimagined interactive exhibit.

Major infrastructure projects were also a feature of Darius's reign. For example, he ordered the construction of a long canal that would have allowed ships to pass from the Red Sea into Egypt's Nile River and thus to the Mediterranean. It is unclear whether he actually completed it. It seems unlikely, though Herodotus insists he did. Whatever the case, that Darius attempted this massive undertaking is a testament to the power and resources the kings of Persia had at their fingertips. Other infrastructure projects included the expansion and rebuilding of the many roads that crisscrossed the empire, as well as the construction of a number of *qanats* (Figure 4.33). These were long, underground tunnels used for carrying fresh water over many kilometers, usually for irrigation, and represented a major improvement over earlier technologies. They likely had been used before the Achaemenids, but their construction expanded with the rise of Persian power.

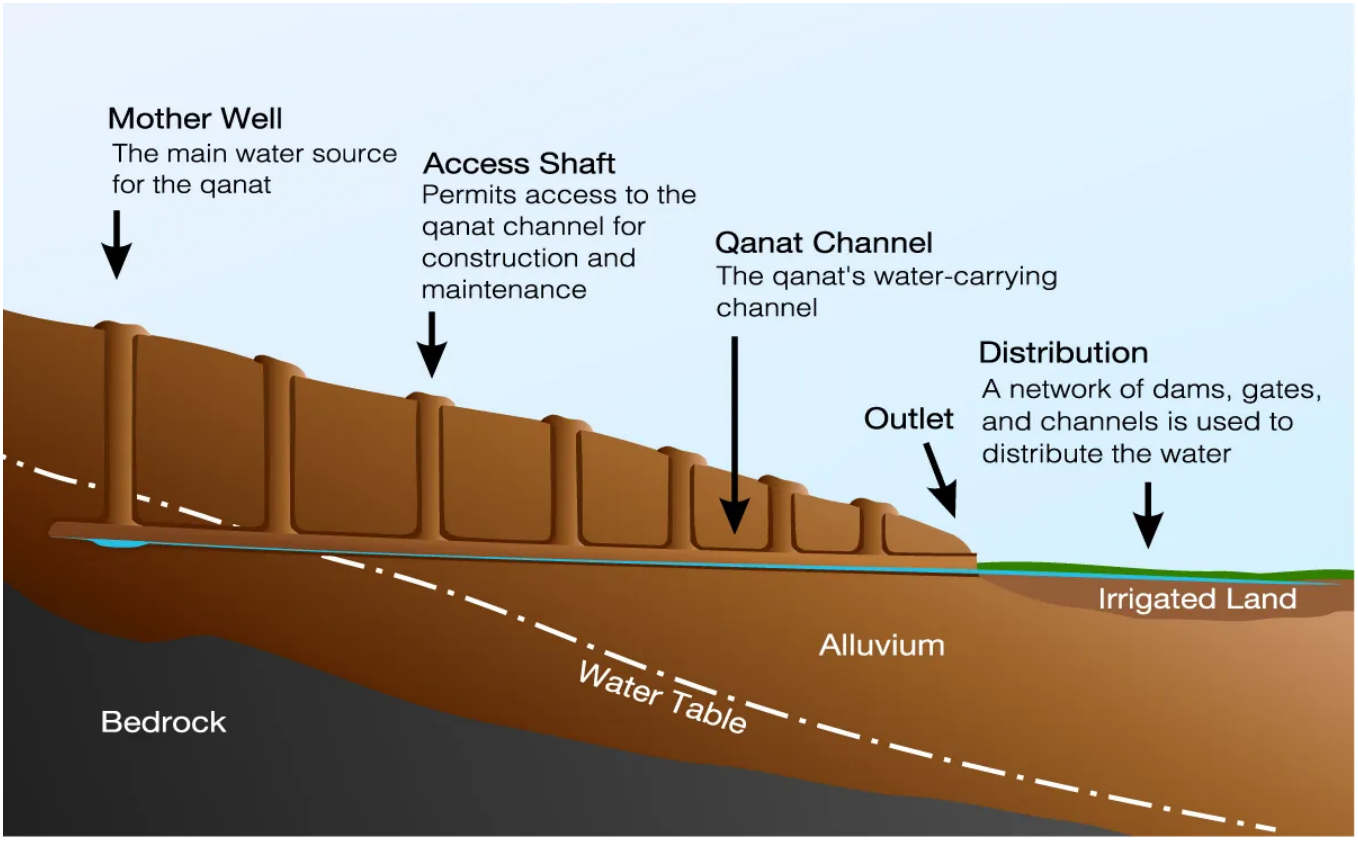


Figure 4.33 Qanats for Irrigation. The *qanats* built by Darius were designed to carry fresh water over long distances into populated areas or to irrigate land for farming. (credit: modification of work “Qanat cross section” by Samuel Bailey/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

Persian Culture and Daily Life

The social order of the Persian Empire included a number of hierarchically organized groups. At the bottom were the enslaved. While the Persians did not have a long history of using slavery before becoming a major power, it was common in the regions they conquered. Over time, the Persian nobility adapted to the practice and used enslaved people to work their land.

Next in the hierarchy were the free peasants, who generally worked the land and lived in the villages of the empire. On the next level were the various kinds of artisans, and higher still were the educated classes of scribes, imperial recordkeepers, and important merchants. And higher than all of these was the ruling order, including priests, nobles, and warriors (Figure 4.34).



Figure 4.34 Persian Recordkeeping. Thousands of clay tablets like this one from the administrative archives at Persepolis have been key to helping historians understand the way the empire functioned and was socially organized. Like the rulers of earlier Near Eastern empires, the Persians also used cuneiform. (credit: “Persepolis tablet” by “Pentocelo”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Persian king occupied a place far above and removed from these groups. As the earthly representative of the god Ahura Mazda, he expected complete submission from everyone in the empire. Those in his presence had to position themselves on the ground to show his superiority over them. Servants who came near had to cover their mouths so as not to breathe on him. His power was absolute, though he was restrained by custom and the advice of leading nobles. One of the most important of these nobles was the “Commander of a Thousand,” who managed the large court, served as a gatekeeper to any audience with the king, and oversaw the king’s personal protection service. As was the case in the Assyrian Empire, kings were not necessarily eldest sons. Rather, the current king could select his heir and frequently chose a younger son for any number of reasons.

The Persian king and his court seem not to have remained in one centralized capital. Rather, they moved periodically between the cities and regions of Babylon, Susa, Rhagae, Parthia, Ecbatana, Persepolis, and possibly others. One motive was a desire to avoid extreme weather during certain seasons, but there were also political considerations. For example, by moving across the countryside, the king made himself visible not only to important individuals in the cities but also to the many peasants in the villages that dotted the landscape. Thus, he allowed them opportunities to present him with petitions or seek his guidance.

Moving the court in this way was no easy feat, however. It required the efforts of thousands of people including officials, soldiers, religious leaders, wives, other women, and servants of all types, and the transport of horses, chariots, religious objects, treasure, and military equipment. In many ways, it was as though the state itself migrated with the seasons. The arrival of this migrating state in any major location was met with elaborate public ceremonies of greeting and welcome. Some contemporary descriptions detail how flowers and incense were laid along the city roads where the king moved. His dramatic entry was followed by the proper sacrifices to the local gods and an opportunity for the people to bring gifts to the king, such as exotic animals, jewels, precious metals, food, and wine. It was considered a great honor to present the king with a gift, and the gift-giving ceremonies served to strengthen the king’s relationship with his subjects.

The vast army of Persia had its own ceremonies and customs. Herodotus records that it was made up of a great number of subject peoples from around the empire, all with their own colorful uniforms. Military training began at a very young age and included lessons in archery, horseback combat, and hand-to-hand combat. The most talented of the infantrymen in the Persian army might hope to rise to the ranks of the Immortals, an elite, heavy-infantry combat force that served both in war and in the king’s personal guard. The larger army was made up of various units of infantry, archers, and cavalry. The largest unit was the corps, made up of ten thousand men. Each corps had a commanding officer who answered to the supreme commander. In battle, the archers would rapidly fire their arrows into the enemy as the cavalry and infantry advanced in their respective formations. Occasionally, when rebellions were put down or new territories added, the Persians deported the conquered populations elsewhere within the empire.

Because most records from the Persian Empire focus on kings, wars, the military, and high-level officials and bureaucrats, we know little about commoners. But we know that most ordinary Persians had diets of bread or mash made of barley, supplemented by figs, dates, plums, apples, almonds, and other fruits and nuts. Much more rarely, meals might also include goat, mutton, or poultry. Besides the military, the empire supported a host of other necessary occupations, such as sentinels, messengers, various types of attendants, architects, merchants, and numerous types of lower professions. The many agricultural workers grew traditional crops of the Near East, like wheat and barley, in addition to rice (brought from India) and alfalfa (for horse feed). Merchants in the Persian Empire benefited greatly from the stability created by the government and the extensive network of crisscrossing roads that connected the far-flung regions. Although long-distance trade was prohibitively expensive for most things except luxury goods, trade across short distances was apparently common.

The religion of the Persians was a tradition we describe today as Zoroastrianism. Its name comes from *Zoroaster*, the Greek pronunciation of the name of its founder, Zarathustra. Scholars today believe that Zoroaster likely lived at some point between 1400 and 900 BCE and was almost certainly a Persian priest, prophet, or both. His followers likely practiced a polytheistic religion similar in many ways to the Vedic traditions held by Indo-European speakers who migrated into India. Among Zoroastrians’ many gods were both powerful heavenly deities and more terrestrial nature gods. Ceremonies included various rituals similar to those of other polytheistic religions, such as the sacrifice of animals on outdoor altars.

Zoroaster appears to have emphasized the perpetual conflict between the forces of justice and those of wickedness. Over time, he developed supernatural personifications of these forces: Ahura Mazda was the lord of wisdom and the force of good (Figure 4.35), and Angra Mainu was the destructive spirit and the force of evil. Each was supported by lesser supernatural beings. On the side of Ahura Mazda were the *ahuras* who worked to bring good to the world, and on the side of Angra Mainu were the *daevas* who served the interests of evil.



Figure 4.35 Ahura Mazda. The Persian god Ahura Mazda was the principal source of good as understood by followers of Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion. This large stone carving of him adorns a gate at the ruins of Persepolis (in modern Iran). (credit: "Persepolis, Tripylon, eastern gate (2)" by Marco Prins/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The Persian followers of Zoroastrianism believed Ahura Mazda had created the world as an entirely good place. However, Angra Mainu was dedicated to destroying this perfection with evil, so the two forces fought for the supremacy of good or evil on Earth. The world the Persians saw around them was the product of their pitched battle. However, the fight would not last forever. At some appointed time in the future, Ahura Mazda would overcome the forces of Angra Mainu, and the followers of evil would face judgment and punishment for their crimes. It was up to humans to decide for themselves what path to follow. At the final judgment, the dead would be resurrected and made to walk through a river of fire. Those consumed by the fire were unworthy and would be condemned to torment in hell, while those who survived would live forever in a paradise with no evil.

While Zoroaster's beliefs were not readily accepted by his own people, he found protection and a following among others, and in the centuries after his death, his ideas spread and changed. For example, the Medes incorporated their own priestly class into the Zoroastrian traditions. The Achaemenids borrowed artistic traditions from the Mesopotamians to depict Ahura Mazda in the same way they styled their important gods. Later, Judeans within the Persian Empire, who were from the Canaanite kingdom of Judah and followers of Judaism, incorporated many Zoroastrian ideas into their own religious traditions. These ideas went on to influence the religions of Christianity and Islam.

The Past Meets the Present

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity may have emerged in the ancient world, but they are all still practiced today. And while in modern times these religions appear quite different, they share important similarities.

Consider these modern similarities between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Both accept the idea of a powerful god as the source of all good, the existence of evil and deceptive forces that plague the world, a final judgment that occurs when the forces of evil have been vanquished forever, and a pleasant afterlife for those who follow the path of righteousness. These similarities are not the product of random accident. Rather, the connections between Zoroastrianism and Christianity date to developments within Judaism in the centuries before the birth of Christ.

It was likely that when the Judeans were members of the Persian Empire, they became acquainted with some of the ideas of Zoroastrianism, and these ideas influenced the way they understood their own monotheistic religion. The notion that a force of evil was responsible for the many problems in the world may have been a comforting thought for those who wanted to believe that God was both all-powerful and thoroughly benevolent. The concept of a final judgment was also appealing to Judeans, who held that they were not only God's chosen people but also persecuted by the forces of evil. While these ideas begin to appear in Judean writings only in the centuries after the fall of Persia, the seeds had likely been planted much earlier through a growing familiarity with the tenets of Zoroastrianism. In the second century BCE, many followers of Judaism had come to accept the idea of a final judgment. It was this form of Judaism that ultimately influenced the fundamental tenets of Christianity.

- What do the connections between Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity suggest about the way religions borrow from each other? Can you think of other examples?
- How might modern Christianity be different had Judaism not been influenced by Zoroastrianism?

While the religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, the empire included people of different religions, including Armenians, Nubians, Libyans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Ionian Greeks, Bactrians, Judeans, and many others. Indeed, it was the Persian king Cyrus II who permitted the Judeans exiled in Babylon to return to Judah and rebuild their temple. The empire expected loyalty and the payment of tribute, but its kings were not interested in transforming their diverse peoples into Persians. Instead, they developed an imperial system that supported the maintenance of a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious empire.

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3.5: The Hebrews

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the history of the Hebrews in the context of the development of the Near East
- Explain how the Hebrew faith differed from others in the same region and time period

The Hebrews, a Semitic-speaking Canaanite people known for their monotheistic religion of Judaism or the Jewish religion, have preserved a history of their people that claims very ancient origins and includes descriptions of early leaders, kings, religious traditions, prophets, and numerous divine interventions. That history, often called the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible in the Jewish tradition and the Old Testament in the Christian tradition, has survived for many centuries and influenced the emergence of the two other major monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam. While fundamentalist Christians and Orthodox Jews hold that the Bible is both divinely inspired and inerrant, historians must scrutinize the text and the rich history it records. This study and the careful work of archaeologists in the Near East have revealed a number of problems with accepting as infallible the story as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, but research has also opened our eyes to a history that is perhaps even more interesting than the account traditionally preserved.

The History of the Hebrews

The history of the Hebrews recorded in the Bible starts with the beginning of time and the creation of the first man, Adam. However, it is with the life of the patriarch Abraham that we begin to see the emergence of the Hebrews as a distinct group. Abraham, we are told, descended from Noah a thousand years before, and Noah himself descended from Adam a thousand years before that. Relying on the ages and generations referenced in the Hebrew Bible, we can deduce that Abraham was born around 2150 BCE in the Mesopotamian city of Ur. At the age of seventy-five, he left this city and traveled to the land of Canaan in the eastern Mediterranean. There Abraham and his wife Sarah had their first son together, Isaac. Isaac then had a son, Jacob, and Jacob gave birth to twelve sons. From these twelve sons, the traditional Twelve Tribes of Israel descend (Figure 4.36).



Figure 4.36 Biblical Abraham. The Bible explains that Abraham migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan, as represented in this nineteenth-century painting by a Hungarian artist, and there he eventually had children and grandchildren. (credit: "The Departure of Abraham" by Hungarian National Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While this chronology explains how the Hebrews found themselves in Canaan, there is little to support it. There are no archaeological sites we can reference, and the only evidence we have for Abraham, his trip from Mesopotamia, and his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren comes from the Hebrew Bible. This has led some to suspect that the stories of Abraham and his family may have been developed much later than the Bible suggests. And in fact, historians have traced the story of Abraham to sources written down between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE. It is possible that Abraham was a historical person and part of an ancient migration recounted for centuries in oral form, but without additional records or archaeological discoveries that attest to his existence, we cannot know for sure.

The Hebrew Bible notes that Joseph, one of Abraham's twelve great-grandsons, ended up in Egypt. Later, around 1800 BCE based on the biblical chronology, Joseph's family joined him, and his descendants lived there for several generations. During this long time in Egypt, the Bible explains that the descendants of Joseph experienced increasingly poor treatment, including being enslaved by the (unnamed) Egyptian pharaoh and put to work on building projects in the Nile delta (Figure 4.37). Later, the pharaoh decided to kill all the male Hebrew children, but one was saved from the slaughter by being hidden in a basket to float down the Nile. He was discovered by the pharaoh's daughter, who named him Moses and raised him among the Egyptian royalty as her own.



Figure 4.37 The Hebrews in Egypt. The Bible explains that, as represented in this monumental nineteenth-century painting by the English artist Edward Poynter, the Hebrews were enslaved and oppressed in Egypt. (credit: "Israel in Egypt" by Guildhall Art Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Bible continues the story by explaining that the adult Moses discovered who he actually was and demanded that the pharaoh release the Hebrews and allow them to return to Canaan. After experiencing a number of divine punishments issued by the Hebrew god, the pharaoh reluctantly agreed. The Hebrews' flight from Egypt included a protracted trek across the Sinai desert and into Canaan, during which they agreed to worship only the single god Yahweh and obey his laws. This period of their history is often called the Exodus, because it records their mass migration out of Egypt and eventually to Canaan. Once in Canaan, Moses's general Joshua led several military campaigns against the inhabitants, which allowed the Hebrews to settle the land.

The details in the biblical account of the Hebrews' life in Egypt and their exodus from that kingdom have led some scholars to associate these stories with the period of Hyksos rule. It was then, during the Second Intermediate Period, that the Canaanites flooded into the Nile delta and took control, and it may be that the story of Joseph and his family entering Egypt preserves a memory of that process. The exact time of the exodus from Egypt has been difficult for historians to determine for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the Bible does not name the Egyptian pharaohs of the Exodus period.

Yet some features of the biblical account indicate there was in fact some type of exodus. For example, Moses's name is Egyptian and not Hebrew, suggesting he came from Egypt. The Bible also names the two midwives who traveled with the group, leading

some scholars to conclude there was some oral tradition about a very small group that may have crossed the Sinai into Canaan, though not the very large group described in the Bible. As for the story of the conquests of Joshua, the archaeological record simply does not support this. Even at the site of Jericho, extensive archaeological work has been unable to prove that the city was destroyed when and in the way the Bible describes. This absence of strong evidence has led most to conclude that there likely was no conquest, and that there was already a population of Hebrews in Canaan who were later joined by a smaller group from Egypt.

In Their Own Words

What Is in a Name?

Without archaeological or other evidence, historians have had to rely on the Hebrew Bible for clues about the Exodus. One possible hint comes from the Bible's book of Exodus, which describes the birth of Moses, his mother's effort to save him from slaughter, and his discovery and adoption by the pharaoh's daughter (Figure 4.38).



Figure 4.38 The Infant Moses. This 1904 Anglo-Dutch painting called *The Finding of Moses* represents the biblical account of the pharaoh's daughter discovering the infant Moses floating in a basket on the Nile. (credit: "The Finding of Moses" by Lawrence Alma-Tadema/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

> *And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off, to witness what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened*

> *it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children. Then said his [Moses's] sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.*
>
> *—Exodus 2:1-10 (KJV)*

As this story explains, the pharaoh's daughter named Moses to reflect the fact that she "drew him out of the water." Some scholars believe this phrase is a reference to the Hebrew word *mashah*, meaning to "draw out," which sounds similar to the Hebrew pronunciation of Moses, *Mosheh*. That explanation would have made sense to Hebrew readers of the Bible, but it does not make sense that an Egyptian princess would speak Hebrew. While this problem makes it difficult to take the story seriously as evidence, it does raise an interesting question.

Is the biblical account actually an attempt to explain a Hebrew man's name that was not Hebrew but Egyptian? In Egyptian, Moses means "child of." It would have been part of a larger name such as Thutmose, which means "child of [the god] Thoth." The fact that Hebrew tradition tried to explain his Egyptian name suggests to some that Moses may have been a real person with Egyptian heritage. That, in turn, suggests there is some validity to the Exodus story itself.

- Does the scholarly interpretation of the name Moses as Egyptian in origin seem credible to you? Why or why not?
- What does this story reveal about family relationships in the period?

The biblical book of Judges describes how the Hebrews moved into the hills of Canaan and lived as members of twelve tribes. In the book of Samuel, we hear how they faced oppression from the Philistines, one of the many Sea Peoples groups. To better defend themselves against the Philistines, the Hebrews organized themselves into a kingdom they called Israel. Their first leader, Saul, became king around 1030 BCE but failed to rule properly. The second king, David, not only ruled effectively but also was able to drive back the Philistines.

The Hebrews, properly referred to as Israelites in this period because of their formation of the Kingdom of Israel, now entered a golden age in their history. David suppressed the surrounding kingdoms, made Jerusalem his capital, and established a shrine there to the Israelite god Yahweh. This more organized kingdom was then left to David's son Solomon, who furthered the organization of Israel, made alliances with surrounding kingdoms, and embarked on numerous construction projects, the most important of which was a large temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem.

Historians call the period of these three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—the united monarchy period. Archaeological work and extrabiblical sources support many biblical claims about the era. For example, there was a threat to the Hebrews from the Philistines, who were likely one of the many groups of migrants moving, often violently, around the eastern Mediterranean during the period of the Late Bronze Age Collapse. We have Egyptian and other records of these migrants, some specifically mentioning the Philistines by name. It seems likely that the founding of Israel was a response to this threat.

As for the existence of Saul and David, things are less clear. The Bible provides several conflicting accounts of how these two men became king. For example, Saul is made king when he is found hiding among some baggage, but also after leading troops in a dramatic rescue. Similar confusion surrounds David, though it seems clear he became an enemy of Saul at some point and was able to make himself king. Despite these contradictions, there is one piece of archaeological evidence for the existence of King David. The Tel Dan stele discovered in the Golan Heights in the 1990s makes reference to the "house of David," meaning the kingdom of David (Figure 4.39). However, no similar archaeological evidence has been unearthed for David's son Solomon. Indeed, evidence of Solomon's most famous achievement, the building of the first temple in Jerusalem, has yet to be discovered. However, we have

strong archaeological evidence for some of his other public works projects, such as the three-thousand-year-old gates discovered at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo.



Figure 4.39 Evidence for the Existence of David? This stone fragment from the Tel Dan stele dates from the ninth century BCE and was discovered in the 1990s. It includes an inscription that reads “house of David,” making it the only non-biblical source attesting to the existence of King David. (credit: modification of work “Aramaic Inscription on Basalt Monument, Dan, 9th Century BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0)

After the death of Solomon, the period of the united monarchy came to an end, and Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This inaugurated the period of the divided monarchy (Figure 4.40). Jerusalem remained the capital of Judah, while Samaria was the capital of Israel. The northern kingdom was the larger and wealthier of the two and exerted influence over and sometimes warred with Judah. The biblical account often puts the kings of the northern kingdom in a negative light, noting that they abused their subjects and incorporated elements of foreign religious traditions in their worship of Yahweh.

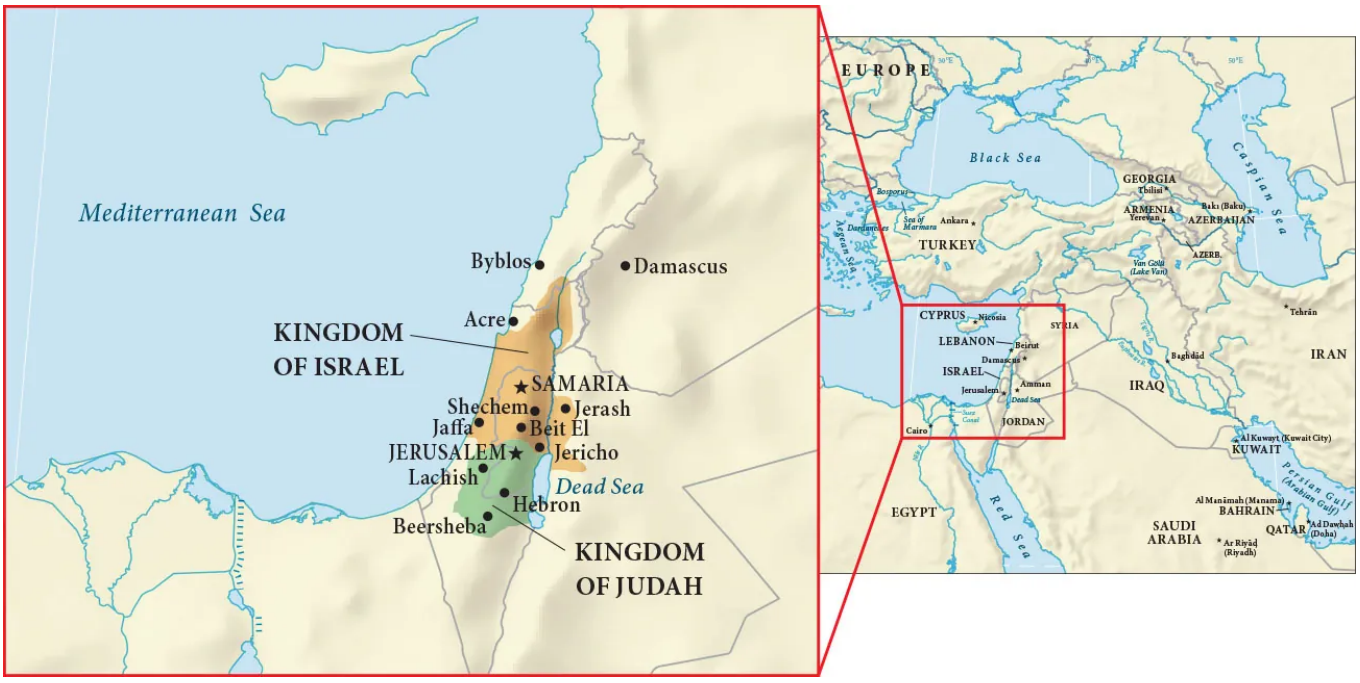


Figure 4.40 The Divided Monarchy. After the reign of Solomon, the united monarchy of the Israelites split into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.(CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its expansion into Canaan, Israel and Judah entered a new era under foreign domination within the Assyrian-controlled Near East. Anti-Assyrian sentiment in both kingdoms and the Neo-Assyrians' desire to control the eastern Mediterranean eventually led to multiple Assyrian attacks on Israel. The most devastating occurred in 722 BCE, when thousands of Israelites were deported to other parts of the empire, as was the Assyrians' custom.

Prophets in Judah interpreted the destruction of Israel as punishment for its having veered from the covenant with Yahweh. They called for religious reforms in Judah in order to avoid a similar fate. While Judah was incorporated into the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it avoided the destruction experienced by Israel. However, the defeat of Assyria by the Neo-Babylonians brought new challenges to Judah. Resistance to Babylon led to punishments and forced deportations in 597 BCE, and finally to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BCE.

The many Judeans deported to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem were settled in Mesopotamia and expected to help repopulate areas that had been devastated by wars. Many assimilated into Babylonian culture and became largely indistinguishable from other Mesopotamians. Some, however, retained their Judean culture and religious beliefs. For these Judeans, the Babylonian exile, as it was called, was a time of cultural and religious revival. They edited various earlier Hebrew writings and combined them into a larger work, thus giving shape to the core of the Hebrew Bible. Finally, with the rise of the Persian Empire and its conquest of Babylonia, the Persian king Cyrus the Great permitted the unassimilated Judeans to return to Judah. They went in two major waves over the next few decades and began a process of reconstruction that eventually included the rebuilding of Yahweh's temple at Jerusalem.

The Culture of the Hebrews

The most salient feature of Hebrew culture during this period was its then-unusual monotheism. The Bible suggests this tradition began with Abraham, who was said to have entered into a covenant with Yahweh as far back as 2100 BCE. With the emergence of Moses in the Bible, Hebrew monotheism really began to take shape. As the Bible explains, during the exodus from Egypt, Moses was given the laws directly from Yahweh, including the command that only Yahweh be worshipped. This account suggests that pure monotheism was commonly practiced by the Hebrews from that time forward. Yet closer inspection of the biblical stories reveals a much more complicated and gradual process toward monotheism.

For example, the first of the commandments given to Moses by Yahweh demands that the Hebrews "have no other gods before me." This language implies that there are in fact other gods, but those gods are not to be worshipped. In other places in the Bible,

God is referred to as plural or occasionally as part of an assembly of gods. This textual evidence likely preserves small elements of the earlier Canaanite polytheistic religious traditions. These include the veneration of El, the head of the pantheon and often associated with Yahweh, and of Yahweh's consort Asherah, the storm god Baal, the fertility goddess Astarte, and many others. Archaeologists' discoveries of temples and figurines representing these gods attest to the fact that they were worshipped in some form well into the eighth century BCE.

Many portions of the Bible describe how the Hebrews frequently fell away from Yahweh and back into their polytheistic traditions. This backsliding is usually condemned in the Bible and occasionally results in efforts by biblical heroes to restore Moses's covenant with God. King Hezekiah of Judah (727–697 BCE), for example, conducted a cleansing campaign against unauthorized worship around his kingdom. He removed local shrines, destroyed sacred monuments, and smashed cult objects. His son, King Manasseh, however, restored some of these cultic practices and shrines. Setting aside the bias of the Bible's writers, Manasseh may have been attempting to rescue long-standing religious traditions that had been under assault by his reform-minded father. However, as early as the mid-seventh century BCE, the religious reformers who promoted the centralized worship of Yahweh and obedience to the laws of Moses had clearly gained the upper hand. Their interpretation of Hebrew history and religion was then on the rise.

The backsliding theme of the Hebrew Bible was partly a way for its writers to account for the vestiges of Canaanite religious practices that did not fit neatly with their view of the Hebrews as having been monotheistic from the time of Moses. The abandonment of Yahweh accounted for the disasters that befell the Hebrews in Israel and Judah, especially the destruction of the temple and forced deportation to Babylon. Neo-Assyria and Neo-Babylonia were merely tools, the biblical writers and the prophets they record attest, used by Yahweh to compel the Hebrews to follow the correct path or face punishment. This version of Israelite history was kindled and strengthened during the Babylonian exile, when the core portion of the Hebrew Bible was being edited and assembled.

By the time the Judeans were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, the basic framework of what we understand today as Judaism had emerged and been largely accepted. The Jews (or people from Judah) were expected to worship only Yahweh, live moral lives consistent with his dictates, and closely follow the laws of Moses. For example, they were prohibited from murdering, stealing, and committing adultery. They were barred from consuming specific foods such as pork, shellfish, insects, and meat that had been mixed with dairy. Food had to be properly prepared, which included ritual slaughter for animals. Jewish people were also prohibited from working on the seventh day of the week and were compelled to treat wives with respect and give to charity, among many other acts. And of course there were important rules about the worship of Yahweh, including loving him, fearing him, emulating him, and not profaning his name.

Since the Hebrews could trace their origins back to agricultural clans, a number of the laws of Moses dealt with agricultural issues, like prohibitions against eating ripe grains from the harvest before they are made into an offering. The festival of Sukkot, meaning "huts," was a harvest festival when Jewish people were expected to erect huts, possibly as a way to remember the time when they were primarily agriculturalists. However, as the Hebrews grew in number and began living in cities and adopting urban occupations, these agricultural traditions were relegated primarily to symbolic religious practice. In cities, Jewish people found economic opportunities as craftspeople, traders, and merchants. As Jerusalem grew in the centuries after the Babylonian exile, their religion became ever more adapted to urban life.

At the center of urban life in Jerusalem was the temple, completed around 515 BCE (Figure 4.41). It included courtyards as well as an enclosed sanctuary with altars and a special location kept in total darkness, referred to as the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh was present. In the temple, the priests organized various religious festivals and performed elaborate rituals, including special sacrifices of animals supplied by worshippers seeking the favor of Yahweh.



Figure 4.41 The Second Temple. This contemporary model of the Second Temple complex in Jerusalem shows the way it would have looked after extensive expansions were completed in the first century BCE. (credit: “Second Temple” by “Ariely”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

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3.6: Key Terms

Babylonian exile
the deportation of Judeans to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem

chattel slavery
a form of slavery in which one person is owned by another as a piece of property

Exodus
the mass migration of Hebrews out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses

Hebrew Bible
the holy book that, according to Jewish tradition, tells the history of the Hebrew people

Iron Age
the period beginning around 1200 BCE when iron became the preferred material for manufacturing tools and weapons

Ramesside kings
the line of kings that ruled New Kingdom Egypt following the reign of Ramses I

satrapy
one of twenty governing districts in Persia administered by royal governors called *satraps*, who answered directly to the king

vassal state
a state or kingdom that is nominally independent in the running of its internal affairs but must submit to the demands of a dominating empire and usually provide tribute to it

Zoroastrianism
the religion of the ancient Persians, named for its founder Zarathustra, pronounced *Zoroaster* in Greek

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3.7: Section Summary

4.1 From Old Babylon to the Medes

After the challenges to Mesopotamian civilization created by the invasions of the Amorites and Elamites, a succession of new empires emerged. In the 1700s BCE, King Hammurabi transformed Babylon from a minor city-state to the center of a vast empire. At the start of the 1500s BCE, the Hittites exploded out of Anatolia, sacking Babylon and later competing with Egypt for supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. During the Iron Age that followed, the Near East underwent an even deeper transformation as the Neo-Assyrians created the first empire to control both Mesopotamia and Egypt. Then, at the end of the seventh century BCE, a resurgent Babylonia allied with the Median Empire to destroy the Neo-Assyrian Empire and carve up the spoils.

Each empire controlled large territories that were home to diverse peoples, religions, and daily practices, often adopted from older civilizations and shaped to suit their own needs and interests.

4.2 Egypt's New Kingdom

During the Second Intermediate Period, Egyptian influence dwindled to only the region around Thebes. Semitic-speaking immigrants from Canaan called the Hyksos flowed into the Nile delta and eventually established control there, bringing improved bronze-making technology, the composite bow, and the horse-drawn, lighter-weight chariot.

The first kings of the Egyptian New Kingdom drove out the Hyksos and extended their own influence into Nubia. Pharaohs like Thutmose III led their armies into Canaan and Syria to halt rivals like the Hittite kingdom and Mitanni. The New Kingdom also saw the rise of the cult of Amun-Re in Thebes and Akhenaten's revolutionary transformations. Akhenaten and Ramesses II built new cities as testaments to their greatness, and many others like Hatshepsut commissioned elaborate tombs, temples, and monuments. These powerful pharaohs extended their influence into Nubia, Canaan, and Syria through a number of military campaigns that also allowed Egypt to control vital trade routes to Mesopotamia. After centuries of greatness, however, the New Kingdom's power declined, hastened by invasions, the loss of territory, and deteriorating foreign influence, until finally the kingdom fell.

4.3 The Persian Empire

According to Herodotus, Cyrus the Great led the Persians to overthrow the Median dynasty and then by 539 BCE to defeat the Neo-Babylonians. Cyrus's successor Cambyses II extended Persia's control over Egypt and assembled a vast empire that stretched from the edges of India to the Nile River. When Darius I rose to power, he reorganized the empire into twenty districts called satrapies, each with its own governor or satrap, and oversaw a number of public works projects such as elaborate palaces and *qanats* for carrying fresh water over many kilometers.

The kings of Persia were honored as the earthly representatives of the Persian god Ahura Mazda and commanded a large army of subject peoples from around the empire. The religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, which saw the world as the field of competition between the forces of good and evil and predicted a final judgment after evil had been conquered. But the empire included numerous ethnicities and followers of many religions, including the Judeans with their own unique monotheistic religious tradition.

4.4 The Hebrews

The history of the Hebrew people as recorded in the Hebrew Bible tracks their emergence in Canaan, their oppression in and exodus from Egypt, their construction of a united monarchy, and their many conflicts among themselves and with empires like Neo-Assyria and Neo-Babylonia. But the archaeological record and various portions of the Bible cast some doubt on a number of aspects of this general story. For example, archaeology does not support the occurrence of Joshua's conquest of Canaan after the Exodus, though at least some of King Solomon's building projects have been discovered in sites like Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo. And the stories of Hebrews migrating to Egypt may preserve much older traditions related to the arrival of the Hyksos there.

The Bible also describes the monotheistic worship of Yahweh, the definitive characteristic of the Hebrews. But contrary to what the Bible suggests, this religious practice did not arise fully formed. Rather, it developed over centuries and under unique circumstances and geopolitical pressures. By the time the Persian Empire extended its domination across the Near East, the religion

of Judaism as we know it today was starting to take shape. It demanded absolute obedience to Yahweh and his many laws, including specific dietary restrictions. And the worship of Yahweh was centralized in the temple at Jerusalem.

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3.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What Near Eastern empire was centered in Anatolia?

a. Old Babylonian Empire
b. Neo-Babylonian Empire
c. Hittite Empire
d. Neo-Assyrian Empire

2.
What was the purpose of the Neo-Assyrian practice now called “calculated frightfulness”?

a. to settle depopulated lands
b. to demonstrate the cost of rebellion
c. to appease the gods
d. to acquire tin

3.
What were the four primary social classes in Neo-Assyrian society?

a. nobles, professionals, peasants, the enslaved
b. nobles, farmers, bankers, peasants
c. kings, scribes, landowners, the enslaved
d. kings, farmers, priests, the enslaved

4.
What did the gift-giving ceremonies carried out between empires by their ambassadors demonstrate?

a. good will
b. hostile intentions
c. military might
d. divine support

5.
What method did ancient city-states and empires use to acquire territory through peaceful means?

a. tribute
b. intermarriage
c. espionage
d. war

6.
Where did the Hyksos people come from?

a. Canaan
b. Nubia
c. Assyria
d. Babylonia

7.
What Egyptian pharaoh completed the task of driving the Hyksos from the Nile delta?

a. Seqenenre Tao II
b. Kamose
c. Hatshepsut
d. Ahmose

8.
To what now-mysterious place did Queen Hatshepsut send an expedition to gather exotic plants, animals, precious metals, and spices?

a. Punt
b. Anatolia
c. Libya
d. Canaan

9.
Whom did Akhenaten want the people of Egypt to worship exclusively?

a. Aton
b. Re
c. Amun
d. the pharaoh

10.
What Persian king conquered the Neo-Babylonians?

a. Cyrus II
b. Cambyses II
c. Darius I
d. Bardiya

11.
According to Zoroastrianism, what happens to people when they die?

a. They go to heaven.
b. They sleep until final judgment.
c. They become gods.
d. They are reborn as animals.

12.
After Darius I's reorganization, who controlled the individual governing regions of the empire?

a. priests
b. Judeans
c. generals
d. satraps

13.
What happened to the Judeans when they were attacked by the Neo-Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE?

a. They were deported to Babylon.
b. They fled to Egypt.
c. They became Phoenicians.
d. They became allies of Persia.

14.
According to the Hebrew Bible, where did Abraham originally come from?

a. Canaan
b. Egypt
c. Mesopotamia
d. Anatolia

15.
Which of the following is consistent with the laws God gave to Moses?

a. eating pork
b. eating shrimp
c. worshipping only Yahweh
d. worshipping only Ahura Mazda

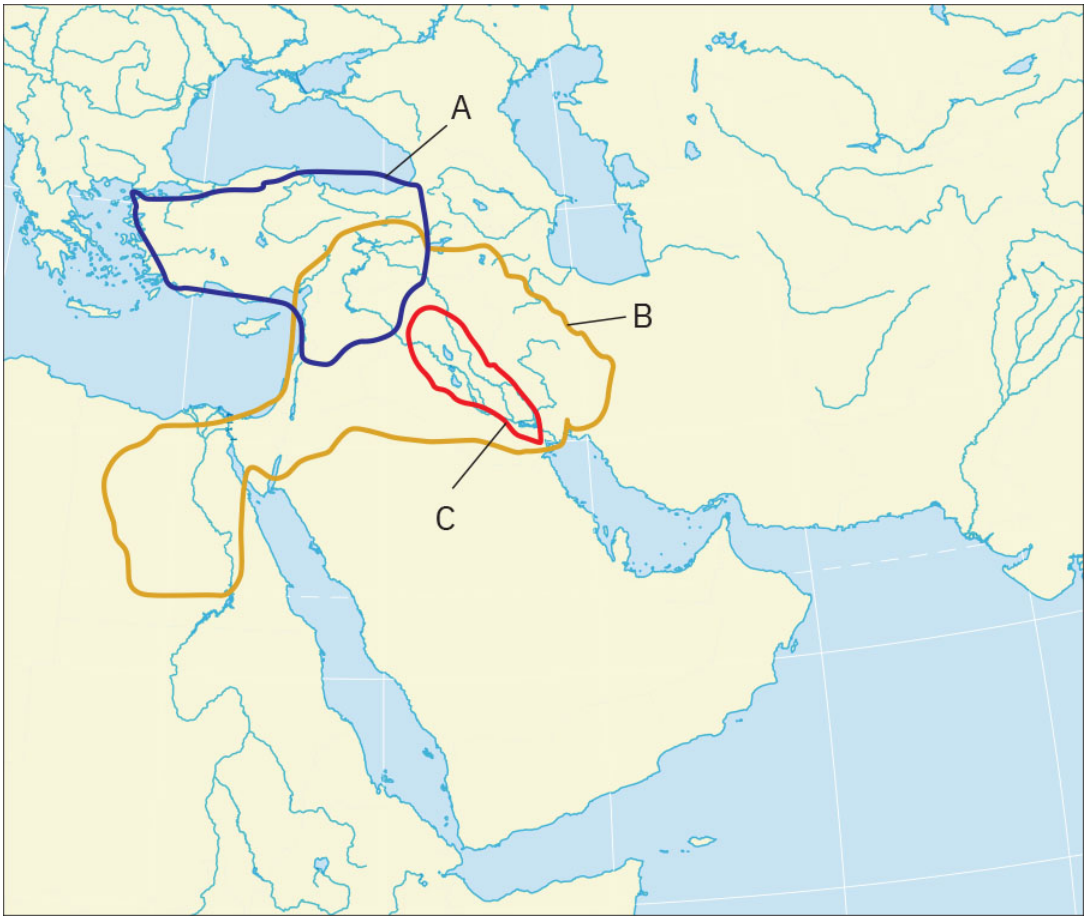
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3.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.

Use the map provided to identify the following empires at their height: Hammurabi's Empire, the Hittite Empire, the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Match A, B, and C to the respective empire.



2.

What led to the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the late seventh century BCE?

3.

What methods did Near Eastern kingdoms, city-states, and empires use to gather intelligence about their neighbors, rivals, and vassals?

4.

What were the consequences of the Hyksos migrations?

5.

How did Egypt maintain its influence in Canaan during the New Kingdom?

6.

Describe the scale of the Persian Empire during the reign of Darius I.

7.

What are some similarities between Christianity and Zoroastrianism?

8.

What evidence supports the existence of the united monarchy of Israel?

9.

How did the Babylonian exile affect the faith of the Judeans?

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3.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
What role did war play in the expansion and maintenance of the major Near Eastern empires? How is this strategy similar to or different from the way countries create and maintain power today?
2.
How was the relationship between the people of the ancient Near East and their gods similar to or different from religious practices today?
3.
Why might someone want to become an ambassador or a spy in the ancient Near East?
4.
What made the New Kingdom pharaohs successful?
5.
Why were some New Kingdom pharaohs removed from the historical record, and by whom?
6.
If you were the king of a vassal state in the Persian Empire, would you have considered rebellion? Why or why not?
7.
What do you think best explains why the Persian Empire was successful?
8.
What role do you think religious texts should play in the study of history, and why?
9.
The narrative of the Hebrew Bible includes many stories about migration. Why do you think migration was an important theme for the Hebrews?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Asia in Ancient Times

4.1: Introduction
4.2: Geography of East Asia
4.3: Ancient China
4.4: The Steppes
4.5: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia
4.7: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire
4.8: Key Terms
4.9: Section Summary
4.10: Review Questions
4.11: Check Your Understanding Questions
4.12: Application and Reflection Questions

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4.1: Introduction



Figure 5.1 Harappa: A Doorway to Trade. This intricately painted cooking vessel is from the ancient city of Harappa, in today's Pakistan near the Ravi River. Harappan ways left an indelible mark on Indian culture. Featuring standardized weights and measures, uniform bricks, and even indoor plumbing, Harappa and the city of Mohenjo-Daro were doorways to trade, to waves of human migration, and to agriculture flowing from Egypt and Mesopotamia to the rest of Asia. (credit: modification of work "Harappa Vessel - 1-8harappanjar" by Prof Grossetti/Flickr, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

5.1 Ancient China
5.2 The Steppes
5.3 Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
5.4 Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

Ancient Asia was dominated by two civilizational poles, one centered in today's India and the other to the east, across the Asian landmass in China. Within both these zones developed impressive cities, kingdoms, and even empires whose commercial might, religion, and technology shaped the lives of Asians for thousands of years (Figure 5.1). Other Asians—traveling peoples of the steppes—acted as conduits of trade and exchange as they brought goods and ideas from one end of the continent to the other.

The same was true far to the east and the south. There, groups that became the Koreans and Japanese, as well as others who arrived in Southeast Asia via migration and trade, also carved out civilizations, smaller societies that influenced their larger neighbors in China and India. At this time, Asia was a region woven together by networks of traveling monks, nomadic peoples, oceanic and overland trade, and shared writing systems.

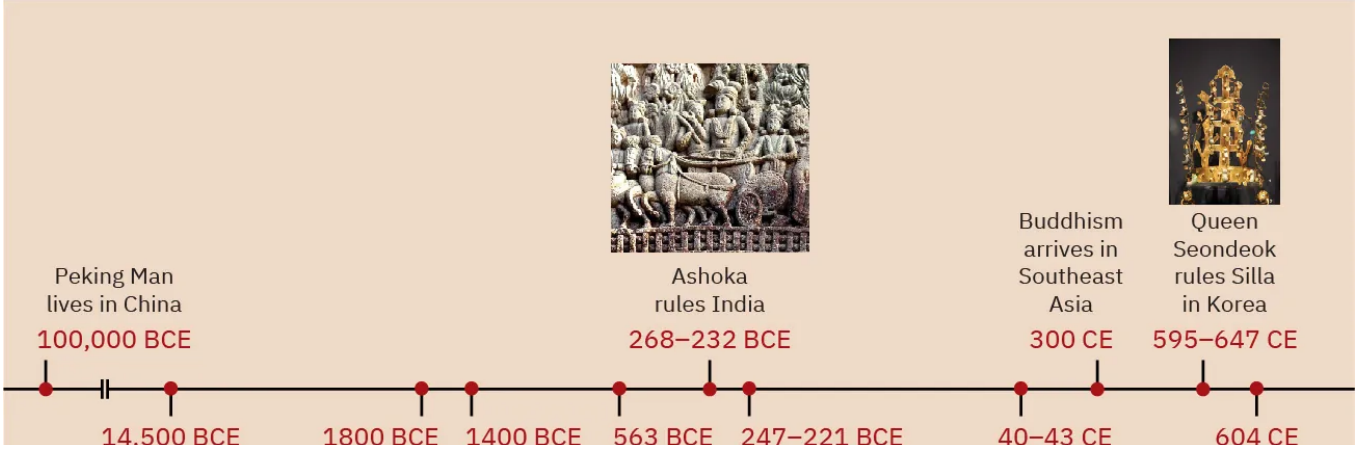


Figure 5.2 Timeline; Asia in Ancient Times. (credit “14,500 BCE”: modification of work “Dogū (Clay Figurine)” by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit “1400 BCE”: modification of work “Shang Ox Bone Oracle Bone” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit “268–232 BCE”: modification of work "King Asoka visits Ramagrama" by Anandajoti Bhikkhu/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit “247–221 BCE”: modification of work “A portrait painting of Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of the Qin dynasty” by Richard R. Wertz/18th century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China, with Chinese historical notes, British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “40-43 CE”: modification of work “Hai ba trung Dong Ho painting” by “LuckyBirdie”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “595–647 CE”: modification of work “Gold Crown of Silla Kingsom” by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

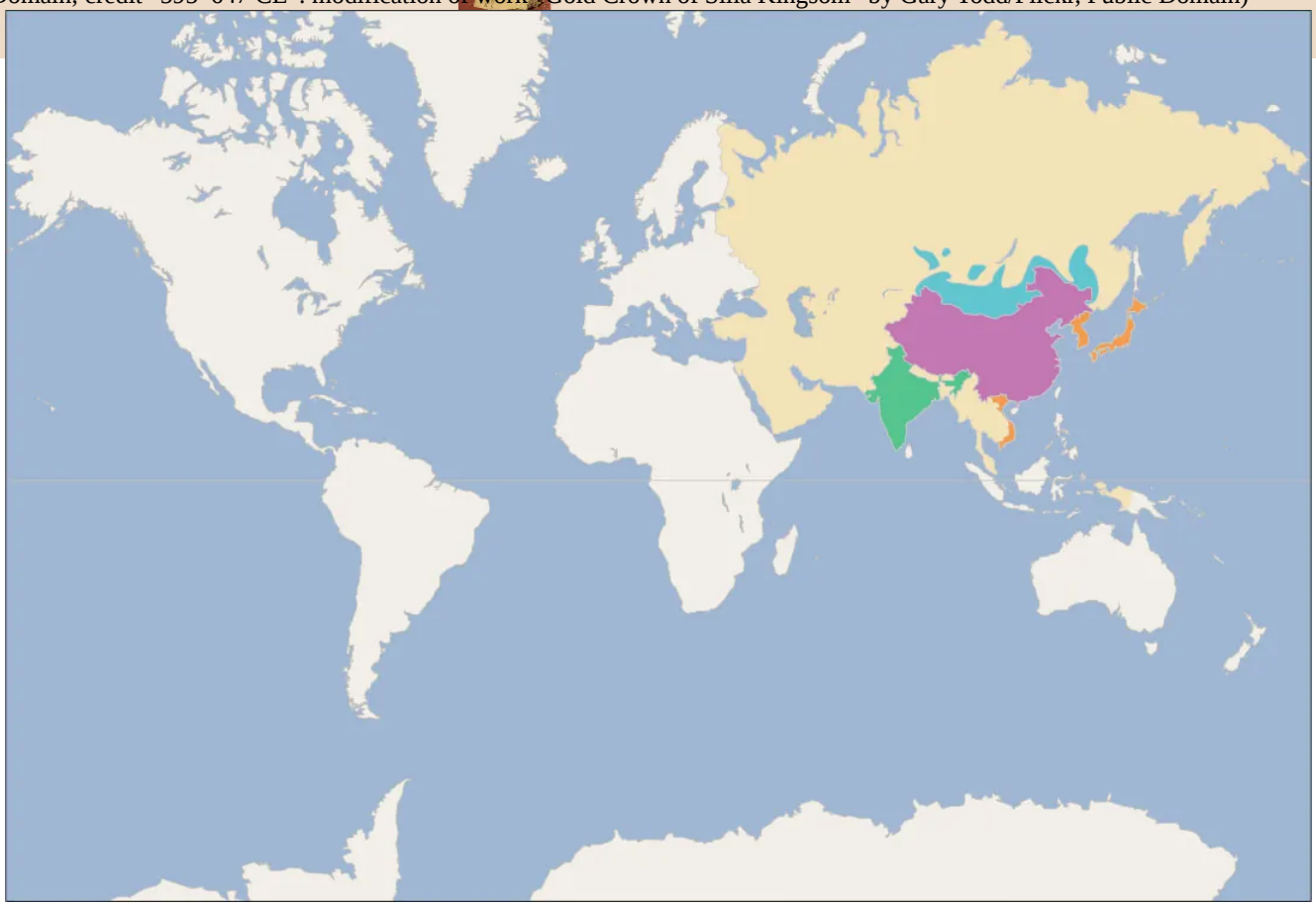


Figure 5.3 Locator Map: Asia in Ancient Times. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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4.2: Geography of East Asia

China's early historical development long predated Japan's and Korea's, which is why a chapter on East Asian history logically begins in the second millennium BCE with China's first dynasty. However, today's nation of China is much larger than China was in ancient times. In earlier times, the bulk of the Chinese population lived in China proper, by which we mean the historical heartland of ancient China (see Map **4.2.1**). To the east, China proper is bounded by the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. To the south, it is bordered by the mountainous jungles of Southeast Asia. To the west and north, China is rimmed by a transitional frontier zone where land suited to agriculture gives way to mountains and plateau or vast expanses of steppe grasslands and desert. At times, the dynasties of China became actively involved in all of these neighboring areas, incorporating them directly into their expanding empires or indirectly as subordinate, tribute-paying states. Those areas include parts of the Korean Peninsula, Northeast China, Mongolia, Central Asia, and Vietnam.



Map **4.2.1**: East Asia (CC BY-SA 4.0; Larry Israel via Original Work)

Within China proper, two rivers were particularly important to the formation of agricultural communities that served as the building blocks of Chinese civilization. Those were the **Yellow River** and **Yangzi River**. The Yellow River meanders through the northern half of China, where a cool, dry climate is well-suited to wheat and millet farming. Beginning far to the west, this river meanders over dusty plateau, becomes muddied with silt, and then deposits this sediment along its middle and lower reaches. The plains surrounding these reaches are collectively referred to as the **North China Plain**. Historically, this was the heartland of Chinese civilization. However, the Yangzi River was just as important. Located in south China where the weather is relatively warmer and wetter, its long basin provided fertile soil for rice-paddy agriculture. Over time, the early dynasties expanded into and included the settled agricultural communities in this region.

Japan is an island country consisting of four main islands and many smaller ones located off the Pacific coast of the Asian continent. At 400,000 square kilometers, Japan is slightly smaller than California, although the terrain is more rugged. Because Japan is covered by mountains and traversed by numerous rivers, only fifteen percent of the land is suited to agriculture. Much of that was concentrated in two plains–the Kinai Plain and Kanto Plain–making them particularly important to Japan's early history. Japan is also located along the Pacific Ring of Fire, where tectonic plates composing the earth's crust frequently move and collide. That is why earthquakes and volcanic activity have been a constant threat to populations living on these islands.

The **Korean Peninsula** is the location of North and South Korea today. Prior to the twentieth century, however, it saw a long succession of Korean kingdoms. Extending roughly 1100 kilometers southward from the Asian landmass, the peninsula is bounded by seas to the east, west, and south, and defined by the Yalu River to the north. Beyond that lies Northeast China which was only

periodically included in the territory of Chinese empires. Consequently, because the peninsula lies between China to the north and west and Japan to the east, Korean dynasties have been deeply impacted by these states' histories and cultures. Like Japan, Korea is also mountainous, although coastal areas and plains located to the west and south were well-suited to agriculture.

The countries of East Asia share in the region's temperate climate and summer monsoon season. During the summer months, warm and moist air originating from the Pacific flows from southeast to northwest, while during the winter months cold and dry air originating from Central Asia moves in the opposite direction. Thus, those areas of East Asia located further to the east and south are generally warmer and wetter, and for longer periods of time. That made them well-suited to rice-paddy agriculture, and rice consequently became the primary cereal crop in southern China, the Korean peninsula, and the islands of Japan. While growing rice is labor intensive, this grain also offers high yields per unit of land, so it has supported population growth in these countries and, therefore, the formation of vibrant civilizations.

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4.3: Ancient China

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the early dynasties of ancient China
- Analyze the impact of the Warring States Period on ancient Chinese politics and culture
- Explain the connections between ancient Chinese philosophy and its political and social context

Ancient China was not the first area in Asia to practice agriculture and develop cities. But it was home to some of the world's earliest political dynasties, and it produced written scripts, influential schools of thought and religion, and innovations in architecture and metallurgy, such as the manufacture of bronze and iron agricultural implements, weapons, chariots, and jewelry. A climate of constant regional warfare between small Chinese states imparted to kings and philosophers alike a sense of urgency to build institutions and systems that would bring stability to their realms. Against this background, China's first empire, the Qin, presided over the creation of some of the ancient world's greatest historical treasures, including the Terracotta Army and an early form of the Great Wall.

Prehistoric China

Recent studies of Paleolithic and Neolithic China suggest it was home to several distinct cultural complexes that developed independently of one another and exhibited notable regional variations in agriculture, social organization, language, and religion.

Human beings set foot on the Chinese subcontinent more than a million years ago. Evidence indicates the presence there of an archaic member of the human lineage known as *Homo erectus*, a term meaning "upright man." One example is the well-known Peking Man, a subspecies of *Homo erectus* identified by fossil remains found in northern China in 1929. The species *Homo sapiens* (meaning "wise man" and including all modern humans) appeared later, around 100,000 years ago. These communities of hunter-gatherers followed the mammoth, elk, and moose on which they subsisted into northern China. Later they learned to fish along China's many rivers and long coastlines and supplemented their food stores by foraging from a rich variety of plants, including many grasses, beans, yams, and roots.

Archaeological evidence from this stage of China's prehistory, the Paleolithic period from roughly 100,000 to 10,000 BCE, confirms that these groups developed symbolic language, which enabled them to evolve ideas about abstractions like kinship and an afterlife and thus produce the foundations for a shared culture and society. Their tools, such as those used for grinding plants, were simple and fashioned primarily of stone, but also of bone and wood. Early humans arrived in China from Africa and western Asia in waves separated by hundreds of years, but they were far from uniform. Thus, they eventually produced early societies that spoke a variety of languages, differed in their spiritual beliefs, and developed the capacity for agriculture independently of one another.

China's diverse geography, climate, and terrain reinforced regional variations in these early cultures as well (Figure 5.4). The country today stretches for roughly a thousand miles from north to south and east to west, occupying a temperate zone dominated by two major river systems, the Yellow and the Yangtze. Mountains, deserts, grasslands, high plateaus, jungles, and a variety of climates exist, such as the frozen environs surrounding the city of Harbin in the north and the subtropical climate around Hong Kong in the south. Most of the early cultures and later dynasties that produced Chinese civilization lay in a much smaller area, within a series of provinces along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, ringed by the outer areas of Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Today these provinces make up the most densely populated areas of the People's Republic of China, inhabited almost entirely by the majority ethnic group in China, Han Chinese. The outlying areas have been the traditional homelands of a great many religious and ethnic minorities, such as Mongolians, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Manchu, who did not become incorporated into the first dynasties of ancient China. Early inhabitants of China found that each region offered advantages and challenges to meeting the necessities of daily life: food, shelter, and security.



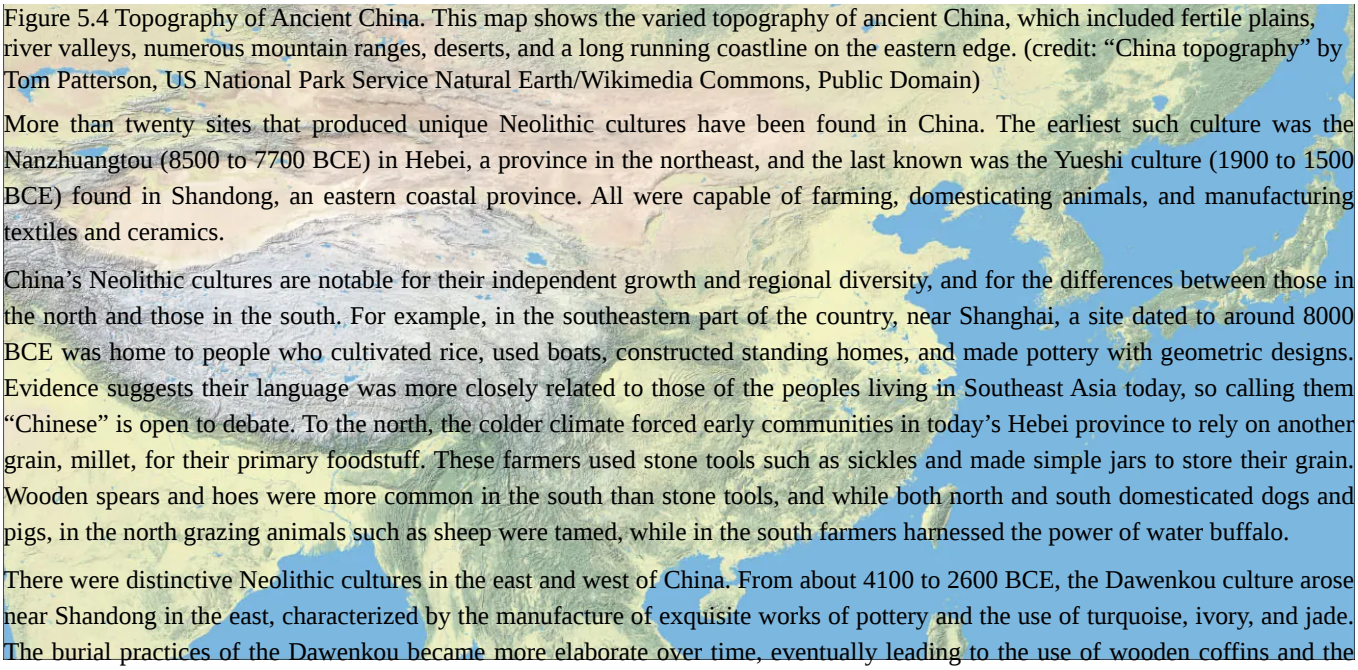


Figure 5.4 Topography of Ancient China. This map shows the varied topography of ancient China, which included fertile plains, river valleys, numerous mountain ranges, deserts, and a long running coastline on the eastern edge. (credit: “China topography” by Tom Patterson, US National Park Service Natural Earth/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

More than twenty sites that produced unique Neolithic cultures have been found in China. The earliest such culture was the Nanzhuangtou (8500 to 7700 BCE) in Hebei, a province in the northeast, and the last known was the Yueshi culture (1900 to 1500 BCE) found in Shandong, an eastern coastal province. All were capable of farming, domesticating animals, and manufacturing textiles and ceramics.

China’s Neolithic cultures are notable for their independent growth and regional diversity, and for the differences between those in the north and those in the south. For example, in the southeastern part of the country, near Shanghai, a site dated to around 8000 BCE was home to people who cultivated rice, used boats, constructed standing homes, and made pottery with geometric designs. Evidence suggests their language was more closely related to those of the peoples living in Southeast Asia today, so calling them “Chinese” is open to debate. To the north, the colder climate forced early communities in today’s Hebei province to rely on another grain, millet, for their primary foodstuff. These farmers used stone tools such as sickles and made simple jars to store their grain. Wooden spears and hoes were more common in the south than stone tools, and while both north and south domesticated dogs and pigs, in the north grazing animals such as sheep were tamed, while in the south farmers harnessed the power of water buffalo.

There were distinctive Neolithic cultures in the east and west of China. From about 4100 to 2600 BCE, the Dawenkou culture arose near Shandong in the east, characterized by the manufacture of exquisite works of pottery and the use of turquoise, ivory, and jade. The burial practices of the Dawenkou became more elaborate over time, eventually leading to the use of wooden coffins and the creation of ledges of earth to surround the graves. Later eastern cultures lavished treasures on the deceased, burying them with necklaces and beads, showing an increasing sophistication in the decorative arts.

To the west lay the Yangshao culture, dating to 5000 BCE, whose people farmed millet and dug homes in the earth to protect themselves from a cool climate. In Yangshao, burying the dead was a simpler process, but artists decorated pottery with painted designs and intricate geometric patterns. To the east there are few examples of painted bowls, jars, or cups. Instead, eastern cultures devoted their creative efforts to the slow, painstaking process of shaping jade. The Hongshan culture in Liaoning province and the Liangzhu complex in Jiangsu fashioned beautiful jade talismans, ornaments, and treasures for spiritual ceremonies. The great distance between these two cultures—with Hongshan far in the northeast near today’s border with North Korea and the Liangzhu located around the Yangtze River delta in the southeast—shows the breadth of jade’s influence along China’s eastern seaboard. In the west, jade remained a much rarer object.

Later networks of exchange connected these regional cultures, which increasingly borrowed from each other, accelerating change, innovation, and collision. From roughly 3000 to 2000 BCE, China’s Neolithic cultures created and shared new implements for cooking and artistic styles such as geometric patterns on ceramics. With contact, however, came growing conflict as well, suggested in the archaeological record by the emergence of metalworking and cities defended by walls of rammed earth. The need to coordinate defense and construct such ramparts likely required a political evolution within these cultures, giving rise to an elite military class led by chiefs. Thereafter, military elites were shrouded in spiritual rituals revolving around human sacrifice, possibly of captives of war, who were entombed beneath buildings in sites found in northern China. Increasing exchange between Neolithic cultures and the prominence of war may also have led to greater social differentiation. Burial sites for elites show evidence of increasingly elaborate ceremonies to please the gods or ancestors and to honor the deceased and denote their status.

Women were often buried with the same quantity of items and laid in the same position as their male counterparts. Archaeological remains such as graves, figurines, tools, and other materials suggest that many Neolithic Chinese communities were matrilineal societies, in which lines of kinship were traced through the mother’s family. While weaving textiles became an important occupation for many women, the division of labor was far less rigid in this period. Carvings depicting goddesses, symbols of fertility, and women’s genitalia are prevalent in many of the cultures and seem to suggest women were on a par with men in the Neolithic era, especially when compared with later periods in Chinese history.

Early Dynastic China

The Yellow River had an enormous impact on the development of Chinese civilization. It stretches for more than 3,395 miles, beginning in the mountains of western China and emptying into the Bohai Sea from Shandong province. (Only the Yangtze River to the south is longer.) Critical to the development of farming and human settlement along the Yellow River was the soil, which is

loess—a sediment that is highly fertile, but easily moved by winds roaming the plain and driven along as silt by the power of the river. This portability of the soil and the human-built dikes along the river have caused it to constantly evolve and change over the centuries, leaving the surrounding areas prone to regular flooding and subjecting farmers to recurring cycles of bountiful harvests and natural disasters. Rainfall around the Yellow River is limited to around twenty inches annually, meaning that the river's floods have usually been paired with periodic droughts.

Near the Yellow River, the site of Erlitou in Henan province reveals a culture defined by the building of palaces, the creation of bronze vessels for rituals, and the practice of forms of ancestor worship. Sites such as these have led to debate about whether they prove the existence of the Xia dynasty, a fabled kingdom said to have been founded by one of China's mythological heroes, the Great Yu. No site has yet been found with documents written by the Xia. Instead, all references to it come from records written many centuries after the possible mythical kingdom ceased to exist.

The first Chinese dynasty for which we have solid evidence is the Shang. It created a complex, socially stratified Bronze Age civilization whose signature achievement was the creation of a written script. The Shang were long thought to be a mythological dynasty like the Xia until scholars in the late nineteenth century discovered old turtle shells inscribed with Chinese characters in a medicine shop. Eventually, these shells and other "oracle bones," once used in the art of divination, were found to be written records from China's first dynasty (Figure 5.5).

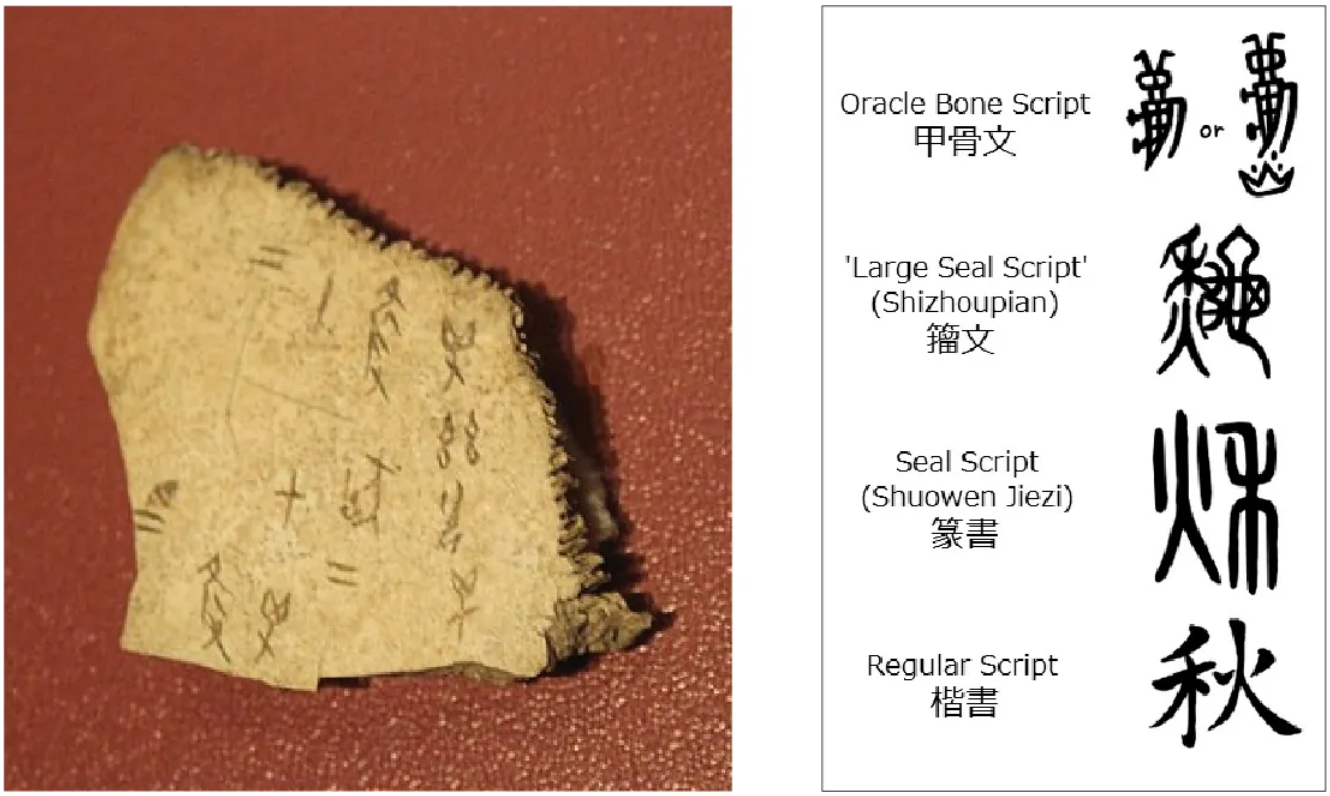


Figure 5.5 Bronze Age Script. (a) This ancient oracle bone is carved with early variations of Chinese characters. (b) Oracle bone script went through a number of stages to evolve into the contemporary form of script we see today, as evidenced by the early iterations of the characters for the word "autumn," shown here. (credit a: modification of work "Shang Ox Bone Oracle Bone" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Comparison of Chinese characters for autumn" by "Pat457"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Shang kings exerted their authority through rituals of ancestor worship drawn from the Erlitou culture and adapted to the art of bone divination. First carving written characters onto shells and animal bones and then applying heat to crack and shatter them, they posed questions to spirits and divined from the bones the spirits' predictions regarding impending harvests, military campaigns, or the arrival of an heir. From there, the Shang developed a logographic script whose characters visually represented words and ideas, combining symbols to make new concepts and sounds as needed. These characters served in a number of tasks

such as keeping records, making calendars and organizing time, and preserving knowledge and communicating it from generation to generation.

The earliest forms of Chinese writing were likely forged on fragile materials such as bamboo or even silk and have not survived. But the Shang's passing on to future dynasties a logographic script, rather than a phonographic alphabet, meant that for centuries literacy was the preserve of elites. Reading required memorizing hundreds and eventually thousands of symbols and their meanings, rather than learning the sounds of a far fewer number of letters as is the case with an alphabet. Chinese ideas, values, and spiritual beliefs stored in this logographic script long outlived the Shang, becoming a key element of continuity from one dynasty to the next.

Through their invention of writing, the Shang were also able to command enormous resources for two centuries. They developed the organizational capacity to mine metal ores and transport them to foundries to make bronze cups, goblets, and cauldrons that grew to weigh hundreds of pounds. Shang artisans began weaving silk into cloth, and the city walls around an early capital in Zhengzhou were erected by ten thousand workers moving earth into bulwarks that stood thirty feet high and sixty feet wide.

But the Shang became China's first dynasty largely because of their military prowess, expanding their power through conquest, unlike the earlier and more trade-oriented cultures. Through warfare and the construction of a network of walled towns, the Shang built one of the world's first large territorial states controlled by a noble warrior class. This area included territory in Henan, Anhui, Shandong, Hebei, and Shanxi provinces. The Shang used bronze spears, bows, and later horse-drawn chariots to make raids against neighboring cultures, distributing the prizes to vassals and making enemies into allies for a share of the plunder. The prizes included captives of war, enslaved by the Shang warrior elite or sacrificed. An aristocratic and militaristic culture, the Shang also organized royal hunts for game such as deer, bear, and even tigers and elephants to hone their skills.

Link to Learning

Visit this website and read a detailed summary of the importance to ancient Chinese cultures of ritual killing to learn more about and see visual examples of the Shang's ritualistic vessels, art of divination, and burial customs.

The oracle bones suggest that religion and ritual were the backbone of Shang society. The kings were not just military leaders but high priests who worshipped their ancestors and the supreme deity known as Di. Shang queens and princesses were also active in politics and warfare, with a few notable women such as the general Fu Hao leading large armies onto the battlefield. Aristocratic women also regularly served as priests in the royal ancestral cult. Like many other ancient societies, the Shang dynasty exhibited a theocratic dimension, with the kings claiming the exclusive right to act as intermediaries between their subjects and the spirit world.

To stage this royal role, the Shang built palaces, temples, and altars for worship in their capital cities, served by artisans making a host of goods. They developed enormous tombs tunneled beneath the earth for royals and nobility, signifying their capacity to organize labor and resources on a vast scale. Fu Hao's tomb, for example, was small by comparison to many others for Shang royals, but it was dug twenty-five feet deep into the earth and was large enough to hold sixteen human sacrifices and hundreds of bronze weapons, mirrors, bells, and other items fashioned from bone, jade, ivory, and stone. A comparison of early Shang tombs in Zhengzhou with those of a later period discovered in Anyang suggests that human sacrifices became ever more spiritually significant, and also more extreme. Later kings were found buried not with a few victims but with hundreds of servants and prisoners of war, as well as animals such as dogs and horses. By spilling human blood, Shang royalty hoped to appease Di and their ancestors to ward off problems such as famine. But the scale of these rituals ballooned, with one record indicating that King Wu Ding went so far as to sacrifice more than nine thousand victims in one ritual bloodletting.

Under the sway of the Shang, the disparate Neolithic cultures of northern China grew more uniform, while even groups beyond the Shang's control in the Yangtze River valley and the west were influenced by their artistic styles and motifs. Yet over the course of their reign, the Shang's reliance on constant warfare and a religion centered on human sacrifices bred discontent and may have fueled the perception of their kings as corrupt and sadistic. It might even have precipitated revolt against the Shang rulers and the culture's eventual demise.

The Zhou Dynasty

The Zhou dynasty, which supplanted the Shang dynasty in 1045 BCE, borrowed extensively from its predecessors. But the Zhou people were originally independent of the Shang, with their homeland lying in today's Shaanxi province in north-central China, in a large fertile basin surrounded by mountains just beyond the core Shang territory that lay to the east. Once settled there, Zhou nobility became vassals of the Shang kings, equipped to defend them and campaign against their hated rivals the Qiang, a proto-Tibetan tribe.

The Zhou combined the practices of farming learned from the Shang with livestock raising learned from nomadic groups living outside the Chinese core. From the Shang, the Zhou also acquired the arts of bronze-making and divination before later developing their own ritual vessels and spiritual practices. Armed by the Shang with chariots, bows, and bronze armor, the Zhou eventually overthrew the Shang kings and founded a new dynastic ruling house. Inheriting the Shang logographic script, the Zhou dynasty became the first to transmit texts such as the *Book of Documents*, records of dozens of speeches and announcements attributed to historical leaders, from the ancient world directly to future generations.

But for all that the Zhou inherited from the Shang, their dynasty also introduced influential changes to ancient China. Likely in order to distance themselves from the Shang, the Zhou allowed the scale of human sacrifices in burials to decline and phased out the use of divination with oracle bones. Above the deity Di, they introduced the concept of a higher power referred to as heaven, and they situated themselves as mediators by performing rituals designed to show that the cosmos legitimated their right to rule (Table 5.1).

Chinese Dynasty	Approximate Duration
Shang dynasty	1600–1050 BCE
Zhou (*pronounced "Jeo"*) dynasty • Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE) • Eastern Zhou dynasty (c. 771–256 BCE)	1046–256 BCE
Qin (*pronounced "chin"*) dynasty	221–206 BCE
Han dynasty • Western/Former Han dynasty (206–9 CE) • Eastern/Later Han dynasty (25–220 CE)	206 BCE–220 CE
Six Dynasties Period • Three Kingdoms dynasty (220–265 CE) • Jin dynasty (265–420 CE) • Period of the Northern and Southern dynasties (386–589 CE)	220–589 CE
Sui (*pronounced "sway"*) dynasty	581–618 CE
Tang dynasty	618–906 CE
Five Dynasties Period	907–960 CE
Song dynasty • Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) • Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279)	960–1279
Yuan dynasty	1279–1368
Ming dynasty	1368–1644
Qing dynasty	1644–1912

Table 5.1 China's Dynasties This table marks the duration of China's dynasties, from the start of the Shang dynasty to the fall of the last, the Qing, in 1912. The physical borders of Chinese civilization fluctuated from one dynasty to the next. (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timeli...line-keyevents)

More than just spiritual changes, these policy shifts helped the Zhou spread a political ideology that fostered a shared cultural identity that was formative to Chinese civilization. According to the Zhou, the Shang rulers over time had grown despotic, ruining the lives of their subjects and squandering the bountiful resources of China. Around 1046 BCE, the Zhou, having grown tired of their abuses, rose up against the Shang and, led by King Wu, defeated them in battle.

The Zhou victory and Shang defeat were recorded in various Chinese classical texts as proof that the heavens had revoked the Shang's right to rule and conferred it upon the new Zhou dynasty. This "Mandate of Heaven" shaped Chinese ideology and understanding of dynastic cycles for centuries to come (Figure 5.6). It justified the overthrow of bad governments and corrupt or inept rulers and reinforced a common conviction that in order to govern, a ruling house must demonstrate morality and order to retain heaven's favor. The concept also pressured dynastic rulers to deserve the mandate by exhibiting moral leadership and proving their legitimacy through support for agriculture, the arts, and the welfare of the common people. Thereafter, natural disasters such as flood or famine and social upheaval in the form of rebellions or poverty were read as signs that a dynasty was in peril of having its mandate to rule rescinded.

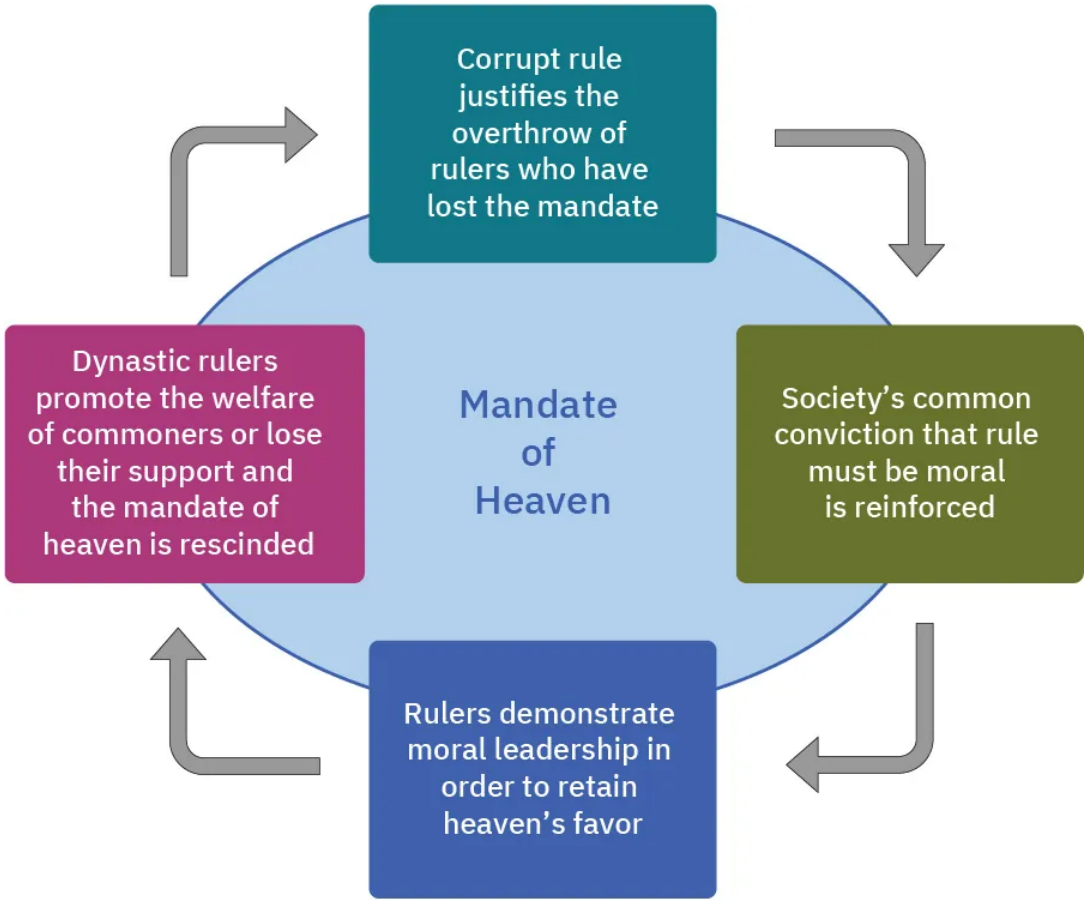


Figure 5.6 The Mandate of Heaven. The Zhou dynasty's belief that imperial rule must be sanctioned by a mandate from the gods shaped China's history and culture for centuries to follow. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Mandate of Heaven also ensured continuity between dynasties because it became an element of a core ideology passed from one ruling house to the next, even as non-Chinese groups such as Mongols and Jurchen later invoked it as conquerors. Thus, the mandate created a basis for increasing political unity of the Chinese under a supreme sovereign, while also promoting dissent and latent revolution against unpopular rulers. From this ideology sprang new terms for subjects, identified as denizens of Zhongguo (China), a name formed from the terms for *central* and *state*, or as Huaxia (Chinese) in the Zhou dynasty, to express their membership in a shared culture defined by farming, writing, and metalworking and inherited from mythical figures and common ancestors.

To consolidate their political control, the early Zhou rulers led military campaigns to extend their territory east over the Yellow River and relied on a complex system of decentralized rule. Leniency was shown to the Shang, with a son of the dynasty left to rule

his own city and preside over rituals to honor his ancestors. Other Shang nobles were uprooted and moved to new cities to keep them under the watch of the Zhou, whose relatives and trusted advisors governed walled garrisons and cities on the frontier to guard against rising threats. In other areas, the Zhou cooperated with largely autonomous leaders, granting aristocratic titles in return for tribute and military service from local chiefs and nobility. To cement these ties, the Zhou brokered marriages between the royal line and the families of local lords, who within their own domains performed the same spiritual and administrative functions as the ruling family. Like the Zhou, local lords were served by ministers, scribes, court attendants, and warriors, and they enjoyed the fruits of the efforts of ordinary laborers and farmers who lived on their estates.

The Zhou proved more durable than the Shang but, especially in later centuries, their power was diffused among many smaller, competing kingdoms only nominally under their control. The Zhou's decentralized feudal system, in which land and power was granted by the king to local leaders in return for special privileges, gradually weakened as those regional lords ignored the commands of kings, instead amassing armies and searching for alliances and technological advantages over their neighbors.

As a result, scholars typically divide the Zhou dynasty into several periods. The Western Zhou (c. 1046–771 BCE) refers to the first half of the dynasty's rule, from its founding to the sack of its capital in Haojing by nomadic armies in 771 BCE. Afterwards the Zhou reestablished their capital in the east, in Luoyang, inaugurating the period called the Eastern Zhou (771–256 BCE). The Eastern Zhou dynasty itself is often divided into two halves—the Spring and Autumn (771–476 BCE) and the Warring States (475–256 BCE) periods. The first half of the Eastern Zhou dynasty derives its name from the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. That chronicle, from about the fifth century BCE, documents the gradual erosion of the Zhou kings' power as outlying territories such as Chu, Qin, and Yan became increasingly autonomous. Not surprisingly, then, the Warring States era was characterized by open warfare between these regional powers to enlarge their territories, absorb neighboring kingdoms, and replace the Zhou as the new sovereigns of ancient China.

Bridging the two eras of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States was a period defined by a flourishing of literature and philosophy known as the Hundred Schools of Thought (770–221 BCE). Inspired by political turmoil and rivalries between various Chinese states, those who wished to retain power were drawn to the study of the military arts, diplomacy, and political intrigue. Those who lamented the lack of order and waning loyalty to authority and tradition turned to the study of morality and ethics. In a political climate of competition and reform, new schools of thought informed a swelling class of capable administrators and military strategists contesting for the patronage of rulers. Philosophers such as Mozi and Sunzi, author of *The Art of War*, created their own rival traditions and contributed to courtly debates on morality, war, government, technology, and law.

In this marketplace of ideas, Chinese civilization as a whole rapidly grew more sophisticated. At the same time, rulers sought to expand their revenues, increase the size of their populations, implement new techniques for farming such as draining marshes, and create new forms of currency such as bolts of silk. This era also fostered dynamic new forms of art as the Zhou court became home to musicians skilled with chimes, drums, lutes, flutes, and bells. States such as Chu and Zheng became famous for their artists and styles of dance, while popular hymns were later translated into poems and recorded in the *Book of Songs*. These intellectual traditions and cultural forms, though varied, served as the foundational core for Chinese politics, education, and art in the ancient world.

Foremost among the new schools of thought was Confucianism, a philosophical system that shaped morality, governance, and social relations in China before spreading to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan in later centuries. Its founding philosopher, known as Kong Fuzi, or Confucius, was probably born about 551 BCE and lived in relative obscurity as a teacher in the small state of Lu. Later his descendants and disciples made his teachings on the family, society, and politics known in ancient China via *The Analects*, a collection of brief statements attributed to him and recorded long after his death. Later scholars influenced by Confucius, such as Mengzi, went on to win renown for their teachings, attracting throngs of new students while gaining influential positions as advisers in the service of rulers.

A central tenet of Confucianism is the importance of exemplifying virtuous leadership by living a moral life, studiously observing rituals, and being tirelessly devoted to the duties owed to the leader's subjects. Confucian texts such as the *Book of Documents* promoted habits like literacy, critical thinking, the search for universal truth, humility, respect for ancestors and elders, and the valuing of merit over aristocratic privilege. Confucius also considered family relationships to be central to an orderly society. Specifically, he delineated five cordial relationships—between king and subjects, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger siblings, and friends. Each relationship consisted of an authority figure who required obedience and honor from the other person or persons, except for friends who were to honor one another. In return, the person in authority was supposed to

embody *ren*, an attitude of generosity and empathy for those beneath him. So long as everyone behaved as they should, good order would flourish.

Later Confucian teachers such as Xun Kuang (also known as Xunzi), witnessing the violence of the Warring States period, argued that humanity's base impulses necessitated rigorous self-cultivation and discipline. Among devout Confucians, such ideas spawned a constant search for internal self-improvement and concern for the well-being of others and society as a whole. During this period, Zhou kings presided over rites to honor royal ancestors, but they also made greater use of written works to magnify their prestige and power. *Yijing*, or *The Book of Changes*, presented a new system of divination later included as a seminal text in the Confucian canon.

In Their Own Words

The Analects of Confucius

Over many decades following Confucius's death, his students and followers collected his words of wisdom in *The Analects*. *The Analects* consists of twenty short books, each of which includes a series of short quotations on a particular theme. Confucius's main concern was to teach people how to become *junzi*, compassionate and moral beings more concerned with doing what was right than with satisfying their own desires. The *junzi* understood their duties to others and fulfilled all the ancient ritual obligations. Confucius believed *junzi* could be created through education, and that society would be harmonious and peaceful if the government was guided by *junzi*. The following are some excerpts from Book 2.

> *CHAP. I. The Master [Confucius] said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it."*
>
> *CHAP. II. The Master said, "In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence—Having no depraved thoughts."*
>
> *CHAP. III. 1. The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. 2. "If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good."*
>
> *CHAP. IV. 1. The Master said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. 2. "At thirty, I stood firm. 3. "At forty, I had no doubts. 4. "At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. 5. "At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. 6. "At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."*
>
> *—Confucius, The Analects, translated by James Legge*

- Why would Confucius think it important to be able to feel shame?
- How would the values expressed here help make a person a better leader?
- What connection, if any, can you see between the teachings of Confucius and the Zhou concept of the Mandate of Heaven?

Link to Learning

You can read the full text of *The Analects* at the Project Gutenberg website.

A mystical indigenous religion that venerated nature, Daoism borrowed from various ideological systems, such as the dualism of *yin-yang* with its emphasis on the complementary poles of light and dark cosmological forces. Daoism's thousands of texts, temples, and priests did not flower until the later Han dynasty, but during the Zhou era, this school emerged as a major influence thanks to teachers like Laozi and Zhuang Zhou (commonly known as Zhuangzi) and the circulation of the books attributed to them,

the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi*. From them, Daoists learned a litany of poems, sayings, parables, and folktales teaching that *dao* (or "the way") was an underlying influence that shaped and infused all humans, the natural world, and the cosmos. Daoists encouraged dwelling on the beauty of the natural world, exploring mystic rituals, and contemplating the comparative insignificance of the individual against the vastness of time and space. Perhaps the most important political concept introduced by Daoists was the idea of *wuwei* (or "nonaction"), implying to those in power that the best form of governance was a minimalist approach that avoided interfering in the lives of their subjects.

Counter to the Daoist tradition and Confucianism ran the school of thought known as Legalism, the focal point of which was the accumulation of power. Legalists argued that governments drew power from a written legal code backed by an expansive system of rewards and punishments to ensure enforcement and order. A few of its exponents, like the thinker Han Feizi, studied Confucianism first, but came to see its proponents and teachings as too idealistic and naïve. Legalists downplayed the need for morality and asserted that the bedrock of a good government was a "rich country and a strong army."

While Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism remained distinct, they borrowed liberally from each other and incorporated values, themes, and terminology to round out their own philosophies. All were open, eclectic systems reacting to historical circumstances and conditions. Moreover, each of these schools of thought and even the more minor traditions formed a common frame of reference within which Chinese rulers, philosophers, scribes, and even hermits expressed their own views. Confucianism and Legalism encouraged the study of texts over mystic rites, or society and its history over the supernatural and the afterlife, while other thinkers continued to ponder the yin and yang and work out principles applicable to astronomy, medicine, and the calendar. The world of spirits, ancestor worship, and folktales was no less prevalent than before. Still, it was the emergence of these new systems and their contributions that make this era an "axial age," a critical stage in the evolution of not just Chinese civilization but the world.

The Warring States Era and Qin Unification

Over the course of the long Eastern Zhou era (771–256 BCE), the means and methods of warfare changed, with dramatic consequences for ancient China. Initially war was regulated by chivalrous codes of conduct, complete with rituals of divination conducted before and after battle. Battles were fought according to a set of established rules by armies of a few thousand soldiers fighting for small Chinese states. The seasons and the rhythms of agricultural life limited the scope of campaigns. Victorious armies followed the precedent set by the early Zhou conquerors, sparing aristocratic leaders in order to maintain lines of kinship and preserve an heir who would perform rites of ancestor worship.

With the advent of the Warring States era (475–256 BCE), these rules were cast aside, and values such as honor and mercy went out of fashion. New military technologies provided the catalyst for these changes. The invention of the crossbow made the advantages once owned by cavalry and chariots nearly obsolete. The result was ballooning conscript armies of hundreds of thousands, making military service nearly universal for men. Protected by leather armor and iron helmets, soldiers skilled in the art of mounted archery trickled into Chinese states from the steppes. Discipline, drilling, logistics, organization, and strategy became paramount to success. Treatises on deceptive military maneuvers and the art of siege craft proliferated among the various states of the Zhou.

Not all the changes wrought by war in the late Zhou period were unwelcome. For example, common farmers gained the right to include their family names on registration rolls and pressure sovereigns for improvements to their lands such as new irrigation channels. Iron technology was developed for weapons, but was also used for new agricultural tools. Together, increasing agricultural productivity and advancements in iron technology were part of a late Zhou surge in economic growth. Mobilization for war stimulated a cross-regional trade in furs, copper, salt, and horses. And with that long-distance trade came increased coinage. The destruction of states through war also created social volatility, reducing the status of formerly great aristocratic families while giving rise to new forms of gentry and a more powerful merchant class. The only way back up the social ladder was through merit, and many lower-level aristocrats proved themselves as eager bureaucrats in the service of new sovereigns.

One of the many warring states in this period, the state of Qin, capitalized on these economic and social changes by adopting Legalist reforms to justify an agenda of power and expansionism. The arrival of Lord Shang, a migrant born in a rival territory in approximately 390 BCE, who soon took the position of prime minister, was the turning point, when Legalism came to dominate the thinking of Qin's elite. Before this, the Qin state had been a marginal area within the lands of the Zhou, a frontier state on the western border charged with defending the borderlands and raising horses. The Qin state leveraged this location by trading with

peoples from central Asia. At the same time, their vulnerability on the periphery kept them in a state of constant alert and readiness for war, creating a more militaristic culture and an experienced army that proved invaluable when set against their Chinese neighbors in the east.

To offset their initial disadvantages, the Qin leaders wisely embraced immigrant talent such as Lord Shang and solicited help from advisors, militarists, and diplomats from rival domains. They adopted new techniques of governance, appointing officials and delegates to centralize rule rather than relying on hereditary nobles. Theirs became a society with new opportunities for social advancement based on talent and merit. Under Shang's advisement, the Qin scorned tradition and introduced new legal codes, unified weights and measures, and applied a system of incentives for able administrators that helped create an army and bureaucracy based more on merit than on birth. Over time, these changes produced an obedient populace, full coffers, and higher agricultural productivity.

The Qin state's rising strength soon overwhelmed its rivals, propelling to victory its king Ying Zheng, who anointed himself China's first emperor and was known as Qin Shi Huang, or Shihuangdi, literally "first emperor" (Figure 5.7). The Qin war machine defeated the states of Han, Wei, Zhao, Chu, Yan, and Qi in less than a decade. Under Shihuangdi's rule, the tenets of Legalism fostered unity as the emperor standardized the writing system, coins, and the law throughout northern China. Defeated aristocratic families were forced to uproot themselves and move to the new capital near Xi'an. To consolidate political control and reverse the fragmentation of the Zhou era, officials appointed by the emperor were dispatched to govern on his behalf, which cast aside the older feudal system of governance. Officials who performed poorly were removed and severely punished. Those who did well wrote regular detailed reports closely read by the emperor himself.



Figure 5.7 Qin Shi Huang. This image of China's first emperor was painted by an anonymous eighteenth-century Chinese artist for an album of emperors' portraits. Shihuangdi's reign was typified by expansionist campaigns and enormous construction projects such as his tomb. (credit: "A portrait painting of Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of the Qin dynasty" by Richard R. Wertz/18th century album of portraits of 86 emperors of China, with Chinese historical notes, British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Qin militarism also turned outward, enlarging the bounds of Chinese territory as far as the Ordos Desert in the northwest. In the south, Shihuangdi's armies ranged into modern-day Vietnam, laying a Chinese claim to the people and territory in this area for the first time in history. These expansions and the need for defense generated new infrastructure, such as fortified towns and thousands of miles of new roads to transport the Qin's armies to the borders. Northern nomadic and tribal civilizations known to Chinese as the Hu (or Donghu) and Yuezhi were seen as formidable threats. To guard against these "barbarians," hundreds of thousands of laborers, convicts, and farmers were sent to connect a series of defensive structures of rammed earth built earlier by states in northern China. Once completed, the Qin's Great Wall illustrated how fortifying the north and guarding against the steppes became the focal point of statecraft in ancient China. Successive empires in China followed a similar wall-building pattern. The walls commonly referred to as the Great Wall of China today are in fact Ming dynasty walls built between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries CE.

Shihuangdi was also ruthless in defending himself from criticism at home. Informed by his chancellor in 213 BCE that literate Chinese were using commentary on classical texts and literary works to critique his rule, the emperor ordered the destruction of thousands of texts, hoping to leave in print only technical treatises on topics such as agriculture or medicine. An oft-cited story of Shihuangdi's brutality credits him with calling for the execution of hundreds of Confucian and Daoist intellectuals by burying them alive. Recent scholars have scrutinized these tales, questioning how much about his reign was distorted and exaggerated by the scholars of his successors, the Han dynasty, to strengthen their own legitimacy. In studying the ancient past, we must likewise always question the veracity of historical sources and not just reproduce a history "written by the winners."

Another monumental feat of Shihuangdi's reign was the creation of the Terracotta Army, thousands of life-sized clay soldiers fully armed with bronze weaponry and horses. From the time he was a young boy, the emperor had survived a series of assassination attempts, leaving him paranoid and yearning for immortality. Trusted servants were sent in search of paradise and magical elixirs, while hundreds of thousands of others were charged with the years-long process of constructing an enormous secret tomb to protect him in the afterlife. Almost immediately upon ascending the throne in 221 BCE, Shihuangdi began planning for this imperial tomb to be filled with clay replicas of his imperial palace, army, and servants. The massive underground pits, which cover an area of approximately thirty-eight square miles, were discovered with their innumerable contents near Xi'an in the 1970s (Figure 5.8). Labor for projects such as the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army came from commoners as a form of tax or as a requirement under the Qin's law codes. Penalties for violating the criminal code were severe—forced labor, banishment, slavery, or death.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.8 The Terracotta Army. (a) Discovered in the 1970s, the buried treasures of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, include thousands of life-size clay soldiers, known today as the Terracotta Army. (b) Small details of their dress and facial features distinguish the individual soldiers. (credit a: modification of work "Terracotta Soldier Panorama" by Walter-Wilhelm/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work "Terracotta warriors exhibit" by "scott1346"/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Link to Learning

Shihuangdi's mausoleum has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Use the tabs at the UNESCO website to view pictures and to access the videos of the Terracotta Army to learn more.

The Qin Empire quickly collapsed in the wake of the emperor's death in 210 BCE. Conspiracy within the royal court by one of the emperor's sons led to the deaths of his rightful heir, a loyal general, and a talented chancellor. Beyond the court, the Legalist philosophy and practices that had helped the Qin accrue strength now made them brittle. Imperial power exercised in the form of direct rule and harsh laws inspired revolts by generals and great families calling for a restoration of the aristocratic feudal society of the Zhou.

The armies of the Qin's second emperor failed against Liu Bang, a commoner who rose to become Emperor Gaozu of the newly formed Han dynasty. The Han's early emperors distanced themselves from Shihuangdi's legacy by reducing taxes and burdens on the common people. But the Qin's imperial blueprint—uniform laws, consistent weights and measurements, a centralized bureaucracy, and early focus on expansionism to ward off "barbarians" in the north—provided the scaffolding for the Han's greatness.

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4.4: The Steppes

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the role climate played in the ancient history of the steppes
- Describe the daily life of people who lived in the region of the steppes
- Analyze the relationship between the people of the steppes and nearby civilizations

The Eurasian Steppe is a vast stretch of grassland running from Eastern Europe over the top of central Asia and China into Mongolia. For much of human history, the area was home to traveling bands of nomadic pastoralists who grazed herds and collided with settled agricultural societies in Persia, Russia, and China. Geographers divide the Eurasian Steppe into two zones: One is in the west near Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, and the other is in the east, close to China and Mongolia (Figure 5.9). In both areas, the vastness of the land supported large herds of goat, cattle, and sheep. The prevalence of horses enabled powerful warriors of many cultures to rule from the saddle but also gave their people the freedom to roam, migrate, and resist absorption into a large unified state. While much of their history is still debated, these various tribes of the steppes provided the origins for a great number of Turkic, Iranian, Mongolic, Uralic, Tibeto-Burman, and multiethnic peoples today.



Figure 5.9 The Eurasian Steppe. The Eurasian Steppe, consisting of a western and an eastern half and shown here in light blue, reaches from the Caspian Sea in Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Its distinctive climate and vegetation are well-suited to pasturing

livestock but less welcoming to settled agriculture. (credit: modification of work “Approximate extent of the Eurasian Steppe grasslands ecoregion, and Eurasia cultural region” by “Mdf”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Nomadic Culture of the Steppes

The eastern half of the Eurasian Steppe, sometimes referred to as the Inner Asian Steppe, now contains vast grasslands, mountains, and deserts not suitable to agriculture and only sparsely populated. Its history has been shaped to a great extent by climate change. Rainfall across the grasslands in Mongolia once supported pasturing herds of sheep, camels, goats, and horses, but in periods of a cooling climate, the grasslands could shrink, forcing nomads to roam in search of new pastures. Or droughts could drive them to desperate measures: If nearby societies were unwilling to trade, the nomads were often left with no choice but to make raids on farms and cities as a means to survive. Scholars now theorize that shifts to a colder, drier climate around 1500 BCE forced many peoples living here to abandon agriculture for livestock herding. However, grazing animals required mobile human communities that could readily find new pastures and protect their herds from predators. Thus the need to care for livestock forced cultural adaptation as people mastered the art of horseback riding.

As livestock herders, many people of the Inner Asian Steppe consumed a great deal of meat and dairy and made products from animal flesh and furs that could be traded in agricultural villages. They spoke languages unrelated to Chinese, such as Turkic or Mongolic, but a few such as the Jie may have even spoken Indo-European tongues. Due to the constraints set on pastoralism by a changing climate, the peoples of the steppes were in constant contact with agrarian civilizations such as the Chinese, who often looked on the nomads and their herds as a pestilence and threat to their own livelihoods. Yet while Chinese and Koreans for centuries tried to erect physical and cultural barriers between their civilizations and the “foreign” groups on the steppes, the ethnic and ancestral lines between Asia’s nomads and their neighbors were porous.

Prizes taken by peoples of the steppes during raids, such as silk, lacquerware, grain, and war captives, were distributed by chieftains to their loyal supporters, who in turn conferred upon their leaders new titles such as *chanyu*, or khan, signifying a supreme leader with claims to spiritual and military supremacy. The khans’ command over thousands of horses in an age of cavalry warfare further enhanced their power. Tribal confederations of the steppes wielded control over the Silk Roads, a series of trade routes circulating luxury goods to and from China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East. To a mobile society, manufactured and luxury goods had material, social, and political value of enormous worth. Silk, for example, was treasured by nomads because its lightness was ideal for clothing in hot summers and its softness was desirable for lining beds. Powerful generals and khans who amassed huge quantities of the fabric used it as an indicator of their power. The same was largely true of other luxury goods such as wine.

The Past Meets the Present

China’s New Silk Road

For hundreds of years, the Silk Roads connected China to central Asia, India, and the Middle East and made prized Chinese goods such as silk available to the people of the steppes. The Silk Roads also created great wealth for China. Although trade over these routes ended in the fifteenth century, in 2013, China laid plans for creating a “New Silk Road,” better known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is a development project that includes the building of highways, railroads, and energy pipelines across central Asia, Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia as part of a Silk Roads economic belt. When completed, it is meant to integrate the nations of central Asia—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizstan—into the global economy, just as the Silk Roads established during the Han dynasty connected the Turkic and Mongolic nomads of the steppes to the wealth of China and the Middle East. Together with a plan by China to develop ports on the Indian Ocean (a project known as the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road), the BRI is intended to increase exports for Chinese companies, provide China with a secure connection to the oil of the Middle East, and assist in the economic development of the country’s western regions, which are poorer than other parts of the country.

Critics in the West as well as in India and Japan claim that the New Silk Road will also allow China to expand its political influence around the world. And not all the nations that China hopes will participate in the project have greeted it with open arms. Some have claimed it is too expensive. Chinese development assistance often comes in the form of loans, and some countries fear ending up in debt. This is especially likely if they are required to do business with Chinese companies that

charge inflated prices for their goods and services. There is also concern about China's record on human rights. In 2019, crowds in Kazakhstan protested Chinese plans to build factories in their country partly because of China's much-criticized treatment of Uyghurs, an ethnic minority group in Xinjiang province.

- Why might leaders in China want to encourage an association between the modern economic initiatives and the older Silk Roads?
- Is it fair to suggest, as some have, that the Belt and Road Initiative and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road are imperialist in nature? Why or why not?

Most nomadic groups in Asia lived in small units of families or in a clan, a small group of several families that shared an encampment and herded or hunted together. Clans were united by loyalty to a chieftain selected for prowess as a mounted warrior. Compared with many other cultures in the ancient world, however, the societies of the steppes were more egalitarian. Role and status differences between men and women were more muted than in cities or farming settlements. Recent archaeological discoveries of female skeletons from the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Turkic peoples of the steppes show evidence that women engaged in horseback riding and combat skills such as archery. They likely formed the historical basis for folktales about legendary female warriors such as Mulan that began circulating in Chinese society in the sixth century. Mobile lifestyles put a limit on the acquisition of wealth and its display in the form of architecture and clothing, which might explain why the development of written scripts was less common as well. Conversely, it was also true that most cultures of the Inner Asian Steppe readily absorbed technologies, goods, and ideas from neighboring civilizations.

Where the peoples of the steppes pioneered was in domesticating the horse, giving them a significant military advantage over their neighbors. Horseback riding and hunting provided the education in martial arts needed for war, and people began both activities at an early age. Hunting was a fixture of nomadic culture and the core of rituals that marked progress from child to adult, or from lowly member of society to one of the higher ranks. Touching both Europe and Asia, the steppes formed a bridge from which developments such as the chariot and cavalry warfare slowly spread to the rest of Asia. Chariots and mounted warriors in turn sparked the development of confederations that constituted a formidable military threat. Campaigns led by conquerors from the steppes—such as Modun, who came to power in 209 BCE—thus marked a turning point in the relationship between the Inner Asian Steppe, the rest of China, and the developing Silk Roads as arteries of exchange across the ancient world.

Link to Learning

This site provides an extensive history of the various nomadic tribes of the Eurasian Steppe. Consult the section about the Silk Roads to understand how these routes influenced the formation of tribal confederations and larger empires led by nomadic groups.

Tribes, Confederations, and Settled Neighbors

The earliest written records about many non-Chinese people living along the steppes come from Chinese sources, which referred to these people collectively as the Hu (or Donghu) and divided them into five large groups. These were the Xiongnu, the Di, the Qiang, the Xianbei, and the Jie. Later inhabitants of the steppes in the ancient world included the Khitan and many smaller groups.

Among the more powerful confederations noted by Chinese scribes were the Xiongnu, who controlled the lands near Mongolia from the third to the first century BCE. The Xiongnu became the dominant military confederation after forcing their rivals the Yuezhi to migrate west. In many periods, the relationship between the Xiongnu and Chinese dynasties such as the Han was complicated. Sometimes the Xiongnu and the Chinese were natural trading partners, exchanging horses for grain and silk. Access to Chinese civilization normally demanded that the Xiongnu submit tribute, accepting inferior status in return for trade rights and other rewards such as Chinese brides to establish stronger ties between the two cultures. At other times, the Xiongnu preferred to assert military and cultural dominance by raiding China and inciting war as well as constructing defenses such as the many northern fortification walls built by successive dynasties. At several points in their history, the Xiongnu were strong enough militarily to force the Chinese to adopt a policy of appeasement, exacting huge sums of silk, rice, and cash for peace. As a result, the tribute flowing between Xiongnu and Han Chinese often became a bribe meant to appease the nomadic tribes.

Simultaneously, tribal chieftains could often be employed as vassals of the Chinese, acting as a buffer to protect their border with the steppes or to sow division and conflict between various other bands of the Xiongnu. Chinese officials and soldiers also often

found it convenient to defect to the Xiongnu, marrying into powerful families who sought their skills and expertise as administrators. For all these reasons, the border between the steppes and China was fluid and constantly changing, even as Han historians began to refer to groups such as the Xiongnu as “barbarians” and the antithesis of what it meant to be Chinese. Conversely, the nomads and tribes of the steppes often looked on Chinese farmers as lowly, weak, and servile peoples, in contrast to their own identity and values.

Critical to the struggle between the two were the Silk Roads. The balance of power, which initially favored the Xiongnu, shifted as two Han military expeditions went in search of allies in central Asia. These campaigns succeeded in subjugating the Xiongnu and gaining control over the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads. The Xiongnu were later weakened by years of civil war over their system of succession during the middle of the first century BCE. Less powerful groups in these wars tended to move toward the frontier of the Chinese empire and try to secure Chinese support against their rivals.

Thus the Southern Xiongnu, with their homeland threatened by natural disasters and resource scarcity, became vassals of the Han fighting against the Northern Xiongnu. Acceptance of tributary status required sending an aristocratic prince as hostage to live in the Han capital and be given a classical Chinese education, part of the continued cultural exchange between the Inner Asian Steppe and China. Channels between the two cultures widened as the later Han moved settlers west and tried to create military colonies along the frontiers for defense, staffed by non-Chinese auxiliary forces. Hundreds of thousands of Xiongnu lived inside the borders of China’s empire, often becoming more settled and assimilated in their lifestyles and cultural practices.

Following the collapse of the Han dynasty, various branches of the Xiongnu tribes founded dynastic states across northern China during a period known as the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE). With innovations such as the stirrup and new forms of armor covering the whole of the mounted warrior and his horse, heavy cavalry units made these nomadic groups the supreme fighting force in Asia for the next two centuries. During this time, much of northern China and the Inner Asian Steppe was dominated by large, multiethnic conquest states ruled by chiefs claiming mixed ancestry from both Chinese and nomadic groups. Dynasties such as the Later Zhao and the Han Zhao were founded by powerful Xiongnu chiefs such as Shi Le and Liu Yuan, respectively. However, these dynasties often invoked claims to legitimacy staked in their ancestral and cultural ties to the Han dynasty. The ethnic markers and identity of the Xiongnu as distinct from Chinese and other groups on the steppes slowly melted away in these centuries. At the same time, an economy rooted in ranching and herding spread from the Inner Asian Steppe to northern China in a period that saw long-distance trade and grain agriculture decline.

Meanwhile, another ethnic nomadic group known as the Xianbei also emerged as a powerful force in the world of East Asia in this period. Originally hailing from southern Manchuria, the Xianbei were once subordinate to larger nomadic groups on the steppes such as the Xiongnu. After the fall of the Han, the Xianbei grabbed territory inside China proper by conducting raids for horses, war captives, and herds of cattle and sheep. Their military might forced a massive reshuffling of populations in northern China, while many Chinese sought employment with the Xianbei as advisers and administrators.

Drawing on the wealth of Chinese farmers, a branch of the Xianbei known as the Tuoba clan founded the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE). Adopting the imperial title of emperor, Xianbei rulers such as Xiaowen in the late fifth century tried to remake their society into a true Chinese dynasty along the blueprint of the Han (Figure 5.10). During Xiaowen’s reign, for example, elite Xianbei families arranged marriages between their daughters and wealthy, well-educated Chinese from the Southern dynasties. Such reforms proved dangerous. The opulence and culture of the courtly center of the Northern Wei alienated Xianbei soldiers of the garrisons along its frontier, who rebelled in 524 CE. The result was years of civil war and the sack of the capital in Luoyang. Still, the Xianbei proved a considerable force in the affairs of East Asia well into the later Sui and Tang dynasties.



Figure 5.10 Northern Wei Dynasty. Xiaowen's reign over the Northern Wei dynasty marked a dynamic period of cultural exchange and assimilation between Xianbei and Han Chinese royals and nobility, but it also led to rebellion and violence by nomadic warriors charged with guarding the kingdom. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Eastern Hemisphere 500 CE" by Thomas Lessman/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

While the Xianbei and Xiongnu faded, after the fourth century another group known as the Khitan began a slow steady ascent toward power on the steppes and beyond. Organized for centuries as small clans of hunters, fishers, herders, and warriors in an area stretching from Mongolia to Siberia, the Khitan later founded the Liao dynasty (907–1125). Even more impressive were later empires that conquered the entirety of the Inner Asian Steppe and all of China, founded by the Mongols and Jurchen.

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4.5: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss how geography and climate change influenced the early history of Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia
- Describe the cultural exchanges between ancient Korea and Japan
- Compare daily life in ancient Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia were notable in the ancient world as homes to cultures uniquely engaged with the wider world. Via trade, religion, and diplomacy, Korea and Japan borrowed and adapted from Chinese civilization, but even more importantly from each other. Ties between Southeast Asia and India likewise proved formative in the eras in which many cultures evolved from small cities and agrarian villages into trade-post empires with monumental architecture. Conversely, geography, climate, and the early cultural forms produced by the first migrants meant that each area also produced its own indigenous systems. For example, Buddhist missionaries traveled from the Indian subcontinent across the Silk Roads and pilgrims trekked to temples to study and eventually bring home tools to convert their native cultures, but in each destination the faith was transformed into hundreds of new sects and interpretations of the path to enlightenment.

Ancient Korea

The earliest humans to reach the Korean peninsula did so around thirty thousand years ago. The land is very hilly, and mountains in the north form a barrier with Manchuria. Important rivers include the Daedong, the Han, and the Yalu. Winters are cold and snowy in the north, while summer months in the south feature blistering heat and torrential rains. Archaeologists have found evidence of bronze weapons dating back to 1300 BCE, but no clear proof that Korea at that time produced a Bronze Age civilization. The earliest written records of the first Koreans come from China, where the *Book of Documents* recounts the creation of a fief known as Joseon, located in northern Korea and awarded to a Chinese noble referred to as Gija. Later records in Chinese documents from 200 BCE to 313 CE provide descriptions of various small states in areas of Korea and Manchuria.

Seen from the vantage point of Chinese authors, our picture of ancient Korea begins to take shape during China's Han dynasty, when the peninsula was home to a number of small tribes, cultures, and communities living near the borders of the Chinese empire. From these Chinese records it is also clear that the earliest Koreans were in constant contact and exchange with not just the Chinese but also Inner Asian Steppe peoples like the Xiongnu as well as settlers in Japan. Thus, ethnicity in ancient Korea was quite fluid and prone to change. Groups borrowed liberally from each other's cultures, traded, and were absorbed and transformed by conquest.

The transformation of Korea into a unified culture and civilization is a story with many stops and starts. Historians often begin with the narrative of the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian, which tells of the dynasty's efforts to suppress the Xiongnu by invading northern Korea and establishing four garrisons there, from the Liao River to near today's Seoul. The presence of Chinese generals, troops, and settlers spurred exchange with societies on the Korean peninsula, which borrowed from Chinese culture the ideas of coins, seals, artwork, and building techniques to make roads and mounded tombs. Adopted by tribal chieftains and aristocratic warrior families, Chinese culture provided a wealth of material needed to engineer the first Korean states by controlling large areas of the northern half of the peninsula.

When unable to trade, Korean tribal societies mimicked the Xiongnu and raided the Chinese settlements, drawing strength and forging their own war bands. Among the early Korean polities noted in Chinese records in the north were Joseon, Goguryeo, and Buyeo, a frequent ally of the Han. With the collapse of the Han, each of these Korean societies lost a valuable partner and source of weapons, technology, and wealth. In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, all three struggled to defend themselves against rising powers in the north, such as the Xianbei.

In roughly the same time frame, in the central and southern parts of the Korean Peninsula, and therefore beyond the reach of Chinese administration, three groups known collectively as the Three Han established their territories. Chinese sources from the time refer to people in the southwest as the Mahan, those in the southeast as Jinhan, and between them a group known as the

Byeonhan. These societies were ruled by aristocratic families that chose a chief and controlled the lives of lower-ranking commoners, servants, and enslaved people.

The Three Han were far less formidable military powers than their counterparts to the north, in part because they lacked horses and fought primarily on foot. On the other hand, they showed considerable cultural fluidity and knowledge of their neighbors. In Jinhan, many tattooed their bodies in decorative patterns like those found on the bodies of the Wa living in Japan, not surprising given that groups moved relatively freely between Japan and Korea in this age. Residents of Korea traveled to Japan, sometimes as traders and fishers and other times as migrants and permanent settlers. In Mahan, clothing and hairstyles mimicked a style used by the Xianbei on the Inner Asian Steppe, even as their lifestyles revolved around farming rather than a nomadic culture lived on horseback. Indeed, it appears that early Korean societies were quite selective in their borrowing.

Practices such as the *levirate*, in which a young male marries his elder brother's widow, were used widely by Inner Asian Steppe peoples and adopted by a number of early Korean ruling families. But the decision whether to emulate the Chinese, Japanese, or other neighbors presented a range of options and cultural choices for chieftains and elite families to build on in this age.

The decline of Chinese power in the fourth century unleashed a wave of refugees that proved pivotal in speeding up the process of state-building in Korea, opening an age known as the Three Kingdoms (313–668 CE). The three kingdoms in questions were Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla (Figure 5.11). Chinese immigrants resettling within the bounds of Korea provided a source of knowledge about political practices that strengthened the rule of elites, transforming them into kings. These kings commanded large armies, drawing legitimacy from their military prowess and creating mounded tombs that required vast resources and labor. From the struggles against groups such as the Khitan and Xianbei in the north emerged the kingdom of Goguryeo. In the late fourth century, under the leadership of King Gwanggaeto, this kingdom drove southward in a series of expansionist wars against its main rival, the Korean kingdom of Baekje and its allies from Japan, the Wa. In doing so, Goguryeo managed to make the third of the Three Kingdoms, Silla, a vassal by the early fifth century.



Figure 5.11 Ancient Korea. Three pivotal kingdoms—Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla—dominated trade and cultural exchange with China and Japan and vied to unify all of Korea under their rule. A fourth kingdom, Gaya, remained relatively weak in this period and in 532 CE was absorbed by Silla. (credit: modification of work “Map of Goguryeo (476)” by “solicitatia”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Beyond Goguryeo's militarism, its expansion was marked by two other critical developments. The first was its skillful use of diplomacy and regional politics to manage alliances and threats, playing off groups within and around the Korean peninsula to secure its power. The second was the adoption of a written script from China, evidenced by 414 CE in a stone slab inscribed to note the accomplishments of King Gwanggaeto upon his death. Goguryeo's elites also learned from the Chinese the art of adorning their large, mounded tombs with colorful murals depicting the lives of royals surrounded by dancers, servants, and enslaved people. Images of large battles, wrestling matches, and mythical creatures such as the phoenix in other mural scenes suggest the emergence of a rich courtly life.

During the Three Kingdoms era, the Chinese writing system spread throughout Korea, allowing those excluded from the ranks of aristocratic families a chance to seek appointment as scribes. The literacy necessary to study Confucian texts or Buddhist sutras, teachings of the Buddha, was a rare and very valuable skill. Knowledge of Chinese culture was another means to a life within the Korean courts, especially when writing poetry became a favorite pastime of Korean royalty and composing an eloquent verse was a critical sign of nobility and refinement. Many kingdoms sent royals, aristocrats, traders, scholars, and monks to China as apprentices to acquire skills and expertise they could bring home. These groups had an indelible impact on early Korean culture and society, particularly as Buddhism developed and grew into distinct sects and traditions. A few Korean Buddhist monks even traveled as far as India and central Asia, while others worked as teachers in the Three Kingdoms, inspiring new forms of painting, sculpture, and jewelry, and later the famed Buddhist monument, the first-century Seokguram Grotto (Figure 5.12).



Figure 5.12 The Seokguram Grotto. Created in the eighth century CE, this Buddhist monument lies in an enormous temple complex on the slopes of Mount Toshan, an architectural marvel and exemplar of Buddhist motifs that modern Koreans consider a national treasure. (credit: "Front view of Seokguram from front chamber" by Cultural Heritage Administration/Wikimedia Commons, Korea Open Government License Type I: Attribution)

These changes to the Korean political, social, and spiritual landscape also powered Gogoryeo's rival state Baekje. The kingdom of Baekje emerged from its home near the Liao River in Manchuria to conquer and absorb the Mahan territory in 369. To consolidate their control over the southwestern area of the peninsula, Baekje's rulers created a Chinese-style bureaucracy with a chief minister and carried on a successful maritime trade with China and Japan. Demand for Chinese culture, weapons, and Buddhism gave Baekje influence and prestige in Japan. However, a military defeat by Goguryeo and Silla in 475 kept Baekje hemmed in below the Han River. Afterward, Baekje turned its energy to upsetting the balance of power on the Korean peninsula by entreating Silla to rise against Goguryeo, its protector and overlord.

Ultimately, however, it was Silla that emerged from these plots to unify a larger share of today's Korea than any kingdom that preceded it. The smallest kingdom at the beginning of the era, located in the southeastern corner of the peninsula, Silla was ruled by powerful families that, like their neighbors, eventually copied models from China to wield power. Silla's rulers created Chinese-style ministries and codes of law and supported the practice of Buddhism to enhance their prestige and legitimacy. Maritime trade later proved a channel for Silla to form an alliance with a reunified China under the Sui and then the Tang dynasties. Conflict between Goguryeo and the Sui began in the 590s and lasted for decades. Later, the Tang supplanted the Sui and renewed Chinese ambitions to dominate the Korean peninsula.

By the 640s, the skillful diplomacy of Queen Seondeok of Silla (Figure 5.13) had leveraged the hostility between Goguryeo and the Chinese into the means for a Silla alliance with the Tang. Her kingdom's ships proved invaluable in ferrying Chinese armies onto the peninsula to lay conquest. Together, Silla and the Tang first subjugated Baekje and then eliminated Goguryeo in the north. Then, while the Tang set up bureaucracies to administer Korea, Seondeok's successors in Silla conspired with the defeated forces of their rivals to evict the invaders. Together, the remnants of the Baekje and Goguryeo's armies under the sway of Silla expelled Chinese forces in 676, ushering in a new era of unified rule over much of the peninsula that lasted from 668 to 892 CE. For a time, Silla severed its relations with the Tang, forgoing a critical resource that had powered its survival for centuries. But by the eighth century, new threats to both the Tang and Silla had emerged in the north. As a result, Silla once again sent tribute to the Chinese in return for protection and trade.


1
2

Figure 5.13 The Gold Crown of Silla. The kingdom of Silla left behind examples of its impressive and famous gold working skill. This gold crown, likely owned by a queen in the fifth century BCE, was found in a tomb in the early twentieth century in Gyeongju, the capital of Silla. While we can't know for sure, Queen Seondeok likely wore a similar crown. (credit: "Gold Crown of Silla Kingsom" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

Part of Queen Seondeok's legacy was a period of unprecedented female rule, during which new art forms emerged that in later centuries became distinctive Korean traditions. In ancient Korea, women wielded power as royal princesses, and affluent women often served as advisors and regents. But Queen Seondeok's reign paved the way for future queens of Silla, Jindeok, and Jinseong, to inherit the throne. Over time, Korean artisans learned from China how to make celadon ceramic, known for its lustrous green glaze, creating exquisite vases, jugs, bowls, and even pillows with Buddhist motifs such as cranes and clouds. In later centuries these works helped support a robust trade network running from China through Korea to Japan.

Beyond the Book

The Tombs of Goguryeo

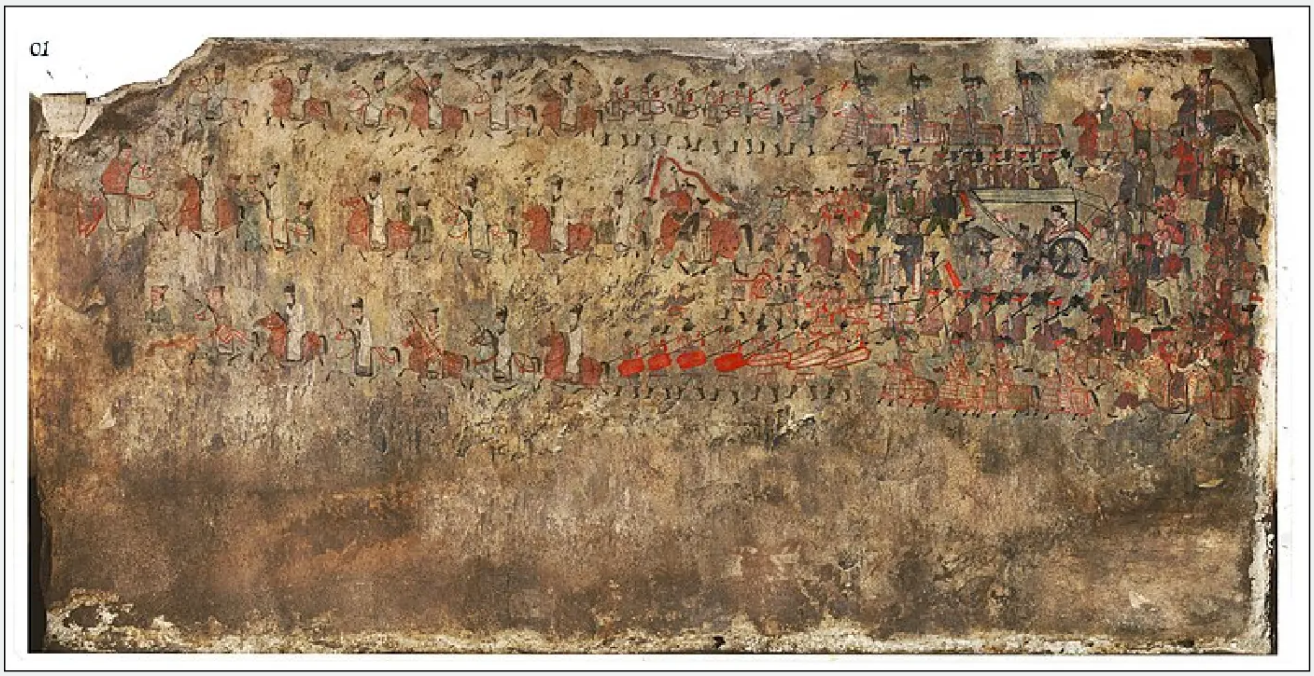
Chinese rulers were not the only ones to build tombs that provide us with clues about what they valued in life. The rulers of the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo also constructed tombs decorated with murals depicting everyday scenes, presumably representing the lives they had lived and the lives they hoped to have after death. Shown here (Figure 5.14) are murals from the tomb of a Goguryeo man who was buried in the fourth century CE, not long after the end of China's Qin dynasty. As you study the images, consider what they tell us about life among the Goguryeo elite at this time.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 5.14 A Tomb of Goguryeo. (a) The tomb's owner is depicted. (b) A woman, most likely his wife, is shown, which was painted on the wall close to the image of the man so that she faces him. Image (c) shows a procession, complete with carts and mounted soldiers, from the tomb's corridor. (credit a: modification of work "A drawing in one of the chambers of the Goguryeo tombs. Painting in Anak Tomb No. 3" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Mural Art in Anak Tomb No. 3. Painting in Anak Tomb No. 3" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit c: modification of work "Preserved wall mural of Anak tomb 3 (procession scene)" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- What do these murals tell you about the lives of Goguryeo's elite? What did they value and what were their concerns?
- Do you see any Chinese influences in these depictions? If so, where are they?

Ancient Japan

As in Korea, geography shaped much of Japan's early development and history. Four main islands make up Japan. The northernmost is Hokkaido. Then comes Honshu, which is home to Tokyo and the largest present-day population. Continuing south, the next island is Shikoku, and finally Kyushu, which is closest to the Asian mainland. Japan today also includes the islands of Okinawa and thousands of others strewn across the Pacific. But much of the story of ancient Japan concerns only the main isles, the inland Sea of Japan, the country's countless mountains, and a few fertile plains fed by monsoon rains that sustain agriculture.

Critical to the formation of the main islands and their geographical features is the belt known as the Ring of Fire (Figure 5.15), mapped by a horseshoe-shaped line drawn around the rim of the Pacific Ocean to mark a zone of frequent earthquake and volcanic activity that has generated countless tsunamis in Japan's distant past and modern day.

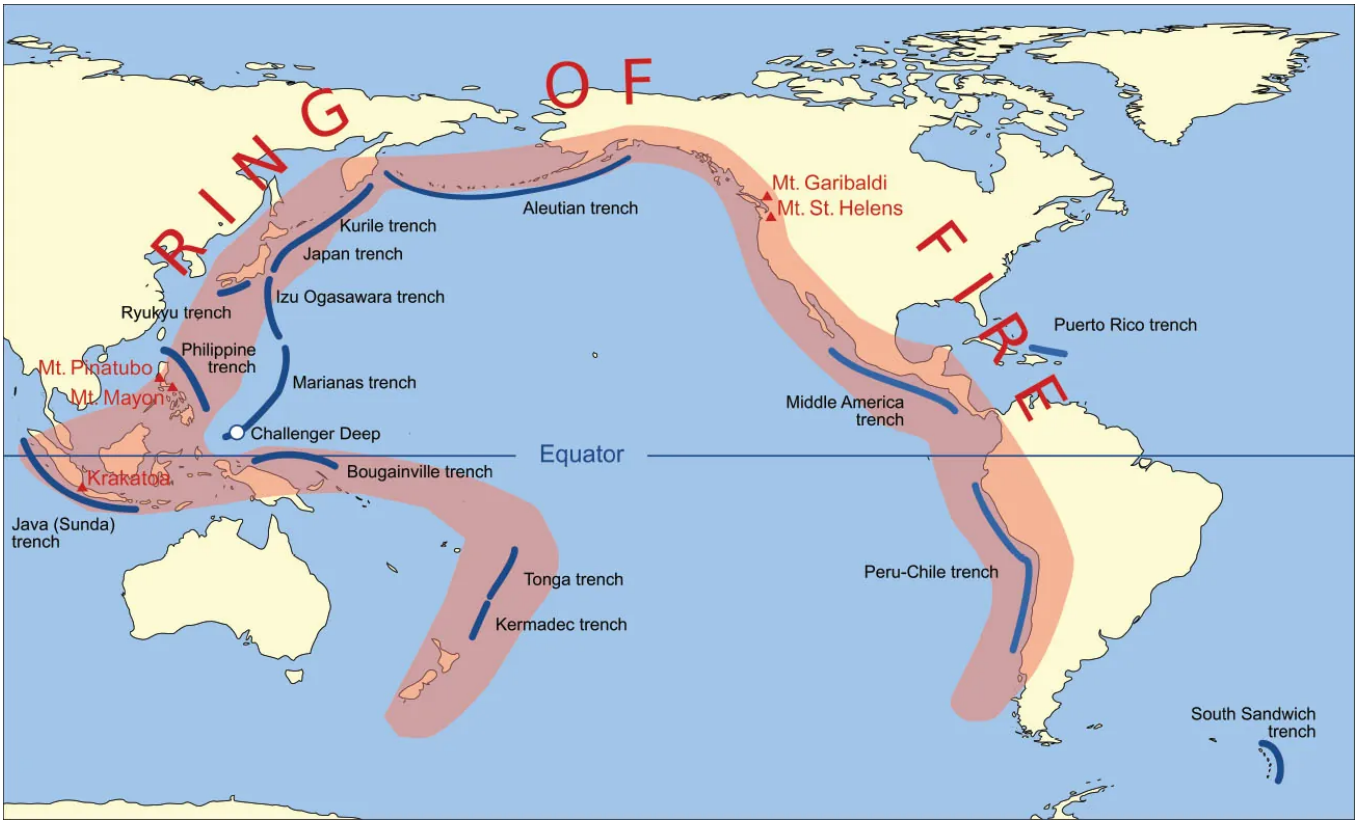


Figure 5.15 The Ring of Fire. A horseshoe-shaped line running around the rim of the Pacific Ocean marks the Ring of Fire, an area where frequent shifts of tectonic plates cause earthquakes, volcanic activity, and tsunamis that have plagued Japan for centuries. (credit: "Pacific Ring of Fire" by "Gringer"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The story of prehistoric Japan is typically divided into two halves: the era of Jōmon hunters, ranging from 14,500 to 300 BCE, and that of the Yayoi agriculturalists who emerged after them to dominate the centuries from 300 BCE to 300 CE. These groups had no concept of themselves as "Japanese" in a sense recognizable to us today. But they left their imprint on the main isles via migration, settlement, and the development of practices for making the fertile plains, mountainous forests, and innumerable ocean bays and rivers their homes. Without written records, our knowledge of the Jōmon and Yaoyi is almost wholly based on the archaeological evidence and contemporary theories about the pathways humanity followed out of Africa and across the world. Early hominids likely made their way to the Japanese archipelago when it was still connected to the Asian continent, perhaps over 100,000 years ago. Hunting giant mammals such as elephants, wolves, and enormous deer, many of these early hunters moved to an area near today's Sea of Japan. Much later, changing climates led ocean levels to slowly rise and cover the stretches of land that connected Japan to the Asian mainland.

Linguists theorize that ultimately three early waves of foragers and hunters made their way overland or across the Tsushima Strait that separates the four main isles from the Asian mainland. These groups were descended from Ural-Altaic, Chinese, and Austro-Asiatic peoples. The climate shift that severed Japan from the Asian continent around twelve thousand years ago transformed the

newly formed isles and the game these people once hunted. Grasslands for bison disappeared, for example, and wolves became smaller.

But the early inhabitants adapted, inventing new technologies to enhance their chances for survival. In the caves of Kyushu, archaeologists have found evidence of one of the world's earliest technological breakthroughs, the development of pottery. Known for its elaborate handles and distinctive cord patterns around rims, this pottery allowed Japan's inhabitants to become more sedentary and less dependent on finding wild game and foraging for edible plants. First used to store vegetables and boil water from the sea to make salt, the pottery called Jōmon was likely later used for rituals to promote unity and cooperation (Figure 5.16). The increasingly sophisticated culture of the people, also called Jōmon, was characterized by settlements with shared spaces for burials, food storage, and elaborate ceremonies. Among the important cultural symbols were earthenware figurines known as *dogu*.



Figure 5.16 Jōmon Artifacts. (a) This Jōmon pottery food container (c. 3500–2500 BCE) is among the earliest examples of the craft of pottery found in the world. (b) The *dogu* figurine (c. 1000–300 BCE) likely represents a female god, hinting at the spiritual life of the early inhabitants of Japan's main isles. Such figures are thought to have served as forms of sympathetic magic that healed illness and helped with childbirth. (credit a: modification of work "Deep Vessel" by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Dogū (Clay Figurine)" by The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Skeletal remains of the Jōmon people suggest that despite their diverse diet of fruits, nuts, and seafood such as clams and fish, they lived with the constant threat of starvation and malnutrition. Another shift in the region's climate produced a deadly drop in temperatures that led to a decline in the populations of game such as deer and boar. To survive, many Jōmon moved to the coastal areas to supplement their food supply by fishing. Others likely began experimenting with early forms of agriculture; evidence suggests the cultivation of yams and lily-bulbs in the years from 3000 to 2400 BCE. Further evidence of early agriculture comes from traces of rice found in jars dated to the later years of the Jōmon era.

Agriculture and the Yayoi

The next phase of Japan's prehistory is marked by the leap into agriculture and is known by the name of a separate people and culture, the Yayoi. Beginning in 300 BCE, a new wave of migrants descended from groups in northern Asia began arriving on the southern island of Kyushu. They brought with them knowledge about cultivating barley, buckwheat, and later rice, and gradually they overwhelmed and replaced the Jōmon. Later, the Yayoi built impressive storehouses for grain and domesticated horses and

dogs. Other archaeological sites show that, as Yayoi culture spread, the people developed the capacity to engineer the landscape for farming by creating irrigation canals, wells, and pits. Agriculture brought stability and growth, and the Yayoi population is estimated to have ballooned to more than half a million people by the first centuries of the common era.

The Yayoi period marked a turning point in Japan's prehistory. From this point forward, Korea, China, and Japan were in more consistent contact than in the centuries before. This was especially the case because in the Bronze Age, with copper in short supply on the islands of Japan, the Yayoi were forced to import much of the material. The Yayoi period also marked the beginning of a written record of Japan.

Han conquests and the construction of garrisons on the Korean peninsula began a period of trade in bronze mirrors, iron weapons, and agricultural practices transmitted via Korea to Japan. The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and later the kingdom of Cao Wei (220–265 CE) also sent occasional envoys to Japan (which the Han called the Wa kingdom). These envoys left behind the first written records of the lives and cultures of the Yayoi. Their observations show a slow but gradual transformation of society and politics. Despite increasing food surpluses and material abundance, the Yayoi people at first remained largely communal, sharing wooden tools and public spaces. Over time, the appeal of certain areas and sites for agriculture led to competition and increasing warfare and, by extension, the emergence of states to provide for defense.

Chinese records also note the distinctive style of dual governance—in which power was shared between male and female rulers—that developed in early Japanese states at the end of the Yayoi era. Among the notable rulers was Queen Himiko, who ruled in the early third century and, in return for paying tribute to the Chinese emperor, was recognized as an ally and given a golden seal. Ruling alongside Himiko was her younger brother, who handled the administration of her realm. The Cao Wei's records show that Himiko was at war with a neighboring king and staked the legitimacy of her rule on her spiritual powers, expressed in elaborate burials, the practice of divination, and other sacred rituals. Through such specialization, ancient Japanese women exercised political power and influence, possibly built upon the legacy of the Jōmon, whose *dogu* figurines depicted women as deities ensuring fertility and safety.

Chinese envoys noted that Japan was also home to an increasingly stratified society that included aristocratic families, merchants, skilled divers and fishers, farmers, and other commoners. With warfare constant, palaces looked more like garrisons, but granaries and markets were full and lively. And while these early Japanese lacked a written script, the Yayoi did develop a rich art form literally written on their bodies, as the practice of tattooing patterns to denote rank, status, and family was widespread in this era.

The Dawn of the Yamato Age

Records of Queen Himiko's era also suggest a growing concentration of political power and control over territories held by a loose confederation of states and powerful families. This period, known as the Yamato era, was marked by the construction of tombs for deceased royals like Himiko, who were buried with an impressive array of treasures and human sacrifices to accompany them in the afterlife.

It may be that the onset of the Yamato era was produced by a changing climate and constant turmoil in Japan, as a result of which many of the island's inhabitants despaired and abandoned deities who seemed negligent in their duty to protect them. Instead, new gods associated with an imported technology—mirrors from China and Korea—arose to take their place. Powerful rulers and a new military class forged from warfare associated themselves with these new gods, or more importantly, with the female god of the Sun, Amaterasu, who soon became the ancestral figurehead of the imperial household. Yamato kings further accrued power by brokering alliances, managing trade, giving symbolic gifts, and presiding over ceremonies designed to forge a common culture across Japan.

As co-rulers of a kingdom or heads of households, women continued to wield political clout by using expertise in sorcery via items such as mirrors and often expressing their triumphs in gold jewelry and earrings. Many spiritual practices were imported from earlier Chinese dynasties such as the Shang dynasty. For example, during the burial of Queen Himiko, Chinese envoys recorded that Japanese employed the art of divining the future with heated bones by reading their cracks to foretell the outcome of harvests and wars. Other burial practices such as water purification were more indigenous to Japan and left an imprint on later religions such as Shintoism. Later, new foreign religions such as Buddhism were used by women such as Empress Suiko, who ruled in the early seventh century CE and sought to preserve women's role in politics through practices such as piety, rigorous study of sutras, and the construction of shrines and temples.

Regardless, it was the construction of large keyhole-style tombs and control over the burial rituals that brought the Yamato rulers power over the area stretching from western Honshu to northern Kyushu. Employing laborers and skilled artisans such as blacksmiths, the Yamato tomb makers showed their wealth and organizational capacity, skills they used later to create capital cities with large markets and highways to the countryside and the coastal ports. To centralize power, kings soon began issuing law codes, such as Prince Shotoku's Seventeen Article Constitution in 604. The emphasis on law as the basis for rule, the creation of a bureaucracy to help rulers govern, and Confucian values embedded in the document show the Yamato's reliance on Chinese culture as a source of ideas and inspiration. Borrowing from the Chinese model for imperial statecraft, the Yamato strengthened their rule with mythology and bejeweled regalia, elevating kings to godlike status and eventually transforming them into emperors. Later legal codes such as the Kiyomihara Codes in 689 organized monasteries, created a judiciary, and managed relations between the king's advisors and vassals. These set the stage for the evolution of Japan's culture and political system in the later Heian and Nara periods.

Link to Learning

Prince Shotoku's "Seventeen Article Constitution" was an effort to reform the Japanese state along the lines of the Chinese imperial model. Read the translated law codes at Columbia University's Asia for Educators site.

To the north, beyond the lands of the Yamato, was another group descended from the early Jōmon foragers who had lived on and resisted the sweep of Yayoi settled agriculture. Later, they continued to forage and hunt and practice their own spiritual beliefs, rejecting the Yamato cultural sphere and its borrowings from China, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and the idea of large states governed by kings and emperors. While the later Japanese imperial courts in Nara and Heian deepened ties with China's Tang dynasty, these northern people existed in another orbit defined by contact with smaller northern Asian cultures, such as the Satsumon people of Hokkaido. Relations with the descendants of the Yamato to the south soured over these centuries, as Nara and Heian came to call the northerners *Emishi*, or "barbarians." The Emishi survived from the seventh to the eleventh century despite repeated attempts by emperors and militarists from the south to subjugate them. They resisted via war, moved to remote areas, and used other forms of evasion, but the culture of Japan's south moved inexorably north, and the smaller remnants of the Emishi were subdued by the end of the ninth century.

Southeast Asia

The term "Southeast Asia" describes a large area in subtropical Asia that can also include thousands of islands in the Pacific. Today it often refers to Brunei, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. For much of human history, travel across this area was far easier by boat along the shore and between islands than overland. Lands were more sparsely populated than in India, China, Japan, and Korea, and most communities were isolated from their closest neighbors by forests and mountains. Early on, however, they became able to engage with other peoples through the sea lanes.

In general, communities in Southeast Asia settled first along coastlines near rivers, lakes, and the oceans and seas. But archaeological sites in Thailand, Burma, and Laos prove that many chose to make upland regions their homes as well. As in India, early agriculture was driven by the rhythms of monsoon season. Farmers developed rainwater tanks to manage their supply of water and learned how to grow rice in paddies. A reliance on slash-and-burn agriculture meant that many Southeast Asians had to migrate after the soil had been exhausted, making the population fluid as people moved from one area to the next. The social structure, too, was less stratified than in India and China. Only with the later arrival of new religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism did priestly and kingly classes start to form and play a central role in religion and politics.

Despite its great territorial expanse and varying climates and topography, the region does have broad commonalities that make it useful to see Southeast Asia as one geographic and cultural zone (Figure 5.17). For example, its location between India and China led to the growth of royal courts that borrowed from foreign traditions to develop rituals and diplomatic relations, assert control over ordinary farmers and fishers, and create trading-post empires. The region's geography and climate also made sailing a universally efficient craft. For centuries, merchants and adventurers traveling from the Indian landmass along the coastlines of Asia have exploited monsoon winds from June to November that easily push boats all the way to the Malaysian peninsula. Return voyages were made possible by a second set of monsoon winds blowing in the opposite direction from December to May. The holdover period between the two monsoon seasons proved ample time for merchants and missionaries to transplant customs, religion, and art from India to new environs in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the arrival of boats and merchants traveling from

Vietnam and Malaysia to China and back as early as 300 BCE meant residents of Southeast Asia enjoyed a rich marketplace of ideas, goods, and cultures at a very early stage in world history.

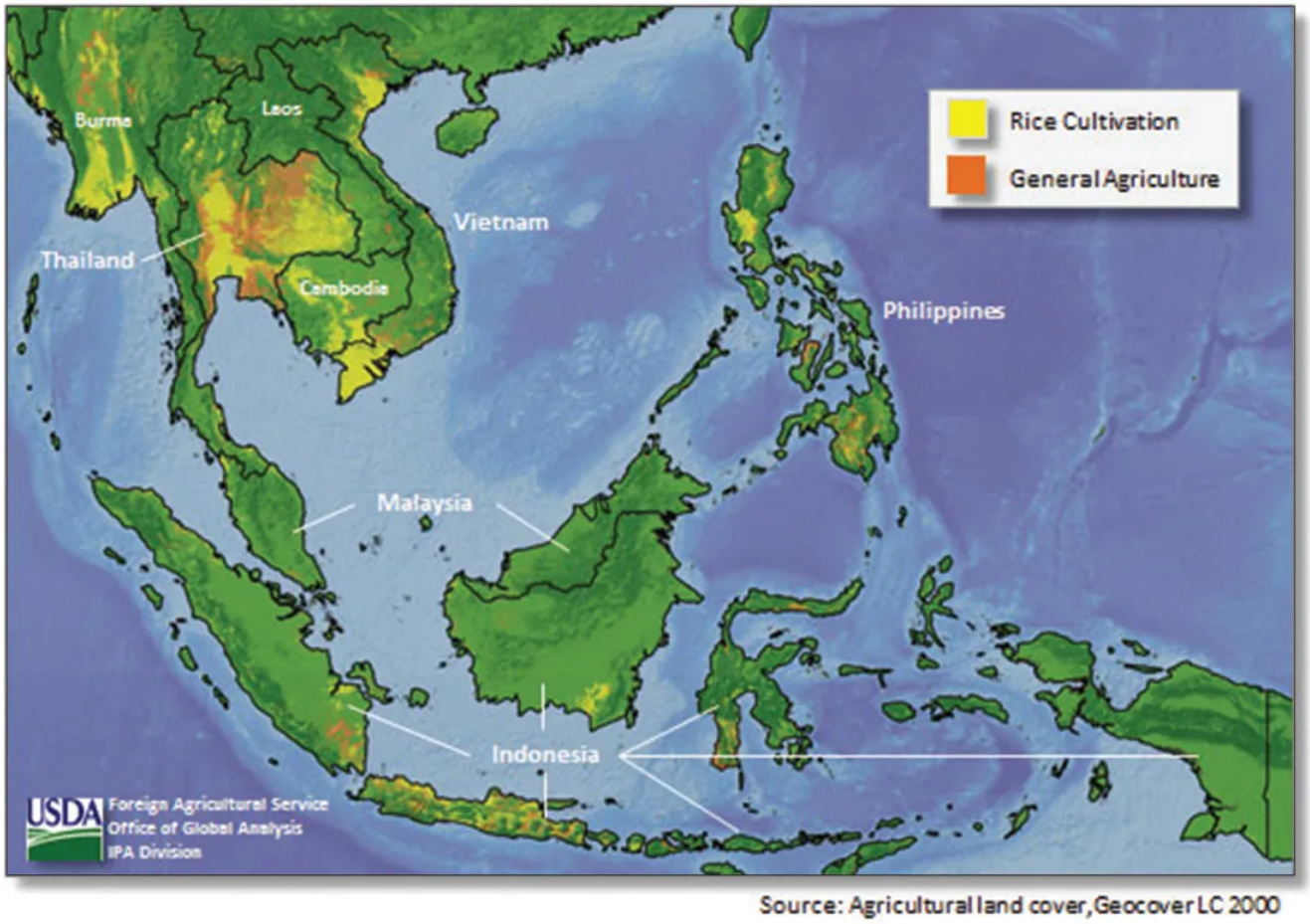


Figure 5.17 Southeast Asia. The expanse of Southeast Asia includes varied topographies and climates but also some common historical and cultural features, such as the practice of wet-rice agriculture and religions such as Buddhism. (credit: "SE Asia: Distribution of Agricultural Lands" by Agricultural land cover, Geocover LC 2000"/USDA: Foreign Agricultural Service, Public Domain)

While the influx of foreign ideas was critical to the development of societies across Southeast Asia, each local community made selective adaptations and preserved its indigenous customs. For example, the importance of the individual family was a point of commonality for many societies in Southeast Asia, in contrast to the weight given extended families and clans in India and China. Most peasant communities in Southeast Asia also afforded women higher status than their counterparts in China were allowed under the stricter Confucian values system.

Archaeological remains of the region's prehistory show that inhabitants of northeast Thailand used bronze and mastered agriculture as early as 3000 BCE. Evidence found at Non Nok Tha shows that they grew rice and cast bronze in factories using molds, later producing iron objects. The spread of rice cultivation produced densely populated centers along the region's smaller fertile plains. Expanding populations were often forced into hilly regions, which they made suitable for farming by creating terraces. Migration chains and artifacts such as simple tools suggest that by the time the inhabitants of India began making contact with Southeast Asia, the islands and coastline settlements there were dominated by peoples related to Malays, who had made their way from southern China. Expert sailors working with finished stone tools and navigating by the stars, these peoples developed long, narrow boats that navigated Southeast Asia's water with speed and grace. Moreover, they left behind cultures with maritime traditions that echo today with Malaysians, Indonesians, and the people of Singapore.

The archaeological record of Southeast Asia's prehistory is less clear than that of many other areas of the world, however, and its study has been hampered by many circumstances, including the political volatility of countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia

after 1945. As a result, historians often look to the region's villages and families for insights into its remote past. For example, cultivating rice in terraced rice paddies requires skill and cooperation among many families, likely making this task the basis for village leadership and unity. Elders with experience in selecting breeds, transplanting young plants, and negotiating water resources likely used their authority to foster consensus around values and politics oriented toward giving deference to seniority. It is also possible that growing rice is particularly suited to cultures with animist religions, which venerate deities and spirits thought to inhabit nature. Rites and festivals to honor grains and timber and to appease forces that control wind and rain are still important to local cultures in Southeast Asia today, even as many people also participate in universal religions such as Buddhism.

Occupations offer another important point of continuity. Fishing, farming, and craftwork in fabrics are depicted in carvings found in caves, temples, and mountainsides and remain the primary labor activities of rural peoples today. For example, in Brunei many people still live much of their life on the water—at work as fishers and divers as well as at play when racing boats and swimming. Houses and many other buildings are still situated in the hills or on stilts to protect them from flooding, and many people share a diet of fish, simple grains, and coconut, just as their ancestors did.

In early Southeast Asia, trade and the arrival of outside religion were critical to the development of larger states and powerful kingdoms. Even in the interior, Buddhist artwork and texts flowed in steadily from 300 to 600 CE. The mouths of great rivers linked the interiors and the coasts, and capitals and small principalities that developed there taxed the trade on goods traveling to and from the wider world. During these centuries, Southeast Asians also traveled to India to trade and learn Sanskrit. When Indian elites and literate Buddhists arrived, they came to be known as *purohita*, advisers to Southeast Asia's powerful chiefs and nobility. Other immigrants became teachers and founded temples across the region's landscape, critical hubs that promoted travel, learning, and commerce.

As they did in India, Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted with local religions in much of Southeast Asia. In areas such as the kingdom of Srivijaya, which ruled over the island of Sumatra and southern Malaya Peninsula from the seventh to the twelfth centuries CE, Indian merchants and missionaries were welcomed, while the people retained their own religious traditions rooted in the worship of spirits that inhabited trees, rocks, water, and various physical features of the land. Proclaiming themselves "Lord of the Mountains," Srivijaya's rulers patronized Buddhism to foster trade relations across the Malaccan Straits and Indian Ocean.

Other communities, such as nearby Borobudur, which controlled central Java in Indonesia, were more firmly devoted to Buddhism. There, Buddhism inspired countless converts and the later Shailendra Kings (775–860 CE) to erect the world's largest Buddhist monument, a structure more than one hundred feet above the ground and adorned with magnificent artwork (Figure 5.18). Buddhists from all over Southeast Asia made pilgrimages to Borobudur, leaving behind thousands of clay tablets and pots as offerings. Wreckage from a nearby ship dated to the ninth century shows that the people of Borobudur were engaged in commerce that connected them to Islamic and Arabic cultures in the Middle East. Like many heads of Southeast Asian states, Borobudur rulers staked their political legitimacy on setting a pious example for their subjects and thrived economically by opening their ports to the wider world. Thus India's centrality to much of Southeast Asia in the ancient world was founded on trade, religion, and art. India was a repository of desired goods and a source of inspiration for religion and state-building, but also a bridge to the wider Eurasian world.



Figure 5.18 Borobudur. This 1913 photograph of the temple of Borobudur shows one side of the massive Buddhist structure with the local mountains in the background. In the upper left, one can see several of the seventy-two perforated stupas surrounding the central dome. Behind and to the left of the man posing for the photograph are just some of the over 2,600 decorated relief panels that adorn the site. (credit: modification of work "A terrace on the temple of Borobudur, Java, Indonesia, 1913" by State Library of New South Wales, PXD 162/150/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While much of Southeast Asia faced west toward India as the center of trade, culture, and religion, the area near today's Vietnam fell within the orbit of China's cultural sphere emanating from the east. The natural geography of Vietnam creates three distinct zones that shaped the evolution of the country from ancient times to the present: one area in the north surrounding the Red River delta; below that, in the south, another densely populated center on the Mekong River delta; and lastly, a long narrow land bridge along the coast squeezing between mountains to join the other two areas together. Humans practicing wet-field rice agriculture developed settlements in the northern zone sometime around 2500 BCE, and a millennium after, there is evidence of bronze-making by the region's inhabitants. But the most notable contribution to world history from this area in northern Vietnam came from the Dong Son culture (c. 600 BCE–200 CE), defined by its remarkable bronze drums decorated with cords and images of animals such as frogs. Dong Son drums have been found at sites all over Southeast Asia.

Whether the Dong Son culture and its drums originated in Vietnam or inside China near Yunnan province is the subject of debate. Evidence suggests that southeast China below the Yangtze River was once home to peoples who were more strongly linked, culturally and linguistically, to Southeast Asia than to the dynasties in the north such as the Shang and Zhou. During the Zhou dynasty, many non-Chinese societies and kingdoms inhabiting provinces such as Fujian and Yunnan were known as the Yue, the Mandarin version of "Viet." These areas and groups remained independent of Chinese control for centuries. Chinese records of the Yue demonstrate their sophistication and diversity. They were known for practicing wet-field rice cultivation, adorning their bodies with tattoos, and traveling widely by boat along the seas and the Red River that linked China to Vietnam.

These Chinese records further indicate that many early Vietnamese groups spoke a multitude of languages and were divided into as many as one hundred small polities, kingdoms, tribal clans, and autonomous villages. Unlike in northern China, there appears to have been no successful drive to centralize power under a unified dynasty in Vietnam's prehistory. In later centuries, many Vietnamese accepted the mythological lore of a mighty king known as Van-Lang, who in the seventh century BCE united the various tribes of the Yue and established a dynastic line of Hung kings. This origin tale eventually evolved to include a divine origin for the Vietnamese people, telling of a union between a dragon lord and a female mountain deity that produced the Hung royalty.

At best, Vietnam's prehistoric record can only validate the idea that chiefdoms grew increasingly large around 258 BCE. By then, the rulers of a new kingdom known as Au Lac had constructed an impressive capital arranged in the shape of a widening spiral near today's Hanoi. Later, around 179 BCE, Au Lac was conquered by another kingdom, Nam Viet, an offshoot of China's Qin dynasty. The area was later retaken by the Han dynasty, which attempted to establish permanent control by dividing its territory spanning southern China and northern Vietnam into nine administrative units. In 40 CE, Han control of the Red River delta ran afoul of two rebellious daughters of a Vietnamese general known as Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. The uprising launched by these women rallied native resistance from southern China to central Vietnam (Figure 5.19). Briefly victorious, the Trung sisters' rebellion was eventually squashed. Their legacy was indelible, however, and stories of their exploits riding elephants into battle became a source of Vietnamese nationalist pride and rejection of encroachment by outsiders such as the Chinese and, much later, the French.



Figure 5.19 Trung Trac and Trung Nhi. The sisters Trung Trac and Trung Nhi launched a short-lived rebellion against Chinese domination that has lived on popular memory as a potent symbol of Vietnamese national identity. Images such as this folk painting of them riding elephants into battle have long been a source of inspiration for resistance to foreign empires and, more recently, helped promote a role for women in politics and the military. (credit: "Hai ba trung Dong Ho painting" by "LuckyBirdie"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The end of the Trung sisters' uprising began a period of more direct Chinese governance, with the aim of assimilating the region and its inhabitants. Over time, however, the families of the Han generals and officials who were sent as administrators took on many local habits and customs, blurring the boundaries between Chinese and Vietnamese culture in the ancient world. By that time,

the area around the Red River delta had become critical to the Han's maritime trade in Southeast Asia. Thus, even after the dynasty collapsed, China's political dominance of northern Vietnam lasted into the next few centuries. Sporadic uprisings continued, occasionally resulting in independence for rulers in northern Vietnam. But the Sui and Tang relaunched campaigns to reabsorb the Red River delta. Thus, northern Vietnam remained on the border of the Chinese imperial frontier for centuries.

Farther south, an area known in the ancient world as Champa was settled by a wave of people arriving from the sea around 500 BCE. Distinct from the Dong Son culture, these people engaged in trade across the waterways of Asia, from India to the Philippines. Chinese records of a civilization in this central region of Vietnam describe a unique people who reserved a higher status for women than for men, and who used an Indian script written on leaves from trees. Indeed, all the remaining inscriptions on artifacts found within this region until the ninth century are written in Sanskrit.

Another import from India to central Vietnam was the idea of a society led by a priestly Brahman class and deities such as Shiva, identified with the Champa kings. Still, indigenous spirits and ancestors were worshipped as well, coexisting alongside the Indian imports whose foreignness faded slowly over the centuries. Lacking a large agricultural region to supply a powerful state, Champa may have been a region with many centers, loosely knit by trading networks exchanging rice, salt, horns, and sandalwood.

Even farther to the south, people known as the Khmers had made the Mekong River delta their home by the early centuries of the common era. Chinese texts referring to this region named it Funan, and its history shows many similarities to that of Champa, its neighbor to the north. Funan too was engaged in wide trade. Archaeological remains show items that made their way to Vietnam from India, the Middle East, and Rome. Funan's inhabitants and rulers imported features of Indian culture such as Sanskrit to help create royal courts, but little writing survived until the development of the powerful Khmer empire in the ninth century.

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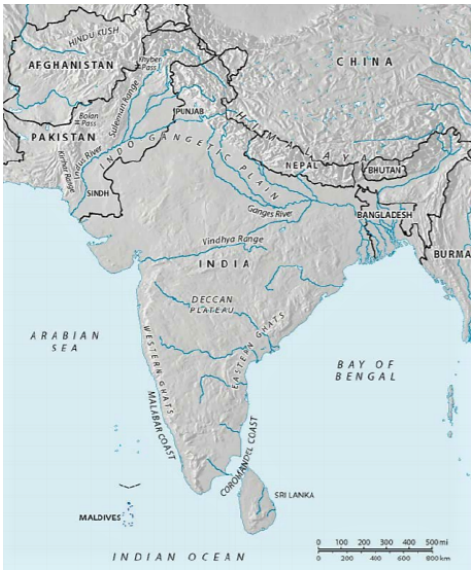
4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia

India's dynamic history, then, alternated between periods when the subcontinent was partially unified by empires and periods when it was composed of a shifting mosaic of regional states. This history was also impacted by influxes of migrants and invaders. In thinking about the reasons for these patterns, historians highlight the size of India and its diverse geography and peoples.

It is important to remember that "India" can mean different things. Today, India usually designates the nation-state of India (see Map **4.6.1**). But modern India only formed in 1947 and includes much less territory than India did in ancient times. As a term, India was first invented by the ancient Greeks to refer to the Indus River and the lands and people beyond it. When used in this sense, India also includes today's nation of Pakistan. In fact, for the purpose of studying earlier history, India can be thought of as the territory that includes at least seven countries today: India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. This territory is also referred to as South Asia or the Indian subcontinent.

The Indian subcontinent is where Indian civilization took shape. But that civilization was not created by one people, race, or ethnic group, and it doesn't make sense to see India's history as the history of one Indian people. Rather, the history of this region was shaped by a multitude of ethnic groups who spoke many different languages and lived and moved about on a diverse terrain suited to many different kinds of livelihood.

Large natural boundaries define the subcontinent. Mountain ranges ring the north, and bodies of water surround the rest. To the east lies the Bay of Bengal, to the south the Indian Ocean, and to the west the Arabian Sea. The largest mountain range is the Himalaya, which defines India's northern and northeastern boundary. A subrange of the Himalaya—the Hindu Kush— sits at its western end, while a ridge running from north to south defines the eastern end, dividing India from China and mainland Southeast Asia. To the northwest, the Suleiman Range and Kirthar Range complete what might seem like impassable barriers. Yet, these ranges are punctuated by a few narrow passes that connect India to Central Asia and West Asia.



Map **4.6.1**: South Asia (CC BY-SA 4.0; Larry Israel via Original Work)

To the south of the mountain ranges lie the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the two great rivers of northern India that comprise it: the Indus River and the Ganges River. These rivers originate in the Himalaya and are regularly fed by snow melt and monsoon rains. The Indus River, which is located in the northwest and drains into the Arabian Sea, can be divided into an upper and lower region. The region comprising the upper Indus and its many tributary rivers is called the Punjab, while the region surrounding the lower Indus is referred to as the Sindh. The Ganges River begins in the western Himalaya and flows southeast across northern India before draining into the Bay of Bengal. Because they could support large populations, the plains surrounding these river systems served as the heartland for India's first major states and empires.

Peninsular India is also an important part of the story because over time great regional kingdoms will also emerge in the south. The peninsula is divided from northern India by the Vindhya Mountains, to the south of which lies the Deccan Plateau. This arid plateau is bordered by two coastal ranges— the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, beyond which are narrow coastal plains, the Malabar

Coast and the Coromandel Coast. This nearly 4600 miles of coastline is important to India's history because it linked fishing and trading communities to the Indian Ocean and, therefore, the rest of Afro-Eurasia. Sri Lanka is an island located about thirty kilometers southeast of the southernmost tip of India, and also served as an important conduit for trade and cultural contacts beyond India.

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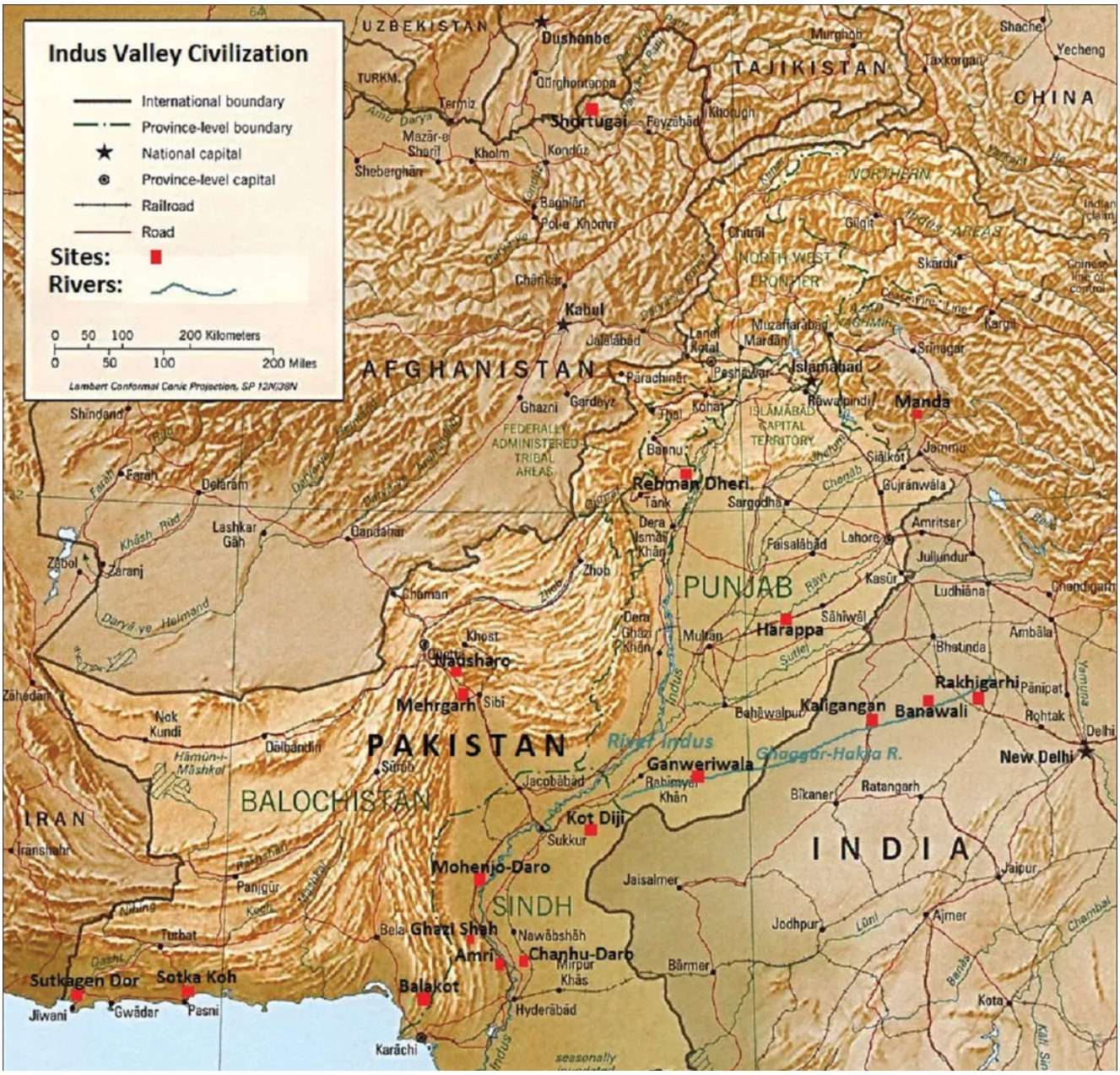
4.7: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the caste system and the way it functioned in Indian society
- Identify the main elements of Buddhism
- Describe India's faith traditions: Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

Few areas of the world are as important to our understanding of the emergence of human civilizations as India. Occupying an enormous subcontinent in South Asia, India has three distinct geographic zones: a northern area defined by the Himalayas that forms a natural barrier to the rest of the Asian mainland, the densely populated river valleys of the Indus and Ganges Rivers that lie to the south and northwest of that area, and lastly the tropical south, cut off from those valleys by many mountains and thick forests (Figure 5.20).



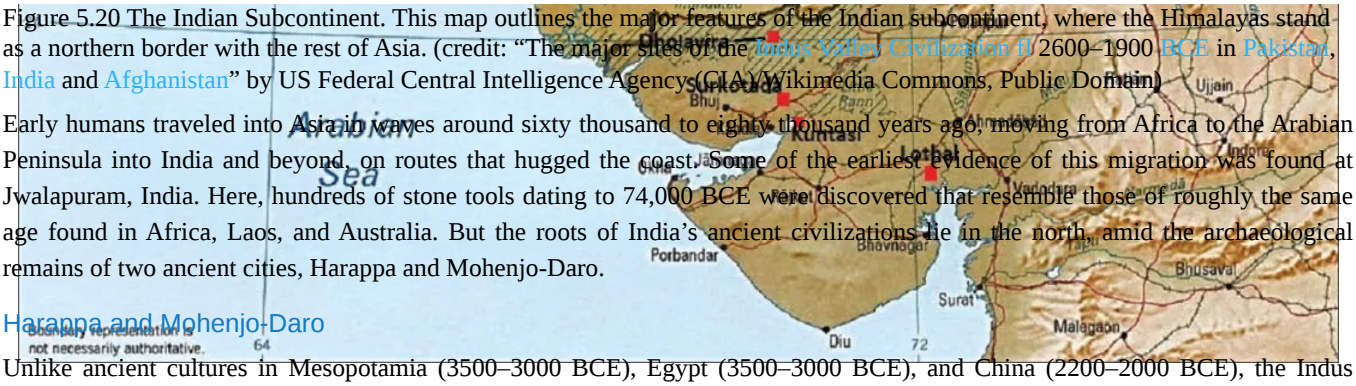


Figure 5.20 The Indian Subcontinent. This map outlines the major features of the Indian subcontinent, where the Himalayas stand as a northern border with the rest of Asia. (credit: "The major sites of the Indus Valley Civilization (2600–1900 BCE in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan" by US Federal Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Early humans traveled into Asia in waves around sixty thousand to eighty thousand years ago, moving from Africa to the Arabian Peninsula into India and beyond, on routes that hugged the coast. Some of the earliest evidence of this migration was found at Jwalapuram, India. Here, hundreds of stone tools dating to 74,000 BCE were discovered that resemble those of roughly the same age found in Africa, Laos, and Australia. But the roots of India's ancient civilizations lie in the north, amid the archaeological remains of two ancient cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro

Unlike ancient cultures in Mesopotamia (3500–3000 BCE), Egypt (3500–3000 BCE), and China (2200–2000 BCE), the Indus valley civilization shows little evidence of political power concentrated in the hands of hereditary monarchs. Yet its culture and technology spread, in an area running from parts of present-day Afghanistan into Pakistan and western India. There, early human communities capable of agriculture flourished near the fertile plains around the Indus River and other waters fed annually by the region's monsoons.

Farmers harvested domesticated crops of peas, dates, and cotton, harnessing the power of draft animals such as the water buffalo. The archaeological record shows few traces of any kind of elaborate monumental architecture, burial mounds, or domination by warriors and kings. Instead, a common culture grew that was defined by urban planning, complete with advanced drainage systems, orderly streets, and distinctive bricks made in ovens. Equipped with those tools, the Indus River valley produced two of the ancient world's most technologically advanced cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Within them, residents developed a highly urban society and rich spiritual life, with altars featuring fire and incense, practices such as ceremonial bathing, and a symbolic vocabulary using elephants and bulls as revered animals. Dedicated artisans made jewelry and fabrics. All these aspects of the Indus valley culture left an imprint on later Indian civilizations.

How did a civilization with a high degree of labor specialization and the coordination necessary for irrigated agriculture and large urban centers manage such complexity without a powerful centralized state? There is no consensus answer, though the Indus valley civilization may have developed as a series of small republic-like states, dominated by religious specialists such as priests presiding over an intensely hierarchical class system. It does seem likely, however, that the environmental toll the civilization inflicted upon the surrounding areas led to its decline. Over time, irrigation replaced fertile soil with soil having greater quantities of salt, lowering crop yields. The use of wood as a fuel source, such as for making the oven-fired bricks, led to rapid deforestation and even greater soil erosion. It appears that most communities in and around Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro abandoned the sites around 1700 BCE, when they became unable to feed and supply themselves. Before their decline, however, the two cities housed perhaps as many as forty thousand residents each, most of whom lived in comparatively luxurious homes of more than one story that featured indoor plumbing and were laid out in an orderly pattern along grid-like streets. Public buildings such as bathhouses were quite large, as were the protective city walls and citadels.

The development of a written script, found on clay seals and pottery at the sites, likely made such feats possible. The written language of the Indus valley civilization featured more than four hundred symbols that functioned as pictures of ideas, words, and numbers. While many of the symbols have yet to be deciphered, one of the primary functions of writing appears to have been commerce because many finished goods were stamped with written seals. Writing used as a means of communication and recordkeeping probably also helped the Indus valley civilization profit from long-distance trade with Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Merchants from Sumer traveled to the Indus River valley to establish trade in luxury items such as lapis lazuli. In return, it appears that traders and merchants from cities such as Harappa took up residence in cities in Mesopotamia to facilitate exchange. In this way, Mesopotamia exerted a recognizable influence on India's art and culture. Scholars have identified aspects of Greek naturalist art in sculptures found in Harappa, combined with local preferences for representing human bodies in motion rather than adopting the Greek emphasis on anatomical correctness. Art from these early cities helped usher in artistic styles and motifs that created a continuous tradition ingrained within Indian culture. Stone seals with fantastic beasts and anthropomorphic deities were later associated with Indian traditions such as yoga and Hindu deities.

Significant archaeological evidence suggests that urban women in the Indus valley were influential figures who functioned as specialists in rituals. More figurines were found depicting female than male deities, and women were typically buried with female

relatives—their mothers and grandmothers—and not with their husbands. This is not to suggest that all women were equals. The prevalence of contrasting hairstyles and clothing on many surviving figurines indicates that women were differentiated by a great number of class and ethnic markers.

Among the more intriguing clues to the way women fared in the Indus valley is a tiny artifact from Mohenjo-Daro called *Dancing Girl*, a bronze and copper figurine about 4.5 inches tall and dating from around 2500 BCE (Figure 5.21). Created by a method of casting bronze known as the "lost wax" method, the nude figure appears in a confident and relaxed pose, with her hair gathered in a bun. She may have represented a royal woman, a sacred priestess of a temple, or perhaps a lower-born tribal girl. That scholars can draw such a wide array of plausible conclusions speaks to the fact that the Indus valley likely had a very fluid class structure and a highly complex society.



Figure 5.21 Dancing Girl. A bronze and copper figurine from India, the tiny *Dancing Girl* found at Mohenjo-Daro stands as one of the most enigmatic artifacts from ancient Asia. (credit: modification of work "Bronze 'Dancing Girl,' Mohenjo-daro, c. 2500 BC" by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

The Aryans and Brahmanism

The Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent as conquerors beginning in 1800 BCE. With them came a new religion, Vedic, named for their hymns called Vedas. Vedas were sung in rituals to celebrate a pantheon of gods representing various aspects of nature and human life and were a useful way of teaching, given that the Aryans were illiterate. Gods such as Varuna ruled the sky, while Indra was the god of war. The Aryans offered ritualistic sacrifices to their gods and built enormous altars of fire, imposing a hierarchy on the people they conquered that emphasized strict observance of the law. The Vedas, along with poems and prayers, were first transmitted orally from one generation to the next; later they were recorded in the written language of Sanskrit. Over time, the Indian peoples added new dimensions to the Vedic religion, changing the nature of Aryan society as well. New gods such as Soma, associated with magical elixirs, storehouses for grain, and the moon, grew in importance as the practice of ritual became ever more meaningful.

A later series of treatises known as the *Upanishads*, written by a priestly class called Brahmans, developed new expressions of the Vedic religion, gradually transforming it into what many scholars refer to as Brahmanism. These new expressions include samsara and karma. Samsara was a view of humanity and the universe in which the soul left the body after death to be reborn. Karma represented the idea that all human actions, moral and immoral, were counted and weighed, ultimately governing whether a person was reborn higher on the spiritual ladder in the next life, perhaps as a king or priest, or—if ruined by immoral acts—as a lower life form, perhaps a detested reptile, to try again. The ultimate goal of a person's earthly life was to achieve union with Brahman, the ultimate and universal reality. Even gods needed to perform good acts such as penance or meditation to transcend to a higher plane of existence. Belief in reincarnation supported the idea that a person's status in the present life came about not by chance, but rather as a consequence of past lives. Thus the authority of elites such as the Brahmans was sanctified as reflecting the divine will of the cosmos.

In this way, the Vedic religion of the Aryans religion produced the *varna*, a strictly hierarchical society based on inherited status. At the highest level were the Brahmans, who exerted authority by virtue of their knowledge of the sacrificial rituals and their role as guardians of the poems, hymns, and later texts that carried on the Vedic traditions. Below them were aristocratic warriors, Kshatriya, members of noble families who fought in small but effective armies to protect their kingdoms and carry conquest into new areas. Members of the third class living in the upper half of society were merchants and Aryan commoners, Vaishya, who along with the other two enjoyed privileges based on the idea that in their late childhood they underwent a rebirth.

The fourth major group were the Shudras, non-Aryan servants and peasants who were denied the opportunity to read or listen to Vedic hymns and accounted for more than half the population. At the bottom of society were the Dalits, a class of "untouchables," who were likely the descendants of the populations that lived in parts of south India before the arrival of the Aryans. They were effectively outside and hierarchically below the four-tiered caste system. Prohibitions against marrying Indians from another caste were just one element of a constellation of provisions designed to keep everyone locked in their inherited class from birth to death. Taxes on the lower classes ensured that wealth remained at the top. In truth, the Indian subcaste system was quite complex. Distinctions between groups within each caste mattered a great deal as well, creating sub-castes that came with separate privileges, obligations, and social circles that fixed where people lived and who they could marry.

The caste system reflected Hindu religious beliefs by ensuring that people performed their proper role in this life based on their actions in the past. The laws preventing upward mobility and protecting the privilege of elites were seen as guaranteeing order. They kept the low-born from escaping the divine plan and the cosmic justice that allowed for a slow, steady advancement up the spiritual scale over a series of lives. The ultimate goal was release from the wheel of life, the never-ending transmission of the soul to ultimate peace. Thus the arrival of Aryans and the gradual emergence of Brahmanism created a new social blueprint for India.

Buddhism

Indian culture, religion, and art were forever transformed with the life of Buddha Sakyamuni around 563 BCE. The son of a royal family living near India's eastern border with Nepal and sometimes known as Siddartha or Gautama, Sakyamuni abandoned a life of luxury in his family's palace after experiencing an awakening, upon which he embarked on a spiritual journey that lasted the rest of his life. He came to be called the Buddha, meaning "enlightened," because his teachings offered an alternative to the then-dominant Brahmanist values.

Buddhism explores the depths of human suffering, desire, envy, decadence, and death, offering adherents a way out of an eternal cycle of misery if they adopt the Four Noble Truths leading to the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths acknowledge that pain and disappointment are an unavoidable part of life and that by focusing on spiritual matters via the Eightfold Path, pain and suffering can be overcome. By adopting Buddha's teachings about how to think, speak, and act with respect for all life, and many other practices, followers eventually arrive at an enlightened salvation called *nirvana*. Nirvana is a state of ultimate peace found in the extinction of all desire and transcendence of the person's very being. Without nirvana, upon death the soul is reincarnated into a new life that will again run the gamut of suffering, misery, and the search for enlightenment.

The teachings of Buddha and his followers issued a direct challenge to the status quo in ancient India. In his time, Buddha relished criticizing the Brahmans, questioning their authority and their dependence on ritualism. Continued generations of teachers, missionaries, and lay Buddhists used his teachings to assail the Brahmanist-based caste system. Female Buddhists were attracted by ideas promoting the opportunity for women to achieve enlightenment on an equal basis with men.

Before Buddhism, Brahmanist teachings had supported a system of gender that in the first centuries of the common era pronounced women's genitalia foul, leading women to be excluded from public rituals and worship. Buddhism protected women from being seen as spiritually unclean, promising them an elevated status and greater participation in the community's spiritual life. The same was true for members of the lower castes despite their inherited class. Both women and lower castes were drawn to Buddhism by the greater independence and freedom they found in it. But women adopting Buddhism often found the religion just as patriarchal: Buddhist monasteries were segregated into spheres for male monks and female nuns, and women were given lower positions and fewer privileges.

Buddhism never supplanted Brahmanism as the dominant religion in India. In later centuries, Buddhist thought and institutions were influenced by Brahmanism, incorporating deities such as Shiva and concepts such as karma. Boundaries between the two religions became blurred, a development that helped followers of Brahmanism and Buddhists find a means for coexistence and even cooperation. Buddhism arose in a historical context dominated by a Brahmanist society, and many Buddhist teachings and practices such as meditation reflect the influence of Brahmanism. Likewise, Brahmanism was greatly influenced by Buddhism and its popularity with certain classes in India. As a result, over several centuries between around 400 BCE and 200 CE, Brahmanism evolved into more of a devotional religion, allowing individual practitioners to communicate directly with the gods, not just through the Brahman priests. Worship became more personalized and private, centered on prayer and songs within the home. In this way, Brahmanism emerged as Hinduism, which retained the caste system and belief in the Vedas while also offering a prescription for common followers seeking to live a moral and fulfilling life. What emerged as the central text of Hinduism was called the *Bhagavad Gita*. Finished around 300 CE, it taught that commoners, not just Brahmans, could lead exemplary moral lives by abandoning bodily desires and seeking inner peace.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism were and remained diverse, branching into hundreds of schools of thought and sects that were each quite adaptable to local contexts. As it became institutionalized, however, Buddhism lost some of its early character as a means for liberation of the lowly of India. Instead it attracted the patronage of elites, who elevated it into Asia's most influential source of inspiration for monumental architecture and high art. Buddhism made inroads across all of Asia, coming to be adopted by millions in China, Korea, Thailand, Japan, and many other communities in Southeast Asia.

Dueling Voices

Hinduism and Buddhism in Ancient India

The first excerpt, concerning the Hindu tradition, is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, titled "Perform Action, Free from Attachment." The second, "Basic Teachings of the Buddha," includes a version of Buddhism's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Notice how each spiritual system conceived of immorality, the proper way to demonstrate right conduct and living, and the purpose of life.

> *8. Perform thou action that is (religiously) required;*
> *For action is better than inaction.*
> *And even the maintenance of the body for thee*
> *Can not succeed without action.*
> *9. Except action for the purpose of worship,*
> *This world is bound by actions;*
> *Action for that purpose, son of Kunti,*
> *Perform thou, free from attachment (to its fruits)*
> *10. Therefore unattached ever*
> *Perform action that must be done;*
> *For performing action without attachment*
> *Man attains the highest. . . .*
> *21. Whatsoever the noblest does,*
> *Just that in every case other folk (do);*

> *What he makes his standard,*
> *That the world follows.*
> *35. Better one's own duty, (tho) imperfect,*
> *Than another's duty well performed;*
> *Better death in (doing) one's own duty;*
> *Another's duty brings danger.*
>
> *—Bhagavad Gita, translated by Franklin Edgerton*

> *What, now, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering; Decay is suffering; Death is suffering; Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief, and Despair, are suffering; not to get what one desires, is suffering. . . .*
>
> *What, now, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to fresh rebirth, and, bound up with pleasure and lust, now here, now there, finds ever fresh delight.*
>
> *What, now, is the Noble Truth of the Extinction of Suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this desire, its forsaking and giving up, the liberation and detachment from it. . . .*
>
> *It is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way that leads to the extinction of suffering, namely: 1. Right Understanding, 2. Right Mindedness, which together are Wisdom. 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action, 5. Right Living, which together are Morality. 6. Right Effort, 7. Right Attentiveness, 8. Right Concentration, which together are Concentration. This is the Middle Path which the Perfect One has found out, which makes one both to see and to know, which leads to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. . . .*
>
> *—Buddha, the Word, edited by Nyanatiloka*

- Based on these excerpts, what does it mean for one to lead a moral life in each of these distinct traditions?
- How is the Eightfold Path in the Buddhist excerpt similar to or different from the call for action in the Hindu excerpt?

The Mauryan Empire

The initial spur to Buddhism's migration across Asia occurred with the rise of the Mauryan Empire (326–184 BCE). This entity grew out of the smaller Indian kingdom of Magahda once its ruler, Chandragupta Maurya, managed to unify much of north India from a capital near the city of Patna and pass it on to his descendants, founding the Maurya dynasty. A Greek historian named Megasthenes visited the seat of Chandragupta's power around the end of the fourth century BCE, marveling at its palaces replete with grottoes, bathing pools, and gardens filled with jasmine, hibiscus, and lotus.

Ruling over a population nearing fifty million, Chandragupta's successors conquered all but the southern tip of the subcontinent in a series of military campaigns. The Mauryan Empire's political structure employed a large and well-run army, administered by a war office with branches for a navy and for raising horses and elephants for cavalry warfare. A civilian bureaucracy ran the ministries overseeing industries such as weaving, mining, and shipbuilding as well as organizing irrigation, road construction, and tax collection. The Mauryan rulers lived in constant fear of assassination and intrigue against their rule, however, which forced them to rely on an elaborate network of spies to monitor officials throughout the empire.

The high point of Mauryan greatness came with the ascension of Emperor Ashoka in approximately 268 BCE, opening a period of monumental architecture that left its mark on the ancient world. Ashoka's personal grandeur came from the story of his transformation from a ruthless warrior general to a devout man of peace with a universal mission (Figure 5.22). As the head of the

Mauryan army laying siege to the kingdom of Kalinga, he won a great battle that caused an estimated 100,000 deaths. The carnage brought an awakening that led Ashoka to Buddhism and to reforms intended to promote harmony and compassionate rule throughout India. To that end, he supported missionary efforts to spread Buddhism to Burma and Sri Lanka. His new law code gave protections to the vulnerable—the ill and diseased, the poor and powerless, and travelers making their way across the empire. His ministers put their sovereign's will into action by building hospitals, digging wells, setting up rest-houses along India's roads, and sending out traveling magistrates to resolve disputes and bring justice to remote areas.



Figure 5.22 Ashoka in Splendor. This stone representation of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka visiting a Buddhist pilgrimage site with his entourage is from a large commemorative monument begun in his lifetime to house relics of Buddha. It illustrates the many strategies he adopted to magnify his rule. (credit: modification of work "King Asoka visits Ramagrama" by Anandajoti Bhikkhu/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Ashoka also had a lasting influence on the world of art. He decreed that his sayings and teachings on morality be inscribed on stone pillars erected throughout India (Figure 5.23). The Pillars of Ashoka demonstrate the Indian empire's character as a spiritual and political system. Through Buddhism, patronage of the arts, and monumental architecture, the Mauryans wished to demonstrate morality and benevolence to their subjects and exercise less direct rule. Leaders such as Ashoka hoped the people's loyalty and duty in turn would be motivated by admiration of their achievements, if not by the money and other gifts given to reward the virtuous and charm supporters. The Pillars of Ashoka also demonstrate the flexibility of the Mauryan system of rule. Those closest to the capital were inscribed with detailed summaries of the Mauryan codes for behavior and an orderly society. Farther away, in newly won territories, the pillars promoted very simple teachings, a mark of the ruler's intent to allow room for local autonomy and customs to prevail as long as his subjects met certain universal norms and tax obligations.



Figure 5.23 The Pillars of Ashoka. The incised stoned pillars with Ashoka's decrees about morality were erected throughout the Mauryan Empire and demonstrate how his message and role as sovereign were conditioned by local customs. (credit: "Asoka's Pillar, Monolith in Fort, Allahabad" by Thomas A. Rust/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At the end of Ashoka's reign, the Mauryans left a legacy for future generations of Indian rulers to try to emulate so as to rule a diverse society. When the Mauryan Empire finally collapsed in 185 BCE, India entered another period of fragmentation and rule by small competing states and autonomous cities and villages. By the early centuries of the common era, it was a multitude of smaller regional kingdoms that shared with each other a common culture linked by Hinduism, Buddhism, a canon of Sanskrit texts, and the caste system.

The Gupta Dynasty

From the fourth to the seventh centuries, an empire founded by the Gupta dynasty (320–600 CE) ruled over northern India. As revealed by the name he took, Chandragupta, the founder, emulated the Mauryans and its famous founder, Chandragupta Maurya. He hired scribes working in Sanskrit to promote learning and the arts, and during this age, Sanskrit became the basis for a classical literature that influenced generations of Indians and the world. Texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* glorified ideas about duty, valor, and performing a proper role in society (Figure 5.24). The first was a collection of thrilling poems featuring feuding rulers and powerful families, the other an epic tale of a warrior prince's journey to recover his honor.



Figure 5.24 The Humiliation of Draupadi. The *Mahabharata* is possibly the longest poem even written, with over 200,000 verse lines describing the lives and conflicts of several noble families. One of the main women featured in the stories is Draupadi, known for her beauty and morality. This eighteenth-century watercolor painting depicts a story in the epic when Draupadi's enemies attempt to humiliate her by stripping her naked. However, she's saved by the Hindu god Krishna who miraculously clothes her anew each time her dress is removed. (credit: "The disrobing of Draupadi" by Howard Hodgkin Collection, Purchase, Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, by exchange, 2022/Yousef Jameel Centre for Islamic and Asian Art/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In *Ramayana*, Rama, an avatar for the Hindu deity Vishnu, triumphs over the demon Ravana on the island of Sri Lanka and rescues his wife Sita before going on to found a perfect Indian society from his capital of Ayudha. His noble virtues and ideal society became models for Hindus to aspire to as rulers and aristocrats, while his exploits were retold for centuries in countless paintings, sculptures, carnivals, plays, and shadow theatres.

The Sanskrit classics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* soon spread far and wide in Southeast Asia, where they became part of the cultural fabric for a multitude of non-Indians as well. Other intellectuals of the Gupta era proved themselves in the field of mathematics by using decimals and a mark to denote the concept of zero for precise measurements and recordkeeping. Among the more notable was the astronomer Brahmagupta, who in the seventh century CE pioneered the use of multiplication and division and the idea of negative numbers.

Link to Learning

You can read a brief synopsis of the *Ramayana* and a description of the epic's major characters at the British Library website.

An animated English-language version of the epic is also available.

In politics the Guptas were innovators as well. In return for their loyalty, rulers granted tracts of land as gifts to powerful families, Brahmans, and temple complexes, guaranteeing these followers a share of the harvest and consolidating their own control. In return, the Brahmans elevated the Gupta rulers to new heights in rituals honoring Vishnu and Shiva. Yet as these deities became more important, worship among the commoners turned more personal and private; singing as a form of prayer and ritualism inside the home became essential to daily lives. Many Indians began to believe in the sanctity of *bhakti*, a direct personal relationship between a follower and the deity. This idea bypassed the role of Brahmans as intermediaries, displeasing the Brahmans but gaining popularity in southern India, where poems written in the Tamil language became foundational to the new practice of personalized worship among Hindus.

The Gupta's dynasty marked a flourishing of art and religion and the heyday of Buddhism in India. Painted caves with beautiful sculptures found in the Ajanta caves illustrate the sophistication of the artists patronized by the dynasty. While Hinduism remained the official religion of the state and the Guptas, Buddhist universities such as Nalanda were among the first of their kind in the ancient world and attracted throngs of students and pilgrims from China. India's educated classes ranked among the most learned and knowledgeable of the ancient world, and at times they turned their attention from math and morality to explore the depths of passion, love, and eroticism. During this period, the *Kama Sutra*, a treatise on courtship and sexuality, became a seminal piece of Indian literature, inspiring and titillating generations worldwide ever since.

The opulence and stability provided by the Guptas dissipated under the threat of invaders from the north known as the Huns. While northern India fractured into smaller states after this point, southern India's ties and trade with South Asia deepened and matured. By the eleventh century, the region's profitable exports of goods such as ivory, pepper, spices, Roman coins, and even animals like the peacock had led to the formation of notable southern kingdoms, such as the Tamil Chola dynasty. But the most influential exports from India to the rest of South Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, and the art and learning each inspired—long outlived these states.

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4.8: Key Terms

“Mandate of Heaven”
the favor of the gods that conferred a right to rule but could be lost by those less worthy

clan
a small group of several families that shared an encampment and herded or hunted together and formed the basic social unit of the seminomadic peoples of Eurasia

Confucianism
a Chinese school of philosophical thought shaping morality, governance, education, and family life

Daoism
a Chinese religion that emphasized veneration of nature, the cosmos, and mysticism

Inner Asian Steppe
the eastern half of the Eurasian Steppe that stretches into Mongolia and runs along the northern border of China

karma
a Hindu concept emphasizing the influence of good deeds and moral behavior on a person’s status in life and rebirth after death

khan
a title claimed by warrior-kings to unite various tribes into powerful confederations and empires

Legalism
a school of philosophical thought that helped dynasties such as the Qin use uniform laws and codes to reform and strengthen rulers

Peking Man
a subspecies of *Homo erectus* identified by fossil remains found in northern China

Ring of Fire
the boundary line of a zone of intense seismic activity in the Pacific Ocean

samsara
a Hindu concept explaining the continuance of the soul after death and its transformation

Silk Roads
a series of trade routes circulating luxury goods to and from China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East

Terracotta Army
a collection of life-size clay statues of soldiers, officials, servants, and horses of the Qin emperor and buried in his tomb near Xi’an

Three Han
the three groups (the Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan) in southern Korea that were among the earliest with tribal chieftains

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4.9: Section Summary

5.1 Ancient China

Parts of today's People's Republic of China were home to many migrant groups from disparate cultures who arrived in waves over hundreds of years. But many of these cultures left behind the tools necessary for others to centralize political control and create forms of common culture, such as a written script and schools of thought and religion such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. Together, China's first dynasties—the Shang, Zhou, and Qin—produced an imperial blueprint for harnessing the power of an agrarian civilization that succeeding generations of Chinese adopted and modified to found their own dynasties.

5.2 The Steppes

Around 1500 BCE, climate change forced many ethnic groups living in the eastern portion of the Eurasian Steppe to abandon farming and turn to a nomadic lifestyle, herding livestock and hunting from horseback. They alternately traded with and raided the settled agricultural societies of China and Korea. Several formed military confederations. The Xiongnu, for instance, fought with the Chinese for control of the Silk Roads. The Han dynasty first sought to appease the Xiongnu but later sent military expeditions to defeat them.

Following internal dissension within the Xiongnu confederation in the middle of the first century BCE, the Southern Xiongnu became vassals of the Han dynasty and assisted them in their fight against the Northern Xiongnu. After the collapse of the Han dynasty, Xiongnu tribes established their own states in northern China, as did the Xianbei. In 439 CE, the Touba clan of the Xianbei established the Northern Wei dynasty. As the Northern Wei adopted Chinese culture and intermarried with wealthy Chinese families, however, they alienated other members of the Xianbei, who rose against them in 524 CE. Following the collapse of the Xiongnu and Xianbei, the Khitan rose to prominence, establishing their own Liao dynasty in 907.

5.3 Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia

By the end of the ancient era, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia were home to a number of impressive states that channeled written languages, trade, and cultural exchange from their larger neighbors to power distinctive cultures and royal courts. As seafaring cultures, all three areas were also well positioned to engage a wider world than just India and China. Moreover, the achievements of Koreans and Southeast Asians in monumental architecture, such as the Seokgoram Grotto and Borobudur, are some of the richest and most artistically dynamic of the ancient world. At the same time, the geographic constraints these areas faced hindered cultural unity and social stability, as natural disasters, porous borders, and vibrant trade networks brought an array of problems difficult to solve without the machinery of a modern government.

5.4 Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire

A sophisticated civilization developed in the Indus River valley, centered on cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. These cities were abandoned around 1700 BCE, however, possibly because of deforestation and a decline in soil productivity. India was then invaded by a people called the Aryans, whose social structure was based on hereditary social castes and the Vedic religion. This religion, incorporating a belief in reincarnation and karma, developed into Hinduism.

In the sixth century BCE, an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama founded the religion of Buddhism as an alternative to Hinduism and taught people how they might escape the suffering of the world. Buddhism spread beyond India following the conversion in the third century BCE of Ashoka, a king of the Mauryan dynasty, which had unified northern India in the preceding century. After the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, a new empire was established by Chandragupta of the Gupta dynasty, and Indian art and culture flourished. Despite their accomplishments, however, the Guptas lost control of northern India when the Huns invaded, and the area was broken into smaller independent kingdoms.

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4.10: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What purpose did jade *not* serve in the early Neolithic cultures of China?

a. artwork
b. currency
c. funeral rites and religious rituals
d. jewelry

2.
What key piece of evidence convinced scholars that the Shang dynasty was not a mythical dynasty, as was once believed?

a. oracle bones
b. chariots
c. bronze weapons
d. agriculture

3.
What was one of the major tenets of early Confucian thought?

a. the need for clearly defined law codes
b. the search for natural beauty and immortality
c. the right of sovereigns to rule based on the favor of heaven
d. the need for rulers to exhibit moral leadership and virtuous conduct

4.
In what way did the mobilization for war during the Warring States Period contribute to economic growth in China?

a. Mercenary work became a primary occupation for commoners.
b. Conquered rulers were forced to pay heavy taxes.
c. War encouraged more cross-regional trade in things like copper and horses.
d. To avoid fighting, aristocrats transformed themselves into merchants.

5.
What Chinese tradition from the Hundred Schools of Thought encouraged “nonaction” as an important political concept?

a. Confucianism
b. Legalism
c. Mohism
d. Daoism

6.
Which was *not* one of the nomadic cultures that lived on the Inner Asian Steppe in the ancient world?

a. Di
b. Xiongnu
c. Xianbei
d. Yangshao

7.
What Inner Asian Steppe peoples founded the Northern Wei dynasty?

a. Xiongnu
b. Xianbei
c. Di
d. Jie

8.
Why do scholars think that the people of the Inner Asian Steppe began to abandon agriculture for livestock herding around 1500 BCE?

a. climate change
b. war between clans
c. introduction of the horse
d. pressure from the Shang dynasty

9.
What early culture was known for its bronze drums that spread widely across Southeast Asia?

a. Yayoi
b. Dong Son
c. Emishi
d. Baekje

10.
What climatic condition supported the transfer of culture between India and Southeast Asia?

a. warm summers
b. torrential rails
c. monsoon winds
d. dust storms

11.
What group in Japan invented new technologies like pottery in an effort to adapt to the climate changes occurring around twelve thousand years ago?

a. the Jōmon
b. the Yayoi
c. the Yamato
d. the Silla

12.
Which of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, though originally the smallest and least powerful, came to dominate the others with the help of China?

a. Goguryeo
b. Baekje
c. Silla
d. Mahan

13.
What imported technology from China and Korea seems to have been connected to the religious transformations occurring in Japan during the beginning of the Yamato era?

a. mirrors
b. rice cultivation
c. bronze
d. gold jewelry

14.
What cultural practice of the people in Jinhan (Korea) suggests they were in contact with Japan?

a. They tattooed their bodies.
b. They practiced Buddhism.
c. They used Chinese script.
d. They built stone temples.

15.
What is the name of the hymns the Aryans brought to India?

a. Bhakti
b. Ashoka
c. Vedas
d. Brahmans

16.
What Indian ruler promoted the spread of Buddhism after his own conversion?

a. Chandragupta
b. Megasthenes
c. Rama
d. Ashoka

17.
What do Buddhists call the state of ultimate peace found in the extinction of all desire?

a. brahman
b. karma
c. nirvana
d. samsara

18.
What group occupied the highest tier in the Indian caste system?

a. Kshatriya
b. Vaishya
c. Shudra
d. Brahman

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4.11: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What were some of the legacies or characteristics of each of the three dynasties of ancient China?
2.
What effect did the Warring States period have on the development of Confucianism and Legalism?
3.
How did Daoist concepts help the Chinese people deal with the chaos of the Warring States period?
4.
Describe a few of the ways in which nomadic cultures and societies differed from their agrarian neighbors.
5.
How would you describe the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han dynasty of China?
6.
What role did changing climatic conditions play in the lifestyle of the people of the Inner Asian Steppe?
7.
Compare and contrast the roles of women in politics in ancient Korea and Japan, including Queen Himiko (Japan) and Queen Seondeok (Korea).
8.
How might climate change have affected the development of early Japanese culture?
9.
How did Chinese and Korean culture influence the development of Japanese culture during the Yayoi and Yamato periods?
10.
To what extent was Buddhism liberating for women in India?
11.
Following the development of Buddhism, how did changes in Brahmanism reduce the influence and prestige of the Brahman class as it evolved into Hinduism?

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4.12: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
Most scholars today still hold that the Xia dynasty was a mythical dynasty developed during the Zhou dynasty period. Given what you've learned about the Mandate of Heaven, how might the Zhou rulers have benefited from encouraging belief in the Xia?
2.
Some scholars mark the end of the Warring States period in 256 BCE with the collapse of the Zhou dynasty, while others use the date for the establishment of the first Chinese empire, 221 BCE. Given what you've learned about the features of the Warring States period, which date seems more appropriate?
3.
How would you characterize the relationship between the peoples of the steppes and their neighbors—was it primarily about conflict, war, and competition? Or were its purposes economic exchange and cultural adaptation? Explain your answer.
4.
Given what you've learned about the environment of the steppe and the lifestyle practiced there, why was the horse and the use of the horse in battle such an important part of their daily life?
5.
What were some of the geographical barriers to the development of agrarian societies in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia? What technologies and social practices allowed each culture to make the transition from hunting, gathering, and fishing to farming?
6.
The religion of Buddhism from India ultimately made a huge impact on the people of China, Korea, Japan, and across Southeast Asia. Why do you think Buddhism was so attractive to the people in these different places?
7.
Compare Buddhism and Hinduism to Chinese religions such as Daoism and philosophical schools such as Confucianism and Legalism. Are there any ideas or values that made the Chinese traditions more advantageous to political stability and empire? Alternatively, what Buddhist and Hindu teachings promoted local autonomy and regionalism in India?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Mediterranean Peoples

5.1: Introduction
5.2: Early Mediterranean Peoples
5.3: Ancient Greece
5.4: The Hellenistic Era
5.5: The Roman Republic
5.6: The Age of Augustus
5.7: Key Terms
5.8: Section Summary
5.9: Review Questions
5.10: Check Your Understanding Questions
5.11: Application and Reflection Questions

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5.1: Introduction



Figure 6.1 Alexander the Great. This first-century CE portrayal of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great is part of a large mosaic depicting the Battle of Issus (333 BCE) that was discovered in a home excavated in Pompeii, Italy. (credit: modification of work “Alexander and Bucephalus - Battle of Issus mosaic” by Museo Archeologico Nazionale – Naples/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

6.1 Early Mediterranean Peoples
6.2 Ancient Greece
6.3 The Hellenistic Era
6.4 The Roman Republic
6.5 The Age of Augustus

In the first century CE, a wealthy Roman in the southern Italian town of Pompeii decorated his home with an elaborate mosaic portraying the decisive victory of the Macedonians, led by Alexander the Great, over the Persian Empire at the Battle of Issus (in modern Turkey) in 333 BCE (Figure 6.1). Why would a Roman invest in such expensive decoration to commemorate the three hundred–year-old victory of a foreign king in a distant land?

Beginning approximately 3,500 years before our time, the lands that border the Mediterranean Sea became increasingly linked by commerce and cultural interaction. These links culminated in the emergence of the Roman Empire, which had united all these regions by the first century CE. Greek colonists had settled the region of Pompeii some seven hundred years before this mosaic was produced, and Alexander, the hero of the battle, was a champion in Greek culture. With his iconic victory over the Persian “barbarians,” he represented the shared cultural legacy of Greeks and Romans. The history of the ancient Mediterranean world shows how this common culture developed over time.



Figure 6.2 Timeline: Mediterranean Peoples. (credit “2000 BCE”: modification of work “Figurine of the Snake Goddess.” Archaeological Museum of Herakleion” by O. Mustafin/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “776 BCE: modification of work “Discobolus side 2” by Ricky Bennison/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “490 BCE, 480–479 BCE”: modification of work “Persian Warrior (Left) and Greek Warrior (Right) in a Duel” by National Museums Scotland/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “334 BCE”: modification of work “Alexander and Bucephalus - Battle of Issus mosaic” by Museo Archeologico Nazionale – Naples/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “264 BCE”: modification of work “Heinrich Leutemann - Hannibals Übergang über die Alpen (cropped)” by Musée Dauphinois Grenoble/Wikimeida Commons, Public Domain)



Figure 6.3 Locator Map: Mediterranean Peoples. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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5.2: Early Mediterranean Peoples

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the regional peoples of the Mediterranean before 500 BCE
- Discuss the technological achievements of the early Mediterranean peoples
- Describe the interconnectedness of the early Mediterranean peoples

During the Bronze Age (c. 3300–1200 BCE), trade connected the peoples and cultures of Greece and the Aegean islands such as Crete. By the third millennium BCE, the inhabitants of these lands were already producing wine and olive oil, products in high demand in ancient Egypt and the Near East. The Aegean Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1100 BCE) thus shared in the economic prosperity and cultural interaction that linked the eastern Mediterranean with the ancient cultures of western Asia.

The eventual collapse of the Late Bronze Age world coincided with the development of new technology that allowed people to devise iron tools and weapons. During the new Iron Age, the Phoenicians not only preserved Bronze Age cultural traditions but they also developed a revolutionary new communication tool, the alphabet, that vastly expanded literacy. They established trading posts across the Mediterranean as far as Spain, often in search of new sources of iron ore and other metals such as tin. The arrival of the Phoenicians and Greek traders in the western Mediterranean brought them into contact with the Etruscans in the Italian peninsula. Thus, the period from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age witnessed the development of numerous cultures across the Mediterranean.

The Late Bronze Age World

Egypt was the dominant economic and military power of the Late Bronze Age, for the most part a time of economic prosperity and political stability. Other powerful kingdoms included Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, the Hittites of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the Mitanni and Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia, and the Kassites and Elamites in southern Mesopotamia and western Iran (Figure 6.4). While each maintained its own unique culture, their interactions created a shared Late Bronze Age culture.



Figure 6.4 The Bronze Age World. While Egypt was the dominant power in the relatively peaceful Late Bronze Age, many other cultures thrived during this time. (credit: modification of work “Near East and Mediterranean in 2000 BCE” by “Briangotts”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

For instance, they all used a redistributive economic system in which agricultural goods were collected from local farmers as taxes, stored in the palace or temple, and redistributed to urban artisans, merchants, and officials who could not grow food. They all possessed military forces of elite warriors trained to fight from horse-drawn chariots. They interacted using a common set of diplomatic practices: Official correspondence was often written in Akkadian cuneiform, military alliances were sealed by arranged marriages between the royal families of allied states, and vassal states paid tribute to dominant states to avoid military assault.

These civilizations also exchanged prized goods, such as wine and oil from Greece, cedar logs from the Levant (modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria), and copper from the island of Cyprus. Great cultural achievements resulted from their interaction. For example, in the small maritime kingdom of Ugarit (now Syria), scribes modified Egyptian hieroglyphics to suit their local Semitic Canaanite language, creating an ancestor of our alphabet. They used this script to record traditional epic poetry featuring myths of their main deity, the storm god Baal.

Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece

By 2000 BCE, a unique culture had developed on the Aegean island of Crete, reaching the height of its power at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age around 1600 BCE. The later Classical Greeks told the myth of King Minos of Crete, who built a giant maze known as the Labyrinth and imprisoned there a half-man, half-bull called the Minotaur (the “Bull of Minos”). To avenge his own son’s death, Minos forced young men and women from Athens in Greece to enter the Labyrinth and be eaten by the monster. Historians see in the myth a distant memory of the earlier civilization on Crete and use the term Minoan, derived from Minos, to describe it.

The Minoans built spacious palaces on Crete, the largest at Knossos. Since these were usually unfortified, historians believe Crete was generally peaceful and united under a single government with Knossos as the capital. The Minoans also established settlements and trading posts on other Aegean islands such as Thera and along the Anatolian coast. Their palaces were huge complexes that served as economic and administrative centers. To keep records for these centers the Minoans developed their own script, written on clay tablets and known to scholars as Linear A. It has not yet been deciphered.

A common weapon and symbol in these palaces was the *labrys*, or double ax, from which the word “labyrinth” arose. In the courtyards, young men and women participated in bullfights that may be the basis for the myth of the Minotaur. Frescoes on the palace walls depict these fights as well as sea creatures and scenes from nature (Figure 6.5). The Minoan religion revered bulls and a goddess associated with snakes, nature, and fertility. The abundance of figurines of this snake-wielding female deity and other artistic depictions of women may mean that at least some women enjoyed high social status in Minoan society. Religious rituals were practiced in small shrines as well as on mountain tops and in caves and sacred forests.



Figure 6.5 A Leaping Bull. This small Minoan fresco (c. 1600–1450 BCE) shows a leaping bull with one acrobat on its back and two others alongside. It is one of five discovered in the Knossos palace on Crete. (credit: "Toreador Fresco (Bull-Leaping Fresco)" by "Jebulon"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Link to Learning

For a thorough examination of the art and archaeology of the Aegean Bronze Age, visit Dartmouth University's Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology website.

Sometime around 1500 BCE, the palaces on Crete were destroyed. Knossos was rebuilt, and scribes there began employing a new script scholars call Linear B, apparently derived from Linear A and found to be an early form of Greek. Linear B clay tablets discovered on the Greek mainland led historians to conclude that Greeks from the mainland conquered Crete and rebuilt Knossos.

The Bronze Age culture that produced Linear B is called Mycenaean since the largest Bronze Age city in Greece was at Mycenae. Bronze Age Greeks appear to have migrated from the Balkans into mainland Greece around 2000 BCE and adopted Minoan civilization around the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, in 1600 BCE. Unlike the Minoans, the Mycenaean Greeks were divided into a number of separate kingdoms. Immense palace complexes like those at Knossos have been found at Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Pylos, and Sparta, sometimes surrounded by monumental fortifications. These locations correspond to the powerful kingdoms described in the later Greek epic poem the *Iliad*, attributed to the poet Homer. This poem tells the story of the Trojan War, in which the Greek kingdoms, led by King Agamemnon of Mycenae, waged war against the city of Troy. Archaeologists have also uncovered the Bronze Age city of Troy in western Turkey, which suggests the *Iliad* was loosely based on oral traditions that preserved the memory of these ancient Bronze Age kingdoms. The Linear B tablets indicate that the ruler of these palaces was known as the *Wanax* or "lord," the same word used to describe the heroic kings of the *Iliad*.

The Collapse of the Bronze Age World

The last century of the Late Bronze Age, after 1200 BCE, was a period of wars and invasions that witnessed the collapse of many powerful states. The palaces of Mycenaean Greece were destroyed, perhaps following revolts by the lower class and natural disasters like climate change and earthquakes. In the centuries that followed, the population declined drastically, writing and literacy disappeared, and Greece entered a "Dark Age."

Later ancient Greek historians reported that Greek-speaking tribes known as the Dorians migrated from northwest Greece to the south after the Trojan War. The instability in Greece and the Aegean resulted in much migration by people in search of new homes.

For instance, ancient Egyptian inscriptions tell us that the “Sea Peoples” destroyed the Hittite Empire and numerous kingdoms in the Levant to the north of Egypt. One particular group known as the Philistines (Peleset), who attacked Egypt, eventually settled just north of Egypt along the coast of the southern Levant. But there were many others, including the Akawasha, Lukka, Shardana, Tursha, and more who washed across the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age Collapse (Figure 6.6).

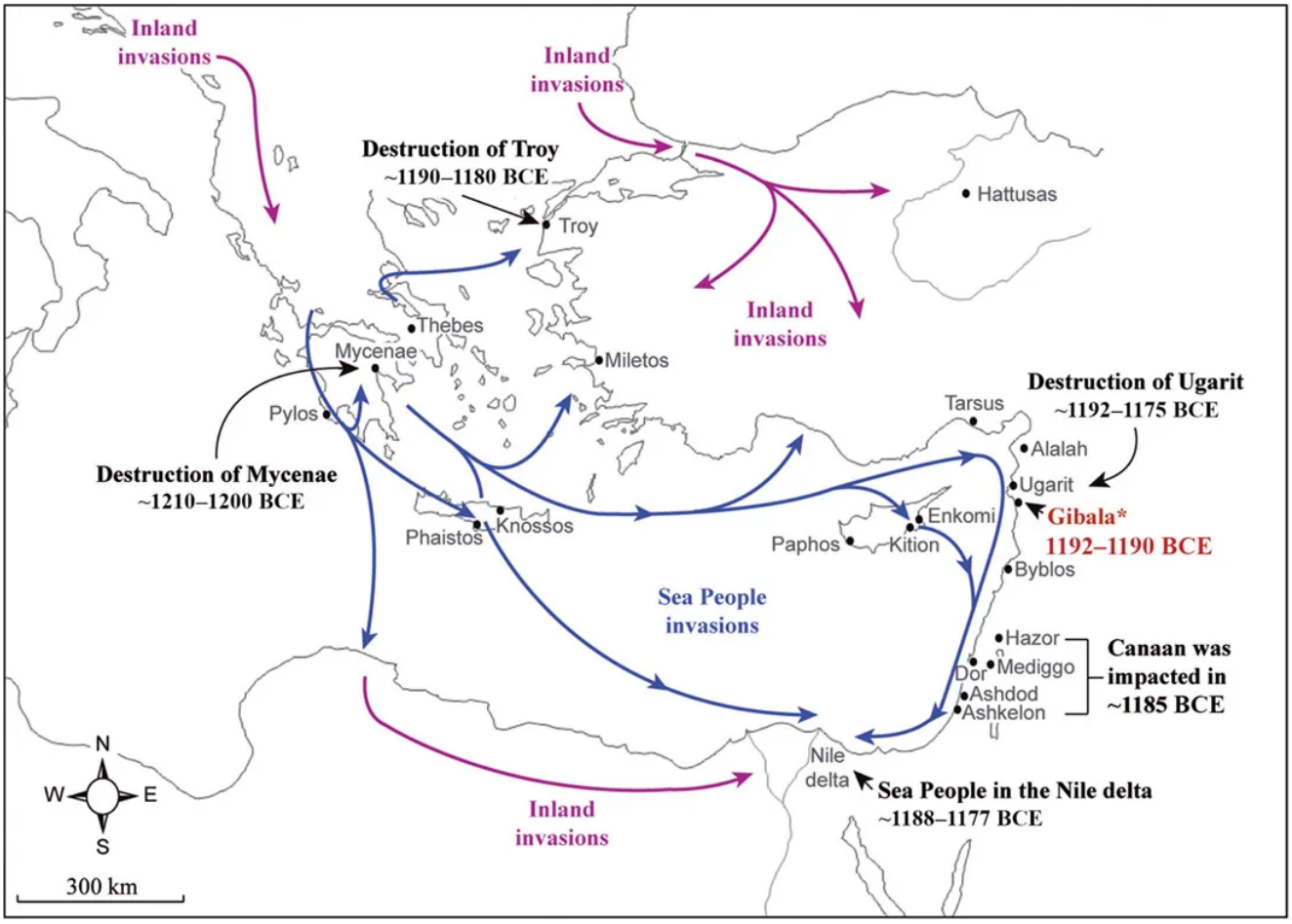


Figure 6.6 The Path of the Sea Peoples. The “Sea Peoples,” as they were called in Egyptian records, came largely from the Aegean region. By studying the remains of pottery and other archaeological traces, scholars have concluded that these groups moved through Greece and Crete and into North Africa, Cyprus, and the Levant (as shown by the blue arrows) at the close of the Late Bronze Age. (credit: modification of work “Map of the Sea People invasions in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age” by David Kaniewski, Elise Van Campo, Karel Van Lerberghe, Tom Boiy, Klaas Vansteenhuyse, Greta Jans, Karin Nys, Harvey Weiss/”The Sea Peoples, from Cuneiform Tablets to Carbon Dating”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Other groups were also on the move. Libyans, who inhabited the North African coastal region west of Egypt, invaded the northern Nile River valley and settled there. The attacks of the Sea Peoples and Libyans contributed to the later collapse of Egypt’s central governments after 1100 BCE, ending the New Kingdom period. Phrygians, who inhabited the Balkans in southeast Europe, migrated into Asia Minor (Turkey). The Aramaeans, nomadic tribes who spoke a Semitic language and inhabited the Arabian Desert, migrated into Syria and Mesopotamia.

These wars and invasions coincided with an important technological innovation, the birth of sophisticated iron-making technology. For thousands of years, bronze had been the metal of choice in the ancient world. But the disruptions caused by the Late Bronze Age Collapse made it difficult for metal workers to access tin, a crucial ingredient in bronze. Without a sufficient supply of tin, artisans experimented for centuries with iron ore. In the process, they developed the techniques of steeling (adding carbon to the iron to make it stronger), quenching (rapidly cooling hot iron with water), and tempering (heat treating) to produce a metal far superior in strength to bronze. By around 900 BCE, the Iron Age had begun in the eastern Mediterranean.

Phoenicians, Greeks, and Etruscans

The Phoenicians were descended from the Bronze Age Canaanites and lived in cities like Sidon and Tyre (in today's Lebanon), each ruled by a king. They were great sailors, explorers, and traders who established trading posts in Cyprus, North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain. They sailed along the west coast of Africa and to the British Isles in search of new markets and goods such as tin (See Figure 6.7).

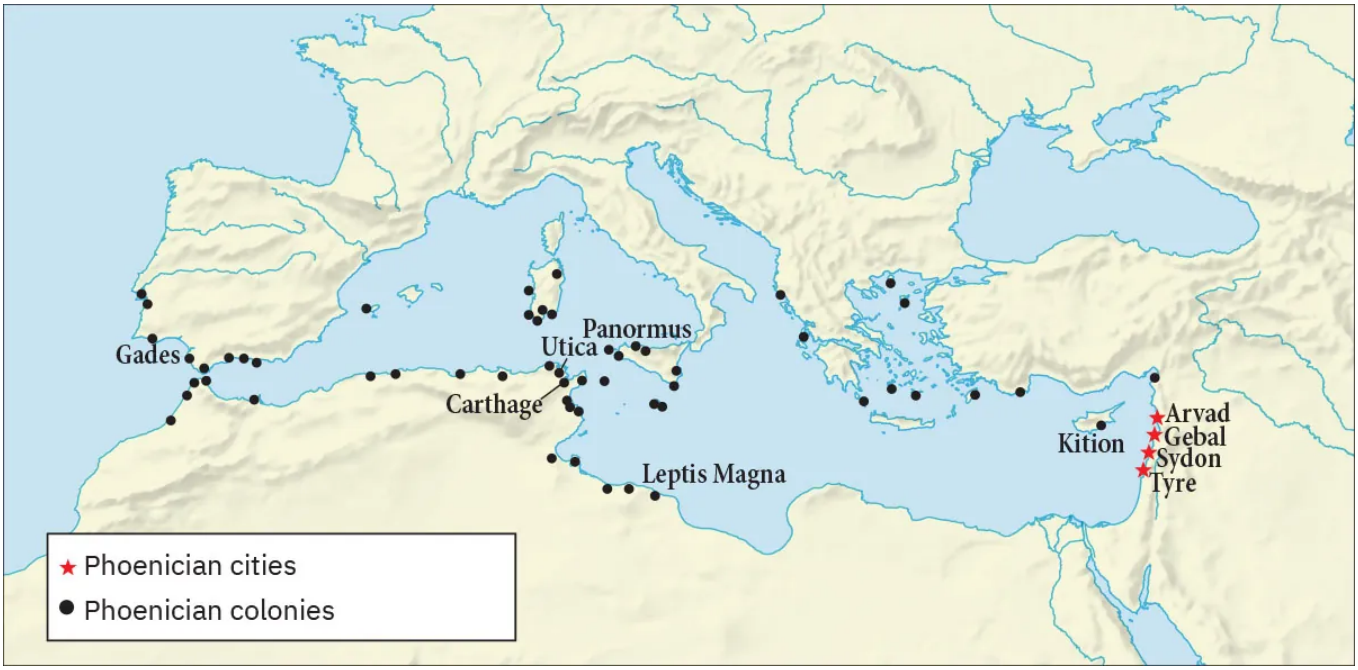


Figure 6.7 Phoenician Cities and Colonies. The Phoenicians were great mariners and explorers. This map shows the many cities and colonies they founded across the Mediterranean Sea. (credit: modification of work "Mediterranean at 218 BC" by "Megistias"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Around 1100 BCE, the Phoenicians also invented the world's first known alphabet, using symbols that represented consonant sounds. Strung together, these consonants created words in which vowel sounds were interpreted by the order of the consonants. Because the Phoenician alphabet simplified the earlier script of the Canaanites, more people could now become literate, not just a small, specialized group of scribes. The Phoenicians' commercial success was undoubtedly partly a result of their better, more efficient record-keeping system that a larger population could learn and employ. Other cultures like the Aramaean peoples and the Israelites quickly adapted the new script to their own languages. By the eighth century BCE, the Greeks had also adopted and later adapted the Phoenician alphabet to write their language.

Beginning with the Assyrian Empire's expansion in the eighth century BCE, the Phoenician kingdoms became subjects of the successive Iron Age empires of western Asia: the Assyrians, the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonian), and the Persians. The Phoenicians continued to flourish, however. The Assyrians valued Phoenician artists, and finely crafted Phoenician wares such as jewelry and furniture became popular among the ruling elites. The Persians relied largely on Phoenician sailors and ships to serve as the naval forces, especially in their campaigns to conquer Greece in the early fifth century BCE. When Phoenician city-states such as Sidon and Tyre became subject to foreign rule, many Phoenicians immigrated to the city of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia), founded by Phoenician merchants around 700 BCE as a stopping place on the long but profitable voyage to Spain. Given this influx of immigrants, Carthage grew large and wealthy, and by the fifth century BCE the southern Italian peninsula was the dominant power in the western Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians were not the only people establishing colonial outposts around the wider Mediterranean world. Beginning in the eighth century, Greeks began founding colonies in North Africa, in coastal Spain and France, on the shores of the Black Sea, and on the Italian peninsula. Many of these colonies were built in resource-rich areas and commonly produced grain, tin, or timber for export back to Greece. Others served more mercantile interests, trading with major and minor powers across the Mediterranean. It

was through these colonial ventures that Greeks and Phoenicians came into contact with the Etruscans of the northern Italian peninsula.

The Etruscans were organized into independent city-states such as Veii and Vulci, much like the Greeks were, and each city was ruled by its own king and council of elders. In their art and architecture, the Etruscans followed Greek models (Figure 6.8). They modified the alphabet the Greeks had acquired from the Phoenicians to write their language, which scholars have not yet fully deciphered. By 600 BCE, they had expanded beyond their base in modern Tuscany and colonized Rome, which became an Etruscan city. They also founded new colonies in northern and southern Italy. The Etruscan states remained the dominant power in the Italian peninsula until 474 BCE. In that year, at the Battle of Cumae off the coast of southern Italy, the naval forces of the Greek city-state of Syracuse won a decisive victory over the Etruscan fleet and emerged as the chief power in the region, along with Carthage.



Figure 6.8 Greek Influence in Etruria. This Etruscan antefix (roof tile) was created in the fourth century BCE and found in the Italian city of Cerveteri, northwest of Rome. The almost twenty-inch-tall piece of terracotta art depicts a maenad, a Greek mythological figure associated with the Greek god Dionysus. In its style and symbolism, it reflects the cultural exchange between the Etruscans and the Greeks. (credit: "Terracotta antefix (roof tile) with head of a maenad" by Purchase by subscription, 1896/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Since ancient Rome began as an Etruscan city-state, the Etruscans strongly influenced the development of Roman culture. For example, Roman priests divined the will of the gods by examining a sacrificed animal's entrails, a custom adopted from the Etruscans. The Etruscans honored their dead with elaborate tombs, and the Romans did the same, maintaining that the spirits of their ancestors watched over them. Gladiatorial contests in Rome had origins among the Etruscans, who at funerals forced prisoners of war to fight to the death as human sacrifices to their dead. The *fasces*, a bundle of rods and an ax that symbolized the authority of Roman magistrates, originally denoted the authority of Etruscan kings. Finally, the Roman alphabet, still used in western and central Europe today, was based on Etruscan modifications to the Greek alphabet.

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5.3: Ancient Greece

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the historical factors that shaped the development of the Greek city-state
- Describe the evolution of the political, economic, and social systems of Athens and Sparta
- Discuss the alliances and hostilities among the Greek city-states during the Classical period
- Identify the major accomplishments of Ancient Greek philosophy, literature, and art

In the centuries following the collapse of the Bronze Age Mycenaean kingdoms around 1100 BCE, a dynamic new culture evolved in Iron Age Greece and the Aegean region. During this period, the Greek city-states developed innovative consensual governments. Free adult males participated in their own governance and voted to create laws and impose taxes. This system of government contrasted with the earlier monarchies of the ancient Near East, in which rulers claimed to govern their subjects through the will of the gods.

The degree of political participation in the Greek city-states varied from monarchy and oligarchy, or government by a small group of wealthy elites, to democracy, literally “rule by the people,” a broader-based participation that eventually included both rich and poor adult males. These systems influenced Ancient Roman and European political thought through the centuries. The Greek Classical period (500–323 BCE) witnessed constant warfare among rival city-states, yet it was marked by the creation of enduring works of literature and art that inspired centuries of European artists and writers. Greek philosophers also subjected the human condition and the natural world to rational analysis, rejecting traditional beliefs and sacred myths.

Archaic Greece

The Greek Dark Ages (1100–800 BCE) persisted after the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization but began to recede around 800 BCE. From this point and for the next few centuries, Greece experienced a revival in which a unique and vibrant culture emerged and evolved into what we recognize today as Classical Greek civilization. This era, from 800 to 500 BCE, is called Archaic Greece after *arche*, Greek for “beginning.”

The Greek renaissance was marked by rapid population growth and the organization of valleys and islands into independent city-states, each known as a polis (Greek for city-state). Towns arose around a hill fortress or *acropolis* to which inhabitants could flee in times of danger. Each polis had its own government and religious cults, and each built monumental temples for the gods, such as the temple of Hera, wife of Zeus and protector of marriage and the home, at the city-state of Argos. Though politically disunited, the Greeks, who began to refer to themselves as Hellenes after the mythical king Hellen, did share a common language and religion. The most famous of their sacred sites were Delphi, near Mount Parnassus in central Greece and seat of the oracle of Apollo, the god of prophecy, and Olympia in southern Greece, sacred to Zeus, who ruled the pantheon of gods at Mount Olympus (Figure 6.9). Beginning in 776 BCE, according to Aristotle, Greeks traveled to Olympia every four years to compete in athletic contests in Zeus’s honor, the origin of the Olympic Games.





Figure 6.9 Zeus. This larger-than-life marble bust of the Greek god Zeus is believed to be a Roman copy of a fourth-century BCE Greek original. It was found in Otricoli, Italy, in 1775. (credit: "So-called "Zeus of Otricoli". Marble, Roman copy after a Greek original from the 4th century" by "Jastrow"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Past Meets the Present

The Olympic Games

Postponed a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Games of the XXXII Olympiad in Japan included more than three hundred events in thirty-three sports, including new entries like skateboarding, rock climbing, and surfing. Modern games have been held since 1896, when the new International Olympic Committee started the tradition, but as the name suggests, the inspiration came from Ancient Greece.

Athletic events in Ancient Greece were important displays of strength and endurance. There were contests at the sanctuaries at Delphi and Nemea (near Argos), but none was as renowned as the Olympic Games, held at the sanctuary in Olympia that was dedicated to Zeus. Contestants came from all over the Greek world, including Sicily and southern Italy.

Unlike the skateboarding and surfing of modern games, the ancient games focused on skills necessary for war: running, jumping, throwing, and wrestling. Over time, sports that included horses, like chariot racing, were also incorporated. Such events were referenced in Homer's *Iliad*, when the hero Achilles held athletic contests to honor his fallen comrade Patroclus and awarded prizes or *athla* (from which the word "athlete" is derived). The centerpiece of the ancient games was the two-hundred-yard sprint, or *stadion*, from which comes the modern word "stadium" (Figure 6.10).



Figure 6.10 The Original Olympic Track. These are the ruins of the original Olympic *stadion* at Olympia. The track was made of hard-packed clay for a race to be won by the fastest athlete in the Greek world. (credit: "Olympic Race Track in modern Olympia, Greece" by "Dwaipayanc"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Unlike the modern games, where attendees pay great sums to watch athletes compete, admission to the ancient games was free—for men. Women were forbidden from watching and, if they dared to attend, could pay with their lives. Competitors were likely locals with proven abilities, though over time professional athletes came to dominate the sport. They could earn a good living from prizes and other rewards gained through their talent and celebrity, and their statues adorned the sanctuary at Olympia. The poet Pindar in the early fifth century BCE was renowned for composing songs to honor them when they returned home as victors. The Olympic Games continued to be celebrated until 393 CE, when they were halted during the reign of the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius.

- Why might the organizers of the modern Olympic Games have named their contest after the ancient Greek version?
- How are the ancient games similar to the modern Olympic Games? How are they different?

The start of the Archaic period also witnessed the reemergence of specialization in Greek society. Greek artists became more sophisticated and skilled in their work. They often copied artistic styles from Egypt and Phoenicia, where Greek merchants were engaging in long-distance trade. At the site of Al-Mina, along the Mediterranean coast in Syria where historians believe the Phoenician alphabet was first transmitted to the Greeks, Greek and Phoenician merchants exchanged goods. Far to the west, on the island of Ischia off the west coast of Italy, Greeks were competing with Phoenician merchants for trade with local peoples, whose iron ore was in strong demand. Thanks to their contact and trade with the Phoenicians, Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet to their own language, making an important innovation by adding vowels (a, e, i, o, u). The eighth century BCE thus witnessed the return of literacy and the end of the Aegean world's relative isolation after the interlude of the Greek Dark Ages.

The eighth century BCE was also the period in which the epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed, traditionally attributed to the blind poet Homer. While historians debate whether Homer was a historical or a legendary figure, they agree the epics originated in the songs of oral poets in the Greek Dark Ages. In the eighth century BCE, using the Greek alphabet, scribes wrote these stories down for the first time.

As the population expanded during the Archaic period, a shortage of farmland brought dramatic changes. Many Greeks in search of land to farm left their homes and founded colonies along the shores of the Black Sea and the northern Aegean, in North Africa at Cyrene in Libya, and in southern Gaul (modern France) at Massalia (Marseille). The largest number were on the island of Sicily and in southern Italy, the region the Greeks referred to as Magna Graecia or "Greater Greece." When Greeks established a colony, it became an independent polis with its own laws. The free adult males of the community divided the colony's land into equal lots. Thus, a new idea developed in the colonies that citizenship in a community was associated with equality and participation in the governing of the state.

In the society of Archaic Greece, the elite landowners, or *aristoi*, traditionally controlled the government and the priesthoods in the city-states. But thanks to the new ideas from the colonies, the common people, or *kakoi*, began demanding land and a voice in the governing of the polis. They were able to gain leverage in these negotiations because city-states needed troops in their wars for control of farmland. The nobility relied on the wealthier commoners, who could afford to equip themselves with iron weapons and armor. In some city-states, the *aristoi* and the *kakoi* were not able to resolve their differences peaceably. In such cases, a man who had strong popular support in the city would seize power and rule over the city. The Greeks referred to such populist leaders as tyrants.

In the sixth century BCE, the difficulties caused by the land shortage were relieved by the invention of coinage. A century before, adopting a practice of the kings of Lydia in western Asia Minor (Turkey), Athens stamped silver pieces with the image of an owl, a symbol of wisdom often associated with the goddess Athena (See Figure 6.11). Instead of weighing precious metals to use as currency or arguing over the value of bartered goods to trade, merchants could use coins as a simple medium of exchange. The *agora*, or place of assembly in each city-state, thus became a marketplace to buy and sell goods. In the sixth century BCE, this rise of a market economy stimulated economic growth as farmers, artisans, and merchants discovered stronger incentives to produce and procure more goods for profit. For example, farmers learned how to produce more food with the land they already possessed rather than always seeking more land. The economic growth of this period is reflected in the many new temples the Greek city-states constructed then.



Figure 6.11 Athenian Money. This Athenian silver coin from the fifth century BCE depicts Athena on one side and an owl, Athena's symbol, on the other. (credit: "Athens owl coin" by "yuichi"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Sparta and Athens

In the Archaic period, Athens and Sparta emerged as two of the most important of the many Greek city-states. Not only did their governments and cultures dominate the Greek world in the subsequent Classical period; they also fired the imaginations of Western cultures for centuries to come. Athens was the birthplace of democracy, whereas Sparta was an oligarchy headed by two kings.

The Rise and Organization of Sparta

Sparta in the eighth century BCE was a collection of five villages in Laconia, a mountain valley in the Peloponnese in southern Greece. Due to the shortage of farmland, the citizens (adult males) of these villages, the *Spartiates*, all served in the military and waged war on neighboring towns, forcing them to pay tribute. The Spartiates also appropriated farmland for themselves and enslaved the inhabitants of these lands, most famously the Messenians, who became known as the *helots*. Just as Greek colonists at this time divided land among themselves into equal lots, the Spartiates likewise divided the conquered land equally and assigned to each landowner a certain number of helot families to work it. Helots, unlike enslaved people in other parts of Greece, could not be bought or sold but remained on the land as forced laborers from generation to generation. In the seventh century BCE, Sparta conquered the land of Messene to its west and divided its farmland equally among the Spartiates.

By the late sixth century BCE, the wealth from the rich agricultural land that Sparta then controlled had made it the most powerful state in the Peloponnese. Sparta also organized the city-states of this region and parts beyond into a system of alliances that historians refer to as the Peloponnesian League. Its members still had self-government and paid no tribute to Sparta, but all were expected to have the same friends and enemies as Sparta, which maintained its dominance in the league. Sparta also used its army to overthrow tyrants in the Peloponnesian city-states and restore political power to the *aristoi*.

The Spartans were proud of their unique system of government, or constitution, which was a set of laws and traditional political practices rather than a single document. It was said to have been created by a great lawgiver named Lycurgus around 800 BCE, but modern historians view its development as an evolutionary process during the Archaic period rather than the work of a single person.

Sparta had two hereditary kings drawn from rival royal families. Their powers were very limited, though both sat as permanent members of the Council of Elders and were priests in the state religion. On occasion, the Spartan kings also led armies into battle. The Assembly of Spartiates passed all laws and approved all treaties with the advice of the Council of Elders. This Assembly also elected five judges every year who administered the affairs of state, as well as the members of the Council of Elders.

The unique element of Spartan culture was the *agoge*, its educational system. At the age of seven, boys were separated from their families and raised by the state. To teach them to live by their wits and courage, they were fed very little so they had to learn how to steal food to survive. At the age of twelve they began an even more severe regimen. They were not allowed clothes except a cloak in the wintertime, and they bathed just once a year (Figure 6.12). They also underwent ritual beatings intended to make them physically strong and hardened warriors. At the age of eighteen, young men began two years of intense military training. At the age of twenty, a young Spartan man's education was complete.



Figure 6.12 Spartan Youth. The design of this nineteenth-century painting by French impressionist Edgar Degas was based on a passage from Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* and depicts Spartan girls encouraging and challenging Spartan boys. Here the boys prepare to compete in running and wrestling exercises. (credit: "Young Spartans exercising" by National Gallery, 1924: purchased from Courtauld Fund/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Women of the Spartiate class, before marrying in their mid-teens, also practiced a strict physical regimen, since they were expected to be as strong as their male relatives and husbands and even participate in defending the homeland. Spartan women enjoyed a reputation for independence, since they managed the farms while men were constantly training for or at war and often ran their family estates alone due to the early deaths of their soldier husbands. The state organized unmarried women into teams known as *chorai* (from which the term *chorus* is derived) that danced and sang at religious festivals.

When a Spartiate man reached the age of thirty, he could marry, vote in the Assembly, and serve as a judge. Each Spartiate remained in the army reserve until the age of sixty, when he could finally retire from military service and became eligible for election to the Council of Elders. Spartan citizens were proud to devote their time to the service of the state in the military and government; they did not have to work the land or learn a trade since this work was done for them by commoners and helot subjects.

The Rise and Organization of Athens

Athens, like Sparta, developed its own system of government in the Archaic period. Uniquely large among Greek city-states, Athens had long enclosed all the land of Attica, which included several mountain valleys. It was able to eventually develop into a militarily powerful democratic state in which all adult male citizens could participate in government, though "citizenship" was a restricted concept, and because only males could participate, it was by nature a limited democracy.

The roots of Athenian democracy are long and deep, however, and its democratic institutions evolved over centuries before reaching their fullest expression in the fifth century BCE. It was likely the growing prosperity of Athenians in the eighth century that had set Athens on this path. As more families became prosperous, they demanded greater say in the functioning of the city-state. By the seventh century BCE, Athens had an assembly allowing citizens (free adult males) to gather and discuss the affairs of the state. However, as the rising prosperity of Athenians stalled and economic hardship loomed by the end of the century, the durability of the fledgling democracy seemed in doubt. Attempts to solve the economic problems by adjusting the legal code, most notably by the legislator Draco (from whose name we get the modern term “draconian”), had little effect, though codifying the law in written form brought more clarity to the legal system.

With the once-thriving middle class slipping into bankruptcy and sometimes slavery, civil war seemed inevitable. Disaster was avoided only with the appointment of Solon in 594 BCE to restore order. Solon came from a wealthy elite family, but he made it known that he would draft laws to benefit all Athenians, rich and poor. A poet, he used his songs to convey his ideas for these new laws (Figure 6.13).



Figure 6.13 Solon. This idealized portrait in oils represents Solon, poet and legislator of Athens. It was made in the early nineteenth century by Merry-Joseph Blondel, a French painter of the Neoclassical school. (credit: “Portrait of Solon Legislator and Poet of Athenes” by Musee de Picardie/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

One of Solon’s first measures was to declare that all debts Athenians owed one another were forgiven. Solon also made it law that no Athenian could be sold into slavery for failure to repay a loan. These decrees did much to provide relief to farmers struggling with debt who could now return to work the land. Under Solon’s new laws, each of Athens’s four traditional tribes chose one hundred of its members by lot, including commoners, to sit in the new Council of Four Hundred and run the government. There were still magistrates, but now Solon created the jury courts. All Athenians could appeal the ruling of a magistrate in court and have their cases heard by a jury of fellow citizens. Solon also set up a hierarchal system in which citizens were eligible for positions in government based on wealth instead of hereditary privilege. Wealth was measured by the amount of grain and olive oil a citizen’s land could produce. Only the wealthiest could serve as a magistrate, sit on the Council, and attend the Assembly and jury courts.

Citizens with less wealth could participate in all these activities but could not serve as magistrates. The poorest could only attend the Assembly and the jury courts.

Solon's reforms were not enough to end civil unrest, however. By 545 BCE, a relative of his named Pisistratus had seized power by force with his own private army and ruled as a tyrant with broad popular support. Pisistratus was reportedly a benevolent despot and very popular. He kept Solon's reforms largely in place, and Athenians became accustomed to serving in Solon's Council and in jury courts. They were actively engaged in self-government, thus setting the stage for the establishment of democracy. Pisistratus also encouraged the celebration of religious festivals and cults that united the people of Attica through a common religion. To further help the farmers Solon brought back, Pisistratus redistributed land so they could once again make a living.

After Pisistratus's death, his sons tried to carry on as tyrants, but they lacked their father's popularity. Around 509 BCE, an Athenian aristocrat named Cleisthenes persuaded the Spartans to intervene in Athens and overthrow these tyrants. The Spartans, however, set up a government of elites in Athens that did not include Cleisthenes. Consequently, he appealed to the common people living in the villages, or *demes*, to reject this pro-Spartan regime and establish a "*demo*cracy." His appeal was successful, and Cleisthenes implemented reforms to Solon's system of government. He replaced the Council of Four Hundred with one of five hundred and reorganized the Athenians into ten new tribes, including in each one villages from different parts of Attica. Every year, each tribe chose fifty members by lot to sit in the new Council. This reform served to unite the Athenians, since each tribe consisted of people from different parts of Attica who now had to work together politically. Each tribe's delegation of fifty also served as presidents for part of the year and ran the day-to-day operation of the government.

By the end of the Archaic period, Athens had developed a functioning direct democracy, which differs from modern republics in which citizens vote for representatives who sit in the legislature. All citizens could sit in the Athenian Assembly, which then was required to meet at least ten times a year. All laws had to be approved by the Assembly. Only the Assembly could declare war and approve treaties. Athens had a citizen body of thirty to forty thousand adult males in the Classical period, but only six thousand needed to convene for meetings of the Assembly. Citizens could also be chosen by lot to sit in the Council. Since they were permitted to serve for just two one-year terms over a lifetime, many Athenians had the opportunity to participate in the executive branch of government. All citizens also served on juries, which not only determined the guilt or innocence of the accused but also interpreted the way the law was applied. Women, enslaved people, and foreign residents could not participate. However, women of the citizen class were prominent in the public religious life of the city, serving as priestesses and in ceremonial roles in religious festivals.

Classical Greece

The Greek Classical period (500–323 BCE) was an era of great cultural achievement in which enduring art, literature, and schools of philosophy were created. It began with the Greek city-states uniting temporarily to face an invasion by the mighty Persian Empire, but it ended with them locked in recurring conflicts and ultimately losing their independence, first to Persia and later to Macedon.

The Persian Wars

The Persian Wars (492–449 BCE) were a struggle between the Greek city-states and the expanding Persian Empire. In the mid-sixth century BCE, during the reign of Cyrus the Great, Persian armies subdued the Greek city-states of Ionia, located across the Aegean from Greece in western Asia Minor (Turkey) (Figure 6.14). To govern the cities, the Persians installed tyrants recruited from the local Greek population. The resident Greeks were unhappy with the tyrants' rule, and in 499 BCE they rose in the Ionian Rebellion, joined by Athens and the Greek cities on the island of Cyprus. But by 494 BCE Persian forces had crushed the rebellions in both Ionia and Cyprus. For intervening in Persian affairs, the Persian king Darius decided that Athens must be punished.

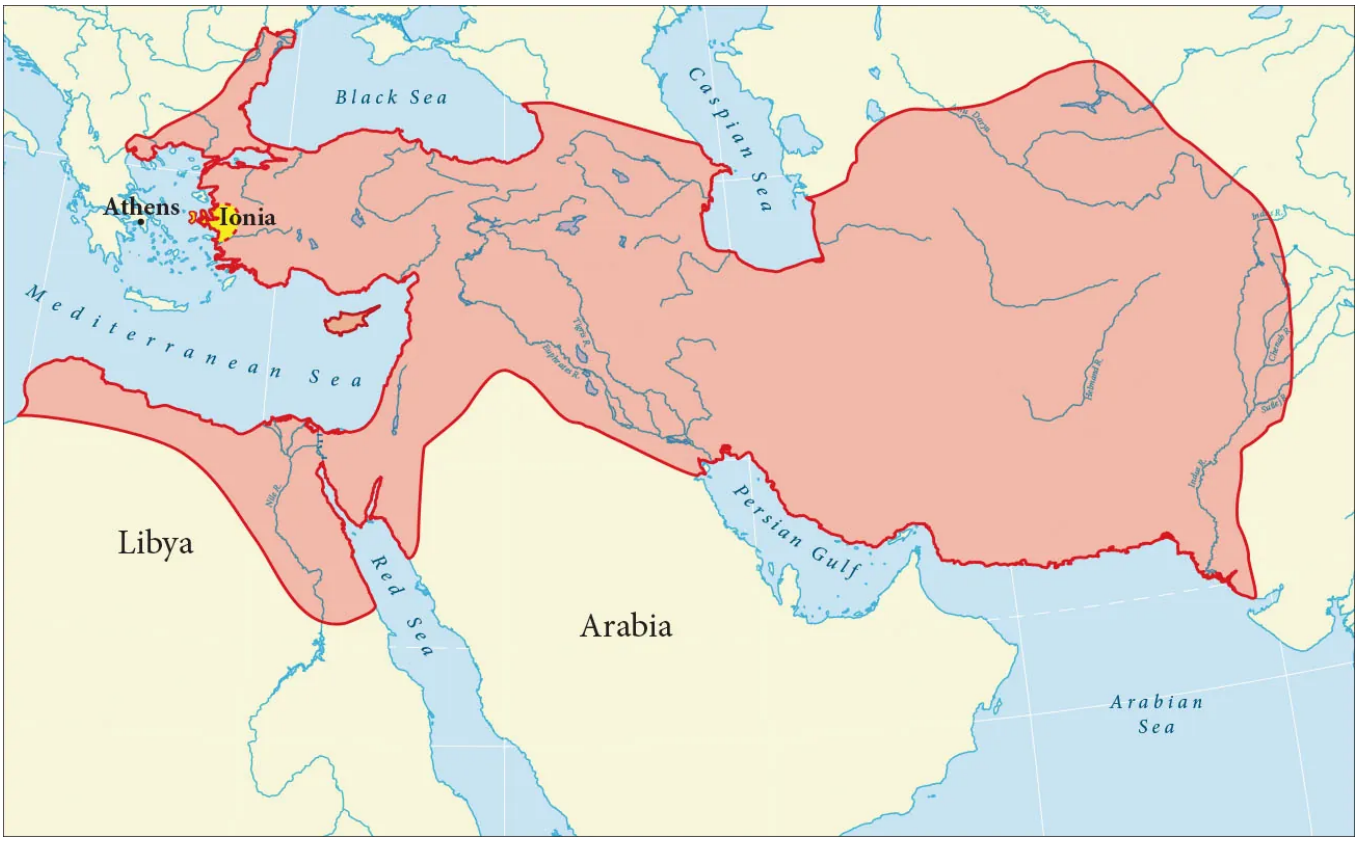


Figure 6.14 Persia and the Greeks in 499 BCE. The Greek world was on the edge of the massive Persian Empire at Persia's height around 500 BCE. Persian rulers likely thought little of the Greeks, but that changed in 499 BCE when Athens intervened in the rebellion in Ionia, a region located just across the Aegean Sea from Athens. (credit: modification of work "Persian Empire, 490 BC, showing route of Cyrus the Younger, Xenophon and the 10.000" by The Department of History - United States Military Academy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 490 BCE, Darius assembled a large fleet and army to cross the Aegean from Asia Minor, planning to subdue Athens and install one of Pisistratus's sons as tyrant there. These Persian forces landed at Marathon on the west coast of Attica. They vastly outnumbered the Athenians but were drafted subjects with little motivation to fight and die. The Athenian soldiers, in contrast, were highly motivated to defend their democracy. The Persians could not withstand the Athenians' spirited charge in the Battle of Marathon and were forced back onto their ships. Leaving the battle, the Persians then sailed around Attica to Athens. The soldiers at Marathon raced by land across the peninsula to guard the city. Seeing the city defended, the Persians returned to Asia Minor in defeat.

In 480 BCE, Xerxes, the son and successor of Darius, launched his own invasion of Greece intended to avenge this defeat and subdue all the Greek city-states. He assembled an even larger fleet as well as an army that would invade by land from the north. At this time of crisis, most of the Greek city-states decided to unite as allies and formed what is commonly called the Hellenic League. Sparta commanded the armies and Athens the fleet. A small band of the larger land forces, mostly Spartans, decided to make a stand at Thermopylae, a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea in northeastern Greece. Their goal was not to defeat the invading Persian army, which vastly outnumbered them, but to delay them so the rest of the forces could organize a defense. For days the small Spartan force, led by their king Leonidas, successfully drove back a vastly superior Persian army, until a Greek traitor informed the Persians of another mountain pass that enabled them to circle around and surround the Spartans. The Spartan force fought to the death, inspiring the Greeks to continue the fight and hold the Hellenic League together.

After the Battle of Thermopylae, the Persian forces advanced against Athens. The Athenians abandoned their city and withdrew to the nearby island of Salamis, where they put their faith in their fleet to protect them. At the naval Battle of Salamis, the allied Greek fleet led by Athens destroyed the Persian ships. Xerxes then decided to withdraw much of his force from Greece, since he no longer had a fleet to keep it supplied.

In 479 BCE, the reduced Persian force had retreated from Athens to the plains of Boeotia, just north of Attica. The Greek allied forces under the command of Sparta advanced into Boeotia and met the Persian army at the Battle of Plataea. The Persian forces, mostly unwilling draftees, were no match for the Spartan troops, and the battle ended in the death or capture of most of the Persian army.

The Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian War

After the Persian Wars, the Athenians took the lead in continuing the fight against Persia and liberating all Greek city-states. In 477 BCE, they organized an alliance of Greek city-states known today as the Delian League, headquartered on the Aegean island of Delos. Members could provide ships and troops for the league or simply pay Athens to equip the fleet, which most chose to do. Over the next several decades, allied forces of the Delian League liberated the Greek city-states of Ionia from Persian rule and supported rebellions against Persia in Cyprus and Egypt. Around 449 BCE, Athens and Persia reached a peace settlement in which the Persians recognized the independence of Ionia and the Athenians agreed to stop aiding rebels in the Persian Empire.

Over the course of this war, the money from the Delian League enriched many lower-class Athenians, who found employment as rowers in the fleet. Athens even began paying jurors in jury courts and people who attended meetings of the Assembly. Over time it became clear to the other Greeks that the Delian League was no longer an alliance but an empire in which the subject city-states paid a steady flow of tribute. In 465 BCE, the city-state of Thasos withdrew from the league but was compelled by Athenian forces to rejoin. Around 437 BCE, the Athenians began using tribute to rebuild the temples on the Acropolis that the Persians had destroyed. Including the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena Parthenos, these were some of the most beautiful temples ever built and the pride of Athens, but to the subject city-states they came to symbolize Athenians' despotism and arrogance (See Figure 6.15).



Figure 6.15 The Parthenon. The large and sumptuous Parthenon, seen here as it is today, was built on the Athenian Acropolis in the fifth century BCE in honor of Athena. Following the temple's destruction in the Persian War, Athens set out to rebuild it using tribute money, which angered some of the other Greek city-states. (credit: "The Parthenon Athens" by Steve Swayne/Flickr, Public Domain)

The wealth and power of Athens greatly concerned the Spartans, who saw themselves as the greatest and noblest of the Greeks. The rivalry between the two city-states eventually led them into open conflict. In 433 BCE, the Athenians assisted the city-state of Corcyra in its war against Corinth. Corinth was a member of the Peloponnesian League and requested that Sparta, the leader of this league, take action against Athenian aggression. Thus, in 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War began with the invasion of Attica by Sparta and its allies (See Figure 6.16).



Figure 6.16 The Peloponnesian War. Athens and its allies controlled the coasts and islands of the Aegean, making it a powerful naval force to contend with. Sparta and its allies were largely land based, though they eventually were able to outmaneuver the Athenians at sea in some important battles. (credit: modification of work “The Alliances of the Peloponnesian War” by U.S. Army Cartographer/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The political leader Pericles persuaded his fellow Athenians to withdraw from the countryside of Attica and move within the walls of Athens, reasoning that the navy would provide them food and supplies and the wall would keep them safe until Sparta tired of war and sought peace. Pericles’s assessment proved correct. In 421 BCE, after ten years of war, the Spartans and Athenians agreed to the Peace of Nicias, which kept the Athenian empire intact. The cost of the war for Athens was high, however. Due to the crowding of people within its walls, a plague had erupted in the city in 426 BCE and killed many, including Pericles.

Link to Learning

We know of the 426 BCE plague in Athens from the writings of Thucydides, the ancient chronicler and historian of the Peloponnesian War. But what was the mysterious illness? And how did it affect Athenian society and politics? Take a look at this article about the plague in Athens from The National Geographic for some modern answers.

Several years later, arguing that the empire could thrive only by expanding, an ambitious young Athenian politician named Alcibiades (a kinsman of Pericles) inspired a massive invasion of Sicily targeting Syracuse, the island’s largest city-state. Just as the campaign began in 415 BCE, Alcibiades’s political enemies in Athens accused him of impiety and treason, and he fled to Sparta to avoid a trial. Without his leadership, the expedition against Syracuse floundered, and in 413 BCE the entire Athenian force was destroyed. In exile, Alcibiades convinced the Spartans to invade Attica again, now that Athens had been weakened by the disaster in Syracuse. In the years that followed, the Spartans realized they needed a large fleet to defeat Athens, and they secured funds for it from Persia on the condition that Sparta restore the Greek cities in Ionia to Persian rule. In 405 BCE, the new Spartan fleet destroyed the Athenian navy at the Battle of Aegospotami in the Hellespont. The Athenians, under siege, could not secure food or

supplies without ships, and in 404 BCE the city surrendered to Sparta. The Peloponnesian War ended with the fall of the city and the collapse of the Athenian empire.

The conclusion of the Peloponnesian War initially left Sparta dominant in Greece. Immediately following the war, Sparta established oligarchies of local aristocrats in the city-states that had been democracies under the Delian League. And it set up the Era of the Thirty Tyrants, a brief rule of oligarchs in Athens. With regard to Persia, Sparta reneged on its promise to restore the Greek city-states in Ionia to Persian control. Persia responded by funding Greek resistance to Sparta, which eventually compelled Sparta to accept Persia's terms in exchange for Persian support. This meant turning over the Ionian city-states as it had previously promised.

Now with Persian backing, the Spartans continued to interfere in the affairs of other Greek city-states. This angered city-states like Thebes and Athens. In 371 BCE, the Thebans defeated the Spartans at the Battle of Leuctra in Boeotia. The next year they invaded the Peloponnese and liberated Messene from Spartan rule, depriving the Spartans of most of their helot labor there. Without the helots, the Spartans could not support their military system as before, and their Peloponnesian League collapsed. Alarmed by the sudden growth of Thebes's power, Athens and Sparta again joined forces and, in 362 BCE, fought the Thebans at the Battle of Mantinea. The battle was inconclusive, but Thebes's dominance soon faded. By 350 BCE, the Greek city-states were exhausted economically and politically after decades of constant warfare.

The Classical "Golden Age"

Many historians view the Greek Classical period and the cultural achievements in Athens in particular as a "Golden Age" of art, literature, and philosophy. Some scholars argue that this period saw the birth of science and philosophy because for the first time people critically examined the natural world and subjected religious beliefs to reason. (Other modern historians argue that this position discounts the accomplishments in medicine and mathematics of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.) For example, around 480 BCE, Empedocles speculated that the universe was not created by gods but instead was the result of the four material "elements"—air, water, fire, earth—being subjected to the forces of attraction and repulsion. Another philosopher and scientist of the era, Democritus, maintained that the universe consisted of tiny particles he called "atoms" that came together randomly in a vortex to form the universe.

Philosophers questioned not only the traditional views of the gods but also traditional values. Some of this questioning came from the sophists ("wise ones") of Athens, those with a reputation for learning, wisdom, and skillful deployment of rhetoric. Sophists emerged as an important presence in the democratic world of Athens beginning in the mid-fourth century BCE. They claimed to be able to teach anyone rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, for a fee, as a means to achieve success as a lawyer or a politician. While many ambitious men sought the services of sophists, others worried that speakers thus trained could lead the people to act against their own self-interest.

Many thought Socrates was one of the sophists. A stonecutter by trade, Socrates publicly questioned sophists and politicians about good and evil, right and wrong. He wanted to base values on reason instead of on unchallenged traditional beliefs. His questioning often embarrassed powerful people in Athens and made enemies, while his disciples included the politician Alcibiades and even some who had opposed Athenian democracy. In 399 BCE, an Athenian jury court found Socrates guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth, and he was sentenced to death (Figure 6.17).



Figure 6.17 The Death of Socrates. Socrates (center with upraised arm) was forced to drink hemlock, a poison. His last moments were imagined to great dramatic effect in this large oil painting of 1787 by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. (credit: "The Death of Socrates" by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Socrates left behind no writings of his own, but some of his disciples wrote about him. One of these was Plato, who wrote dialogues from 399 BCE to his death in 347 BCE that featured Socrates in conversation with others. Through these dialogues, Plato constructed a philosophical system that included the study of nature (physics), of the human mind (psychology and epistemology, the theory of knowledge), and ethics. He maintained that the material world we perceive is an illusion, a mere shadow of the real world of ideas and forms that underlie the universe. According to Plato, the true philosopher uses reason to comprehend these ideas and forms.

Plato established a school at the Academy, which was a gymnasium or public park near Athens where people went to relax and exercise. One of his most famous pupils was Aristotle, who came to disagree with his teacher and believed that ideas and forms could not exist independently of the material universe. In 334 BCE, Aristotle founded his own school at a different gymnasium in Athens, the Lyceum, where his students focused on the reasoned study of the natural world. Modern historians view Plato and Aristotle as the founders of Western (European) philosophy because of the powerful influence of their ideas through the centuries.

Athens in the Golden Age was also the birthplace of theater. Playwrights of the fifth century BCE such as Sophocles and Euripides composed tragedies that featured music and dance, like operas and musicals today (Figure 6.18). The plots were based on traditional myths about gods and heroes, but through their characters the playwrights pondered philosophical questions of the day that have remained influential over time. In Sophocles's *Antigone*, for example, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, must decide whether to obey the laws or follow her religious beliefs.



Figure 6.18 Dionysus. This terracotta representation of a theatrical mask a Greek actor might have worn dates from the first or second century BCE and portrays Dionysus, Zeus's son and the god of wine. (credit: "Terracotta figurine of a theatrical mask representing Dionysos" by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

For an example of Greek theatre, watch this modern performance of *Lysistrata* by the comic poet Aristophanes. In this comedy, first performed in 411 BCE, the women of Greece plot to end the Peloponnesian War. In the Greek original, the actors would have worn masks and sung their parts, as in a modern opera.

The study of history also evolved during the Golden Age. Herodotus and Thucydides are considered the first true historians because they examined the past to rationally explain the causes and effects of human actions. Herodotus wrote a sweeping history of wide geographic scope, called *Histories* ("inquiries"), to explore the deep origins of the tension between the Persian and Greek worlds. In *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides employed objectivity to explain the politics, events, and brutality of the conflict in a way that is similar in some respects to the approach of modern historians.

Finally, this period saw masterpieces of sculpture, vase painting, and architecture. Classical Age Greek artists broke free of the heavily stylized and two-dimensional art of Egypt and the Levant, which had inspired Greek geometric forms, and produced their own uniquely realistic styles that aimed to capture in art the ideal human form. Centuries later, and especially during the European Renaissance, artists modeled their own works on these classical models.

Beyond the Book

Ancient Greek Sculpture and Painting

In the Archaic period, the Greeks had more contact with the cultures of Phoenicia and Egypt, and artists modeled their work on examples from these regions. For instance, ancient Egyptian artists followed strict conventions in their heavily stylized works, such as arms held close to the sides of the body and a parallel stance for the feet. Greek artists adopted these conventions in their statues of naked youths, or *kouroi*, which were often dedicated in religious sanctuaries (Figure 6.19).

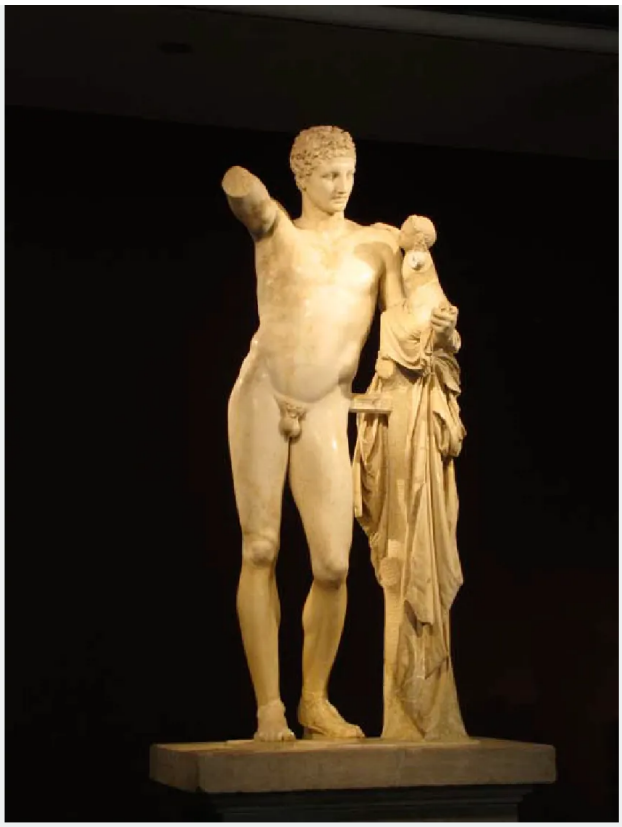


(a) (b)

Figure 6.19 The Early Influence of Egyptian Sculpture. This basalt statue (a) is one of only seven statues of Cleopatra to survive from the ancient world. Its conventions like arms close to the body and parallel feet are mirrored in a Greek marble statue of a youth from about 580 BCE (b). (credit a: modification of work “Cleopatra statue at Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum” by E. Michael Smith Chiefio/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work “Marble statue of a kouros (youth)” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1932/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

During the Classical period, Greek sculptors still produced statues of naked youths for religious sanctuaries, but in more lifelike poses that resembled the way the human body appears naturally (Figure 6.20).





(a) (b)

Figure 6.20 Realism in Ancient Greek Art. In the mid-fifth century BCE, the Greek sculptor Myron produced a lifelike bronze statue of an athlete throwing a discus. Here (a) is a Roman marble copy of his statue. Approximately one century later, the Greek sculptor Praxiteles produced a similarly realistic statue (b), possibly depicting the Greek god Hermes holding Dionysus as a baby. (credit a: modification of work “Discobolus side 2” by Ricky Bennison/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work “Hermes of Praxiteles” by Dottie Day/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Greek painting is most often preserved on vases. In the Archaic period, artists frequently decorated vases with motifs such as patterning, borrowed from Phoenician and Egyptian art (Figure 6.21).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.21 The Influence of Phoenician Decorative Art. This Phoenician silver bowl from the seventh century BCE (a) features lotus flowers and palm trees, which were Egyptian motifs, and repetitive patterning. A Greek jug from the same period (b) also uses repetitive patterns for decoration. (credit a: modification of work" Dish with Tambourine Players" by Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit b: modification of work "Corinthian jug 620 BC Staatliche Antikensammlungen" by Bibi Saint-Pol/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

By the Classical era, especially in Athens, vase painters were relying less on patterning and instead depicting realistic scenes from myths and daily life (Figure 6.22).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.22 Greek Realism in Art. A Greek terracotta cup from the sixth or fifth century BCE (a) depicts charioteers. A wine jug from the fifth century BCE (b) depicts a scene from Greek mythology. (credit a: modification of work “Red-figured Kylix Greek 6th-5th century BCE terracotta (2)” by Mary Harrsch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work “5th century BC Psykter” by Giovanni Dall’Orto/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY)

In the Classical period, Greek artists thus came into their own and no longer borrowed heavily from the art of Egypt and Phoenicia.

- What do the many artistic influences on Greece suggest about its connections with other parts of the ancient world?
- Why might Greek art have relied heavily on mythical symbols and depictions? What does this indicate about Greek culture?

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5.4: The Hellenistic Era

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the events that led to the rise of Alexander the Great
- Analyze Alexander the Great's successes as a military and political leader
- Discuss the role that Alexander the Great's conquests played in spreading Greek culture

The Classical period in Greece ended when Greece lost its freedom to the Kingdom of Macedon and Macedon's king Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire. The period that followed Alexander's death is known as the Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE). Alexander's empire was divided among his top generals, including Seleucus, Ptolemy, and Antigonus. During this time, Greeks, also called Hellenes, ruled over and interacted with the populations of the former Persian Empire. The resulting mixture of cultures was neither Greek nor non-Greek but "Greek-like," or Hellenistic, a term that refers to the flourishing and expansion of Greek language and culture throughout the Mediterranean and Near East during this period.

The Kingdom of Macedon

The ancient Kingdom of Macedon straddled today's Greece and northern Macedonia. The Macedonians did not speak Greek but had adopted Greek culture in the Archaic period, and their royal family claimed to be descended from the mythical Greek hero Heracles.

King Philip II of Macedon, who reigned from 359 to 336 BCE, transformed the kingdom into a great power. He recruited common farmers and developed them into a formidable infantry, with trained aristocrats as cavalry. His tactical skills and diplomacy allowed Philip to secure control of new territory in Thrace (modern-day northern Greece and Bulgaria), which provided access to precious metals and thus the economic resources to expand his military power.

In 338 BCE, Athens and Thebes finally put decades of conflict aside to ally against the rising power of Macedon. At the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE), the Macedonians crushed this allied army. Philip sought to unite the Greek city-states under his leadership after this victory, and he organized them toward the goal of waging war against the Persian Empire. However, in 336 BCE, Philip was killed by an assassin with a personal grudge.

Philip II was succeeded by his twenty-year-old son Alexander III, later known as Alexander the Great, who immediately faced an invasion by Thracian tribes from the north and a rebellion in Greece led by Thebes and Athens. Within a year, the young king had crushed these opponents and announced he was carrying out his father's plan to wage war against Persia. Darius III, the Persian king, amassed armies to face him, but they were mainly draftees from the subject peoples of the Persian Empire. At the battles of Issus (333 BCE) and Gaugamela (330 BCE), these forces collapsed against the Macedonians, commanded by Alexander himself.

At first, Alexander envisioned his campaign as a war of vengeance against Persia. Although he was Macedonian, he saw himself as a Hellene and often compared himself to the hero Achilles of the *Iliad*, from whom he claimed to be descended through his mother. In 330 BCE, Alexander's forces sacked and later burned Persepolis, the jewel of the Persian Empire. After the assassination of Darius III by disgruntled Persian nobles that same year, however, Alexander claimed the Persian throne and introduced Persian customs to his court, such as having his subjects prostrate themselves before him. To consolidate his control of the Persian Empire, in 330–326 BCE he advanced his army deep into central Asia and to the Indus River valley (modern Pakistan) (Figure 6.23). In 326 BCE, his exhausted troops mutinied and refused to advance to the Ganges River in central India as Alexander desired. He led his army back to Babylon in Mesopotamia, where he died in 323 BCE at the age of thirty-three, probably due to the cumulative impact of injuries experienced during the campaign.



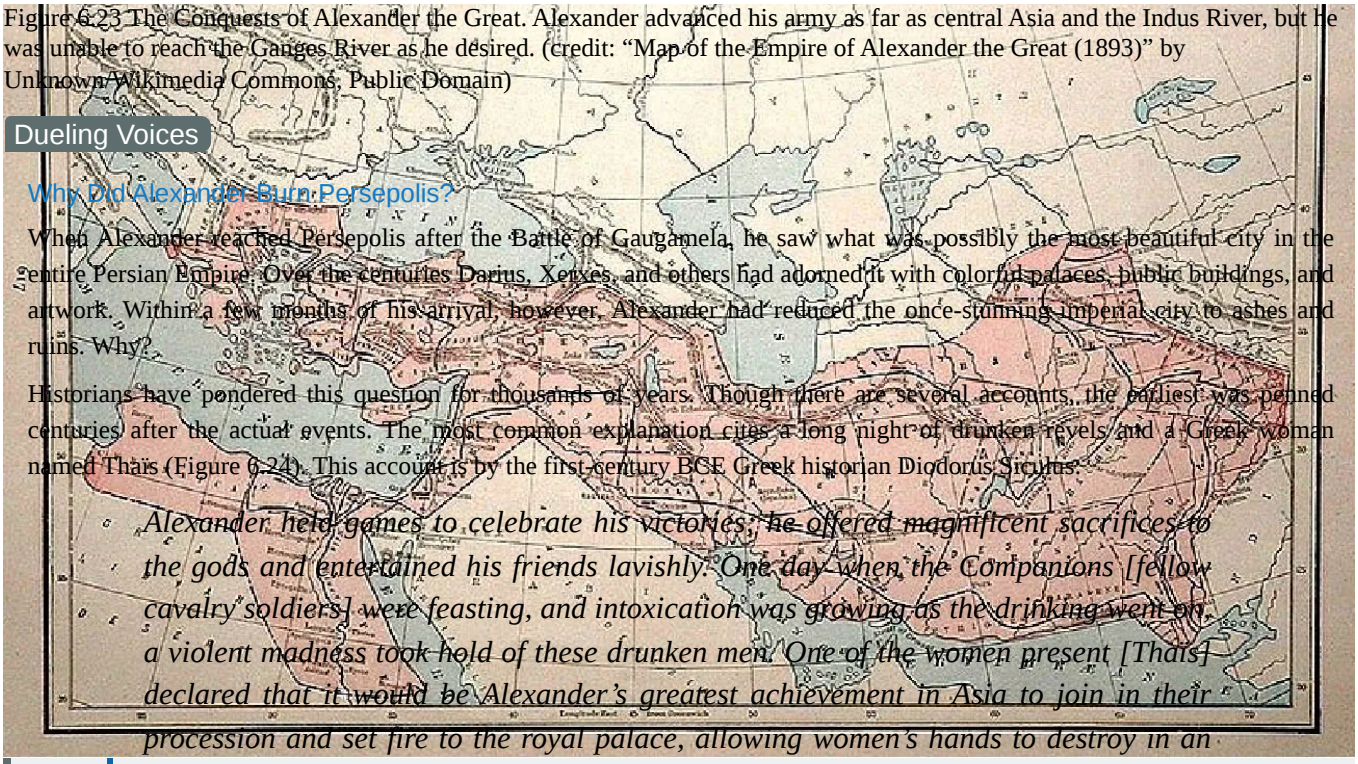


Figure 6.23 The Conquests of Alexander the Great. Alexander advanced his army as far as central Asia and the Indus River, but he was unable to reach the Ganges River as he desired. (credit: "Map of the Empire of Alexander the Great (1893)" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Dueling Voices

Why Did Alexander Burn Persepolis?

When Alexander reached Persepolis after the Battle of Gaugamela, he saw what was possibly the most beautiful city in the entire Persian Empire. Over the centuries Darius, Xerxes, and others had adorned it with colorful palaces, public buildings, and artwork. Within a few months of his arrival, however, Alexander had reduced the once-stunning imperial city to ashes and ruins. Why?

Historians have pondered this question for thousands of years. Though there are several accounts, the earliest was penned centuries after the actual events. The most common explanation cites a long night of drunken revels and a Greek woman named Thaïs (Figure 6.24). This account is by the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus:

> *Alexander held games to celebrate his victories; he offered magnificent sacrifices to the gods and entertained his friends lavishly. One day when the Companions [fellow cavalry soldiers] were feasting, and intoxication was growing as the drinking went on, a violent madness took hold of these drunken men. One of the women present [Thaïs] declared that it would be Alexander's greatest achievement in Asia to join in their procession and set fire to the royal palace, allowing women's hands to destroy in an instant what had been the pride of the Persians.*
>
> *—Diodorus of Sicily, Library of World History*

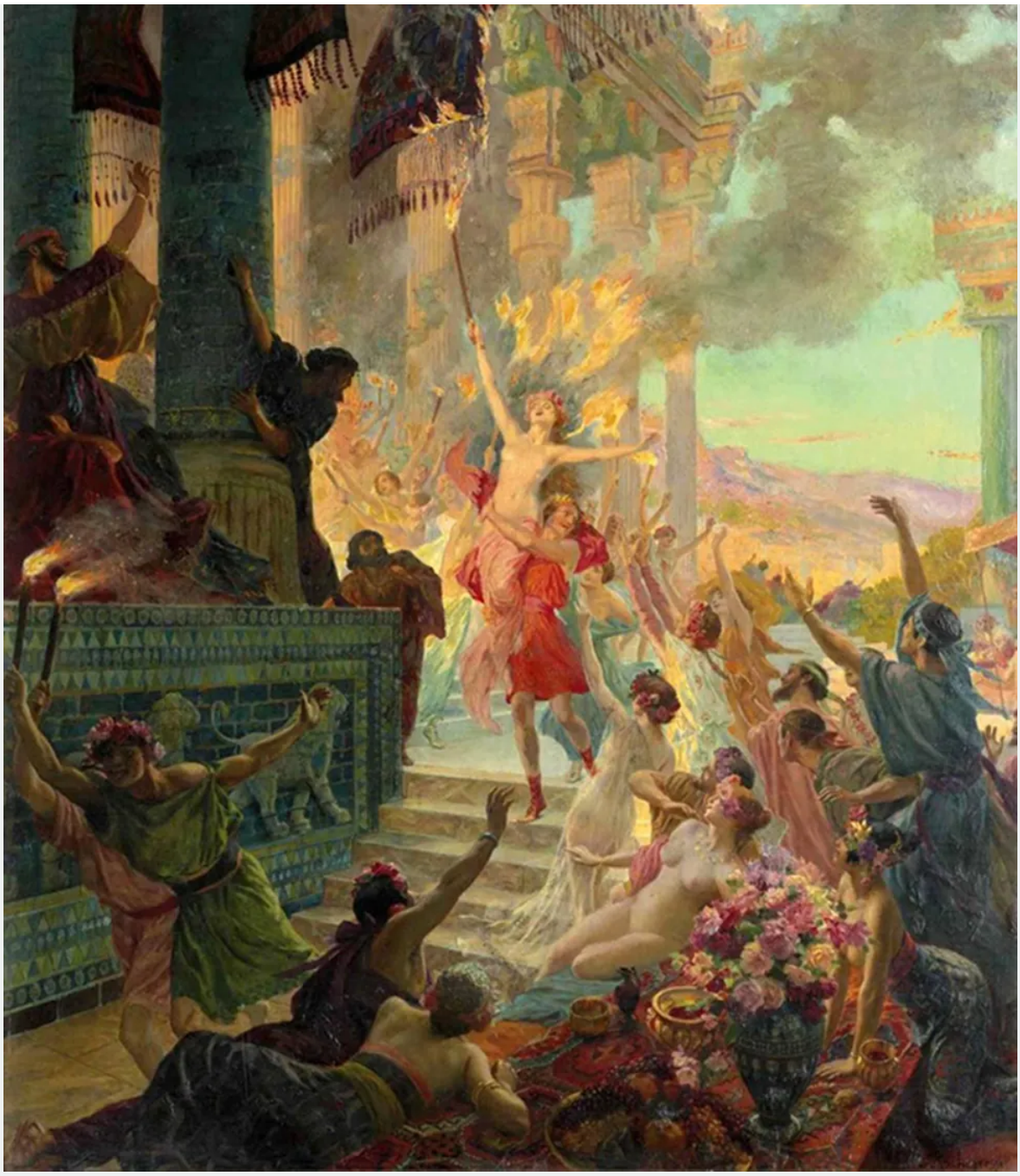


Figure 6.24 Thaïs Burns Persepolis. This 1890 painting by the French artist Georges Rochegrosse imagines Thaïs, held aloft while brandishing a torch, leading the maddened crowd as they burn the city in a drunken spectacle. (credit: “The burning of Persepolis, 1890, by Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Later Roman historians such as Quintus Curtius Rufus and Plutarch provide similar accounts, saying the fire was the result of an out-of-control party and lit at Thaïs’s insistence. But at least one ancient writer disagrees. Relying on sources from Ptolemy and other contemporaries of Alexander, the historian Arrian of Nicomedia makes no mention of Thaïs or a night of heavy drinking. In *Anabasis*, he says the destruction of the city was intentional, the product of calculated revenge “for their invasion of Greece...for the destruction of Athens, the burning of the temples, and all the other crimes they had committed against the Greeks.”

What really happened at Persepolis? Was Thaïs the instigator or merely the scapegoat? Thousands of years later we may be able only to speculate about the cause of this catastrophic event.

- Given what you've read, who do you think was responsible for the burning of Persepolis? Why?
- If Thaïs wasn't responsible, why do you think some ancient historians were convinced of her culpability?

Though his Bactrian wife Roxane was pregnant when he died, Alexander had made no arrangements for a successor. Members of his court and his military commanders thus fought among themselves for control of the empire in what historians refer to as the Wars of the Successors. One of the more colorful contestants was Pyrrhus, who was not Macedonian but was the king of Epirus and Alexander's cousin. Pyrrhus temporarily seized the throne of Macedon and attempted to carve out an empire for himself in Sicily and southern Italy. He never lost a battle, but he lost so many troops in a campaign defending Magna Graecia in southern Italy from Rome that he was never able to capitalize on his success. (Today the term *pyrrhic victory* refers to a win so costly that it is in effect a loss.) In 272 BCE, Pyrrhus died after being struck by a roof tile thrown at him by an elderly woman during a street battle in the city of Argos. His death marked the end of the wars among Alexander's generals.

By the middle of the third century BCE, certain generals and their descendants were ruling as kings over different portions of Alexander's empire (Figure 6.25). Antigonus and his descendants, the Antigonids, ruled Macedon and much of Greece. Some city-states in Greece organized federal leagues to maintain their independence from Macedon. The Achaean League was in the Peloponnese and the Aetolian League in central Greece. Another Macedonian general, Ptolemy, was king of Egypt. To win the support of the Egyptian people, Ptolemy and his successors assumed the title of pharaoh and built temples to Egyptian gods. Yet another Macedonian general, Seleucus and his descendants, the Seleucids, ruled as kings over much of the former Persian Empire, from Asia Minor in the west to central Asia in the east. They adopted many practices of the Persian Empire, including honoring local gods, as revealed by cuneiform records of the offerings they made.



Figure 6.25 The Hellenistic World. The conquests of Alexander and conflicts over the spoils that raged for decades after his death resulted in the reordering of what had once been the Persian Empire. While the borders regularly shifted over the years, this map provides a snapshot of the Hellenistic kingdoms in about 263 BCE. (credit: modification of work "The Hellenistic World in late 281 BC" by "Cattette"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

The Seleucid Kingdom was an enormous and complicated region, stretching from the Aegean Sea to today's Afghanistan, with a population of some thirty million people of various ethnic and linguistic groups. Keeping control over the vast kingdom proved difficult, and some of the far eastern portions like Bactria and Parthia began to break away around 250 BCE. Both became separate Hellenistic kingdoms, ruled initially by former Greek governors of the areas. Around 200 BCE, the Bactrian kingdom invaded and conquered the Indus River valley. The most famous of the Bactrian kings of India was Menander I, whose kingdom stretched from the Indus River valley to the upper Ganges in central India. Menander converted to Buddhism and became a holy man, known in

India as Milinda. The Greek colonists who settled in Bactria and India introduced their art into the region, which influenced Indian sculpture, painting, and architecture. By the end of the second century BCE, however, the Bactrian kingdom had collapsed due to constant civil wars between rival claimants to the throne. We know of their existence only through the coins they issued as kings (Figure 6.26).



Figure 6.26 A Greco-Bactrian Coin. Even after the Bactrian kingdom split away from the Seleucid Empire in the third century BCE, Greek influence there remained. This Greco-Bactrian coin, likely from the second century BCE, shows a Greek goddess and Greek letters on one side and a humped bull, an Indian symbol, and Kharosthi script (Indo-Persian) on the other. (credit: "Bactrian coin, 1st or 2nd century BC" by Jean-Michel Moullec/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In these Hellenistic kingdoms, where peace treaties and alliances could be secured through arranged marriages, elite women might achieve political power unimaginable in Classical Greece. In Egypt, for example, Ptolemy II married his sister Arsinoe, as was the custom for pharaohs, and installed her as co-ruler. Dynastic queens also often ruled when the designated heir was just a child. In 253 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus II ended his war for control of Syria with a treaty by which he married Berenice, the daughter of his opponent Ptolemy II. However, Antiochus's former wife Laodice murdered Berenice and her children upon Antiochus's death in 246 BCE to secure the succession for her own young son Seleucus II. Ptolemy III subsequently declared war to avenge the death of his sister and her children.

In 194 BCE, Antiochus III ended yet another war for control of Syria by giving his daughter Cleopatra I in marriage to Ptolemy V. Upon Ptolemy's death in 180 BCE, Cleopatra ruled because their sons and daughter were still children. The most famous of the powerful Hellenistic queens was this Cleopatra's descendant, Cleopatra VII, who reigned from 51 to 31 BCE. The last of the Ptolemies, Cleopatra VII reigned as co-ruler with her brothers Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV, as well as with Ptolemy XV, also called Caesarion, who was her son with the Roman general Julius Caesar.

Hellenistic Culture

A characteristic cultural feature of the Hellenistic period was the blending of Greek and other cultures of the former Persian Empire. The Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties both employed Greeks and Macedonians as soldiers and bureaucrats in their empires. Alexander the Great and subsequent Hellenistic kings founded Greek cities in the former Persian Empire for Greek and Macedonian colonists, often naming them in honor of themselves or their queens. These cities included the institutions of the Greek cities of their homeland—temples to Greek gods, theaters, *agora* (marketplaces), and gymnasia—so the colonists could feel at home in their new environment. At the site of Ai Khanum in modern Afghanistan, archaeologists have uncovered the impressive remains of one such Hellenistic city with a gymnasium.

Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander himself in 331 BCE, was the capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom and the largest Hellenistic city, with a population that reached one million. There the Ptolemies founded the *Museon*, or "home of the Muses," from which the term "museum" derives. They modeled this on Aristotle's Lyceum, as a center for scientific research and literary studies. These same kings also patronized the Alexandrian Library, where they assembled the largest collection of books in the

ancient world. Antioch, in today's southeastern Turkey, was the largest city of the Seleucid kingdom, with a population of half a million. In cities such as Alexandria and Antioch, the Greek-speaking population became integrated with the indigenous population.

Most Greek cities in this period were no longer independent since they were usually under the control of one of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The city-states of the Achaean and Aetolian Leagues in Greece were the exception, fiercely maintaining their independence against the Antigonid rulers of Macedon. Having lost the right of self-government, many Greeks in cities under the rule of kings no longer focused on politics and diplomacy but turned to the search for personal happiness. New religions emerged that promised earthly contentment and eternal life and combined Greek and non-Greek elements. For example, the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis became common in many Hellenistic cities.

Mithras was a Persian sun god worshiped by the Medes, but in the second century BCE, Greeks in Hellenistic cities came to believe Mithras would lead them, too, to eternal life. His followers built special chapels decorated with symbols whose meaning is still disputed. The emphasis on secret religious rituals, or *mysteries*, about which followers were sworn to silence, lends the worship of Isis and Mithras in this period the name mystery religions (Figure 6.27).



Figure 6.27 Mithras. This stone relief from the second century CE depicts the Persian sun god Mithras, who became the center of a mystery religion. (credit: modification of work "Cult Relief of Mithras Slaying the Bull (Tauroctony)" by Yale University Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Another religion practiced in Hellenistic cities was Judaism, whose followers included migrant Jewish people and new converts. By the second century BCE, the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek under the Ptolemies, since ancient Judea was within their control for much of the Hellenistic period and many Jewish people had immigrated to Alexandria.

Some Greeks preferred new philosophies to religion as a means to achieve happiness. Hellenistic philosophy emphasized the search for internal peace and contentment. Stoicism, for example, maintained that the universe was governed by divine reason (*Logos*), which determined the fate of all people. Happiness therefore resulted from learning how to cope with life and accepting fate while avoiding extreme negative emotions such as fear and anger. Epicureans, however, maintained that the key to happiness was to avoid physical and mental pain by pursuing pleasure. The founders of these two philosophical schools, Zeno and Epicurus respectively, both lived in the early third century BCE and taught in Athens, which continued to be a center of learning in this period. The Stoics were so named because Zeno instructed his students in the *stoa poikile*, or "painted porch" in the Athenian *agora*. The mystery religions and philosophies of the Hellenistic era continued to flourish as these cities became incorporated into the expanding Roman Empire.

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5.5: The Roman Republic

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

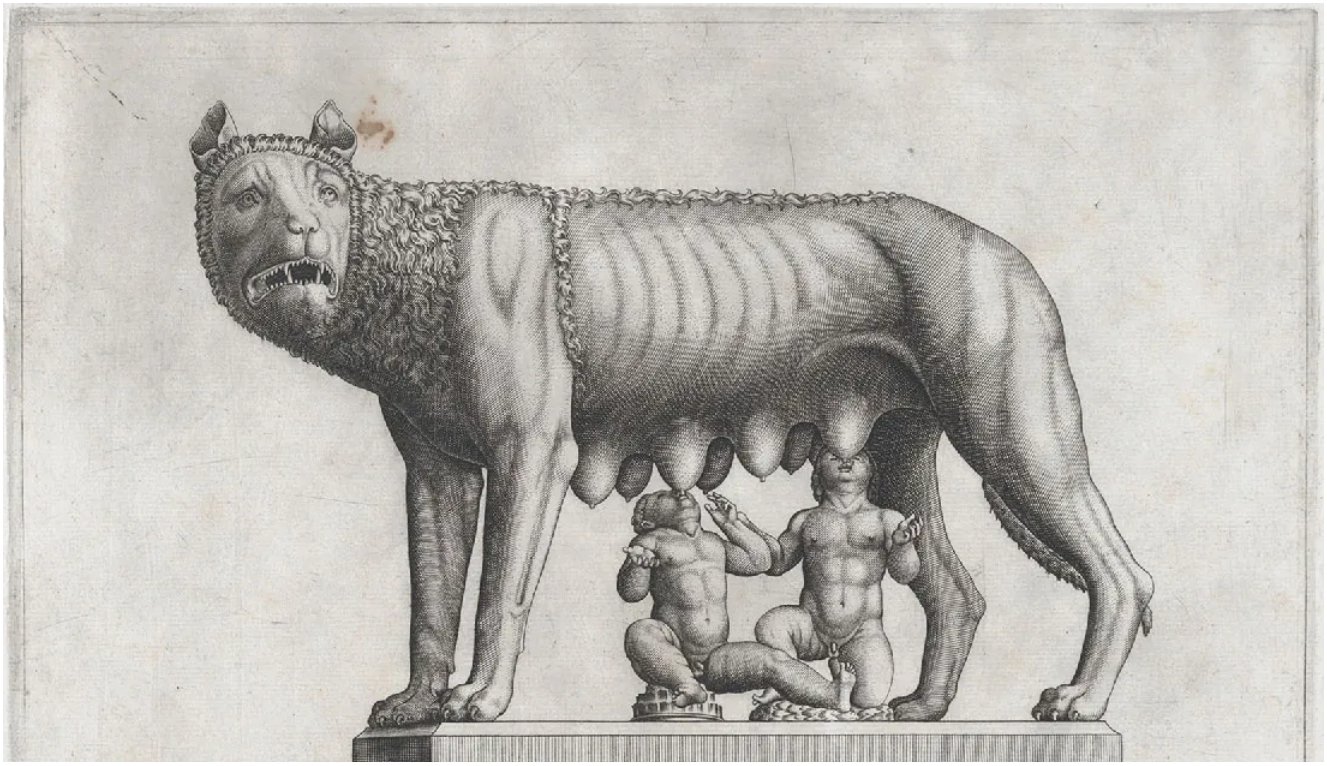
- Identify the key institutions of the Roman Republic
- Discuss class differences and conflict in the Roman Republic
- Analyze the challenges that strained democratic institutions in the Roman Republic, including the Punic Wars

Many elements of early Roman culture and society resulted from Greek influence on the Italian peninsula. Later, when the Roman state expanded and built an empire, its people transmitted their culture—heavily indebted to Ancient Greece—to the Celtic and Germanic tribes of central and western Europe. They also transmitted their language, which is why French, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish are known as "Romance" languages: They are descended from the Latin language spoken by the Romans. The classical civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome were therefore the foundation for what became known as Western civilization.

The Foundation and Function of the Roman Republic

During the Archaic period, Greeks established colonies on Sicily and in southern Italy that went on to influence the culture of Italy. By around 500 BCE, the inhabitants of central Italy, who spoke Latin, had adopted much of Greek culture as their own, including the idea that citizens should have a voice in the governance of the state. For example, the people of the small city-state of Rome referred to their state as *res publica*, meaning "public thing" (to distinguish it from the *res privata*, or "private thing," that had characterized oligarchical and monarchical rule under the Etruscans). *Res publica*—from which the word "republic" derives—signified that government happens in the open, for everyone to see. Early Romans also adopted Greek gods and myths as well as other elements of Greek culture.

The Romans passed down many traditions about the early history of their republic, recorded by historians such as Livy in the first century BCE. These stories often reflected the values that the Romans revered. According to Roman tradition, the city was founded in 753 BCE by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars, the god of war (Figure 6.28). It was said that Romulus killed his brother when Remus mocked his construction of a wall around the new city and jumped over it. This story brought into focus for Romans their respect for boundaries and private property.



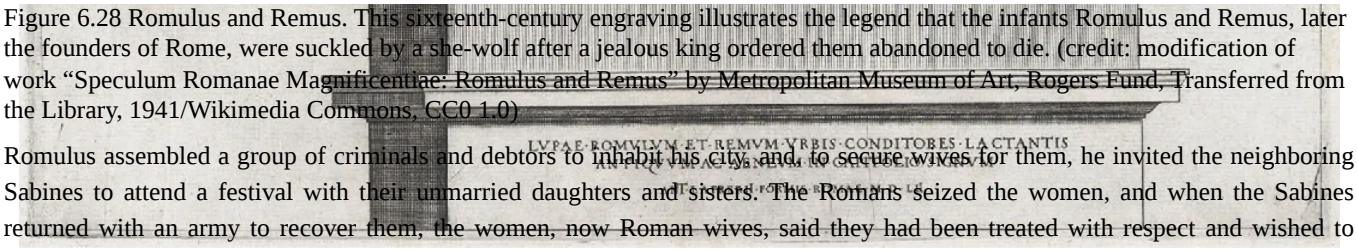


Figure 6.28 Romulus and Remus. This sixteenth-century engraving illustrates the legend that the infants Romulus and Remus, later the founders of Rome, were suckled by a she-wolf after a jealous king ordered them abandoned to die. (credit: modification of work "Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae: Romulus and Remus" by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, Transferred from the Library, 1941/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Romulus assembled a group of criminals and debtors to inhabit his city, and, to secure wives for them, he invited the neighboring Sabines to attend a festival with their unmarried daughters and sisters. The Romans seized the women, and when the Sabines returned with an army to recover them, the women, now Roman wives, said they had been treated with respect and wished to remain. The Sabines and the Romans then joined together in a single city-state. This story showed that a person did not have to be born a Roman to receive the rights of citizenship. It also reflected women's social status in Rome, which was higher than their status in other ancient cultures. They couldn't vote or hold public office, but they could own property and freely participate in public events such as banquets.

These stories also include details of Roman ideas about government. For example, they note that in its early centuries, Rome was a monarchy, with the first king being Romulus. After the passing of the fourth king, the throne was assumed by Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, an Etruscan. The next two kings were also Etruscan. The last of these, Tarquin the Proud, was the final king of Rome, whose son raped a young Roman woman named Lucretia. This act triggered a rebellion against the monarchy, which ultimately ousted the Etruscan king. In 509 BCE, the victorious Romans declared their government to be a republic and vowed never to be subject to tyranny again. This story emphasized the Roman respect for the rule of law. No one, no matter how powerful, was above it.

In Their Own Words

Lucretia's Sacrifice for Rome

Like many stories about Rome's early history, the story of the rape of Lucretia emphasizes Roman values, in this case, virtue. Revered as a model Roman woman, Lucretia embodied sexual purity and loyalty to her husband at the expense of her safety, her autonomy, and even her life. According to the story, Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king, is staying at Collatinus and Lucretia's home. During the night, Tarquinius enters Lucretia's chambers with his sword in hand, He threatens her with successive acts of violence and disgrace before raping her. While recounting the events, Lucretia asks her family to pledge that they will avenge her, and then she dies by suicide. Scholars debate the reason for her suicide, with some indicating it was related to shame, others viewing it as Lucretia asserting control, while still others see it as an allegory for the death of the Roman monarchy.

The historian Livy's account of Lucretia's suicide, written in the first century BCE, shows the story's enduring value in Roman culture. It begins as Lucretia's husband and father run to her aid after hearing she has been raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king. Lucretia they found sitting sadly in her chamber.

> *The entrance of her friends brought the tears to her eyes, and to her husband's question, "Is all well?" She replied, "Far from it; for what can be well with a woman when she has lost her honor? The print of a strange man, Collatinus [her husband], is in your bed. Yet my body only has been violated; my heart is guiltless, as death shall be my witness. But pledge your right hands and your words that the adulterer shall not go unpunished. Sextus Tarquinius is he that last night returned hostility for hospitality, and armed with force brought ruin on me, and on himself no less—if you are men—when he worked his pleasure with me." They give their pledges, every man in turn. They seek to comfort her, sick at heart as she is, by diverting the blame from her who was forced to the doer of the wrong. They tell her it is the mind that sins, not the body; and that where purpose has been wanting there is no guilt. "It is for you to determine," she answers, "what is due to him; for my own part, though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever*

> *unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia." Taking a knife that she had concealed beneath her dress, she plunged it into her heart, and sinking forward upon the wound, died as she fell. The wail for the dead was raised by her husband and her father.*
>
> *—Livy, Ab Urbe Condita (The History of Rome)*

- Why does Lucretia choose death?
- What does her choice say about Roman values concerning the conduct of women, chastity, and reputation?

Archaeological evidence seems to indicate at least some historical basis for these accounts of Rome's founding. In 1988, a wall was discovered around the Palatine Hill where Romulus reportedly built his fortification. Archaeologists also found Greek pottery from this period at the same location, suggesting trade took place. The city of Rome is located along the Tiber River where it was no longer navigable to sea-going vessels. Greek merchants would have sailed up the Tiber from the Mediterranean Sea and traded with the native peoples there. Greek merchants and colonists arriving in Italy at this time influenced the Iron Age culture in northern and central Italy, which then evolved though Greek influence into the Latin and Etruscan cultures. Around 600 BCE, the Etruscans colonized Rome, which became an Etruscan city-state. The story of the Tarquin dynasty reflects this Etruscan period of Roman history. Modern historians maintain that the story of the expulsion of the Tarquins is loosely based on historical events, which saw the Roman city-state free itself from Etruscan domination and establish an independent republic around 500 BCE.

In the early republic, Rome was ruled by elected magistrates instead of kings, and by a Council of Elders or Senate. Roman society was divided into two classes or orders, patricians and plebeians. The patricians were the aristocratic elite, who alone could hold public office and sit in the Senate. From the beginning of the republic through the third century BCE, the plebeians, or common people, worked to achieve equality before the law in Roman society. The political conflict between these two classes is known as the Struggle of the Orders.

Rome was located on a coastal plain known as Latium. East of it were the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, inhabited by warlike tribes that made periodic raids. When Rome was under threat, the plebeians could gain leverage with the patricians by refusing to fight until their demands were met. In 450 BCE, the plebeians went on strike for the first time. They feared that patrician judges were interpreting Rome's unwritten laws to take advantage of ignorant plebeians, so they demanded the laws be written down. The patricians agreed. In the Twelve Tables, published in the Forum, Rome's laws were written for the first time and were then accessible to all citizens.

Link to Learning

Read excerpts from Rome's Twelve Tables of law from Fordham University's Ancient History Sourcebook. What do these laws tell us about Roman society in 450 BCE, when they were first written down?

After 450 BCE, the plebeians met in a Plebian Assembly that annually elected ten officials known as tribunes. These tribunes attended meetings of Rome's assemblies, the Senate, and the law courts. If they saw any public body or official taking action that would bring harm to plebeians, they could say "*Veto*" or "I forbid" and stop that action. This power to veto gave plebeians a way to protect themselves and put a check on the power of patrician officials.

In the fourth and third centuries BCE, plebeians won more concessions by again seceding from the patrician state. After 367 BCE, one of the two consuls, the highest officials in the republic, had to be a plebian. After 287 BCE, the Plebian Assembly could pass laws for the republic that were introduced to it by the tribunes, and their laws applied to all Roman citizens. By the third century BCE, the Struggle of the Orders had effectively concluded, since it was now possible for plebeians to pass laws, serve as elected officials, and sit in the Senate, equals of the patricians under Roman law. The Struggle of the Orders did not bring equality to everyone in Rome, however. Rather, it gave well-off plebeians access to positions of power.

Romans were a very conservative people who greatly venerated the *mos maiorum* or "way of the ancestors." Their political system was a combination of written laws and political traditions and customs that had evolved since the birth of the Republic. By the third century BCE, this system was being administrated by a combination of public assemblies, elected officials, and the Senate.

The Roman Republic had three main public assemblies—the Plebian Assembly, the Tribal Assembly, and the Centuriate Assembly—that elected various officials every year. Only plebeians could attend the Plebian Assembly, organized into thirty-five regional tribes with a single vote each. It was this assembly that annually elected the ten tribunes, who possessed veto power and could present laws to the assembly for approval. The Tribal Assembly was likewise divided into thirty-five tribes based on place of residence, with each tribe casting one vote, but both plebeians and patricians could attend. Every year, the Tribal Assembly elected the Quaestors, treasurers in charge of public money.

Only the Centuriate Assembly could declare war, though the Senate remained in control of foreign policy. Both plebeians and patricians could attend this assembly, which was organized into blocs. The number of votes assigned to each bloc was based on the number of centuries—meaning a group of one hundred men in a military unit—that bloc could afford to equip with weapons and armor. Wealthier citizens had more votes because they could pay more to support the military. This assembly also elected military commanders, judges, and the censor, whose main task was to conduct the census to assess the wealth of Rome's citizens.

All elected officials joined the Roman Senate as members for life after their term in office. By far the most powerful institution in the Roman state, the Senate decided how public money was to be spent and advised elected officials on their course of action. Elected officials rarely ignored the Senate's advice since many of them would be senators themselves after leaving office.

The patron-client system was another important element in the Roman political system. A patron was usually a wealthy citizen who provided legal and financial assistance to his clients, who were normally less affluent citizens. In return, clients in the Roman assemblies voted as directed by their patrons. Patrons could inherit clients, and those with many wielded great influence in Rome.

The Expansion of the Roman Republic

The early Romans did not plan on building an immense empire. They were surrounded by hostile city-states and tribes, and in the process of defeating them they made new enemies even as they expanded their network of allies. Thus they were constantly sending armies farther afield to crush these threats until Rome emerged in the second century BCE as the most powerful state in all the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The Roman Senate developed certain policies in conducting wars that proved quite successful (Figure 6.29). One was to divide and conquer. The Romans always tried to defeat one enemy at a time and avoid waging war against a coalition. Thus they often attempted to turn their enemies against each other. Another tactic was to negotiate from strength. Even after suffering enormous defeats in battle, Rome would continue a war until it won a major engagement and reach a position from which to negotiate for peace with momentum on its side. Yet another successful strategy was to establish colonies in recently conquered lands to serve as the first line of defense if a region revolted against Rome. Well-constructed roads were also built to link Rome to these colonies, so armies could arrive quickly in a region that rebelled. Thanks to these networks across Italy, the language and culture of Rome eventually spread throughout its empire as well. Romans also transformed former enemies into loyal allies who could enjoy self-government as long as they honored Rome's other alliances and provided troops in times of war. Some even received Roman citizenship.

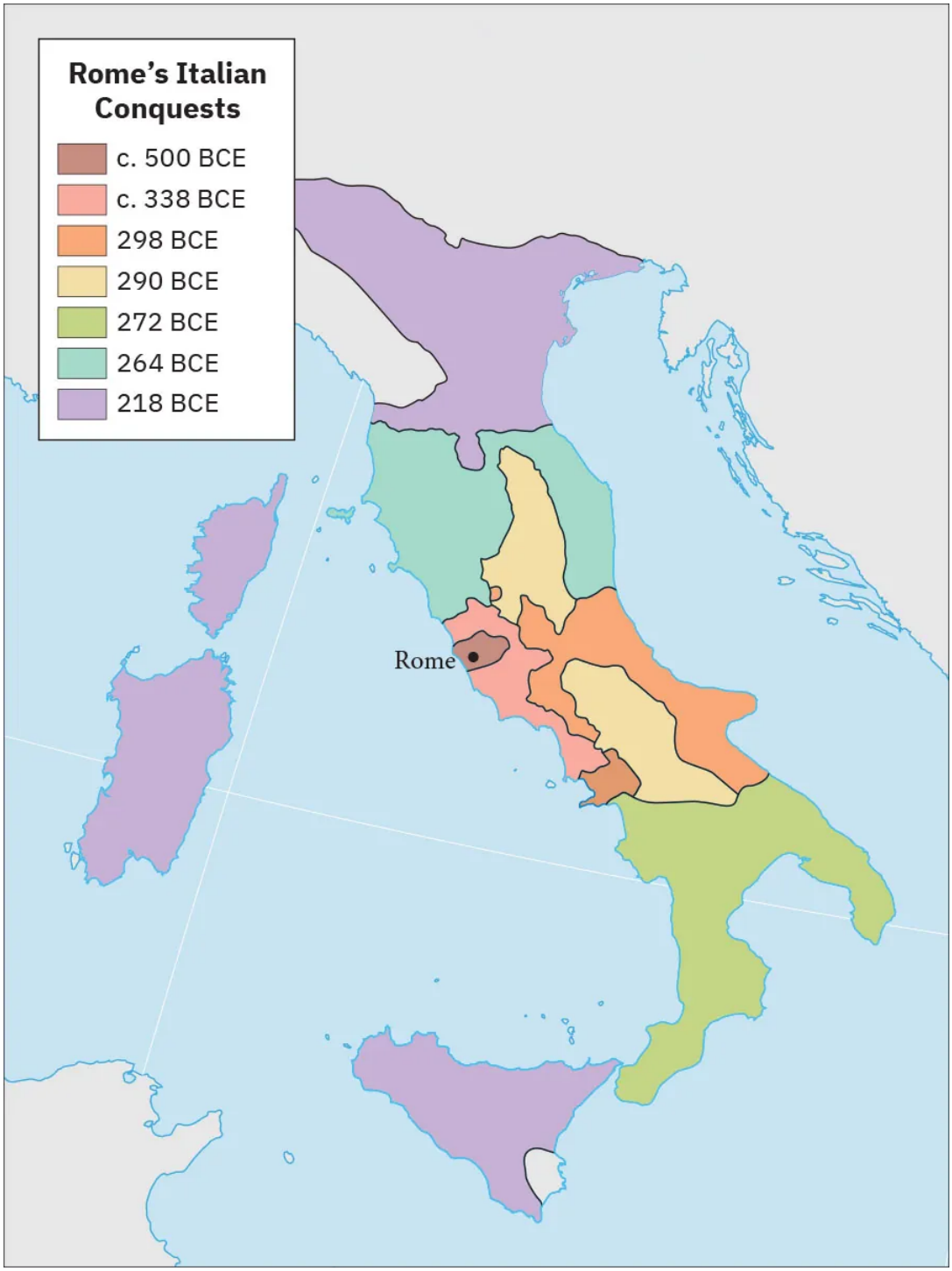


Figure 6.29 Rome's Conquests in Italy. This map shows the expansion of Rome across Italy over time and its addition of new allies. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Roman conquest of Italy" by "Javierfv1212"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Roman Conquest of the Mediterranean

After conquering most of the Italian peninsula, Rome came to challenge the other major power in the region, Carthage. A series of wars ensued, called the Punic Wars, in which Rome and Carthage vied for dominance. During the First Punic War (264–241 BCE), Rome and Carthage battled for control of the island of Sicily. Although Carthage had the largest fleet at the time, the Romans won by dropping a hooked plank on the deck of an opposing ship and using it as a causeway to cross over, transforming a sea battle in

which they were at a disadvantage into a land battle where they could dominate. After the destruction of its fleet, Carthage sued for peace, and the war ended with Rome annexing Sicily.

Carthage desired revenge. In the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE), the Carthaginian general Hannibal marched his army, along with dozens of war elephants, from Hispania (modern-day Portugal and Spain), across southern Gaul, and then over the Alps into Italy. Hannibal hoped Rome's allies would abandon it and leave the city at his mercy. Most of Rome's Italian allies remained loyal, however, even after Hannibal repeatedly defeated Roman armies, and after his decisive victory at the Battle of Cannae. As Hannibal's army was rampaging through Italy, Rome sent an army across the Mediterranean to Africa to attack Carthage, which summoned Hannibal back to defend his homeland (Figure 6.30).



Figure 6.30 Hannibal's Invasion of Rome. This map shows the route Hannibal followed from Hispania over the Alps to attack Italy before finally returning to defend Carthage in the Second Punic War. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

At the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE, the Roman army defeated Hannibal, and the Roman commander Scipio earned the nickname "Africanus" (Figure 6.31). Carthage sued for peace and was stripped of all its overseas territory. Rome thus acquired Carthage's lands in Hispania.



Figure 6.31 Hannibal and Scipio. This classical battle scene, painted by the Italian artist Bernardino Cesari in the early 1600s, is believed to represent Hannibal's defeat by the Roman commander Scipio in 202 BCE. (credit: "Hannibal and Scipio Africanus" by Bernardino Cesari/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

During the war, King Philip V of Macedon, concerned by the growth of Rome just across the Adriatic Sea from his own kingdom, made an alliance with Carthage. After Rome's victory against Carthage, Rome declared war against this new enemy. Philip's Macedonian troops won numerous victories over Roman armies, but in 196 BCE at the Battle of Cynoscephalae in northern Greece, Philip suffered a defeat and lacked the resources to continue. Consequently, he agreed to become an ally of Rome. Rome also liberated all regions in Greece formerly under Macedonian control.

Philip's defeat emboldened the king of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus III, to advance his army into Greece, hoping to obtain the territory Philip had vacated. Rome feared that Antiochus's occupation of Greece posed a threat to Italy, just as Philip had. In 190 BCE, Roman armies smashed the forces of Antiochus III at the Battle of Magnesia in western Asia Minor. Antiochus then agreed to withdraw from Asia Minor.

Rome discovered in the second century BCE that there was no end to the threats from hostile powers. Perseus, the son of Philip V, renounced the alliance with Rome. When he made alliances with Balkan tribes that threatened to invade Italy, Roman armies invaded Macedon and defeated his army at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BCE. Rome then dissolved the monarchy in Macedon, which soon afterward became a Roman province, and Perseus died of starvation as a prisoner in Rome. When the Achaean League in the Peloponnese in Greece challenged Roman control of Greece and Macedon, Rome declared war and sacked Corinth, the League's largest city, in 146 BCE. In that same year, Roman armies also destroyed the city of Carthage in the Third Punic War, fearing the city's revival as an economic and military power. After 146 BCE, no power remained in the Mediterranean that could challenge Rome (Figure 6.32).

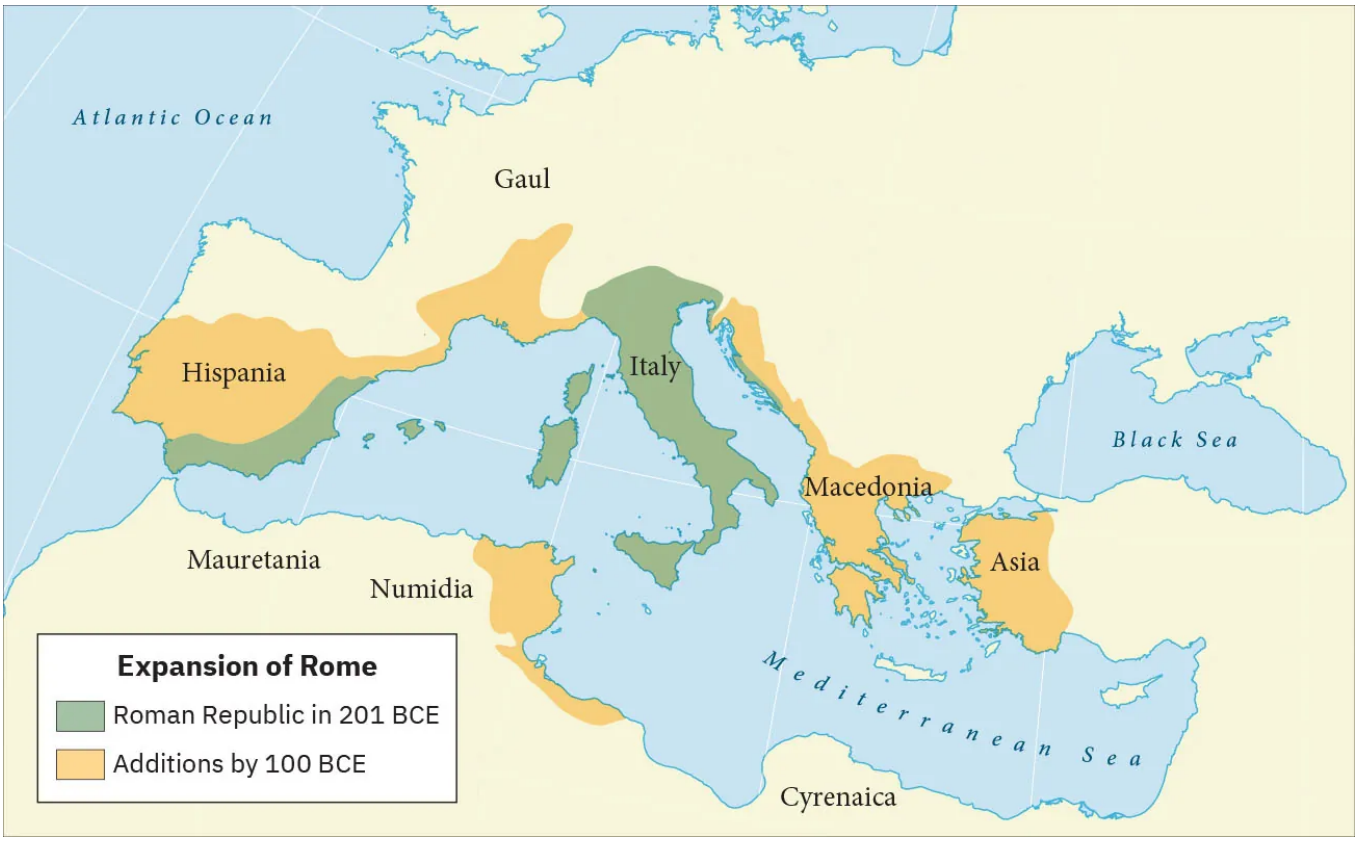


Figure 6.32 The Expansion of Rome. This map shows Rome's expansion in the second century BCE as it responded to perceived threats to its power from neighboring kingdoms. (credit: modification of work "Expansion of Rome, 2nd century BC" by The Department of History, United States Military Academy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

A Republic of Troubles

Rome's constant wars and conquests in the third and second centuries BCE created a host of social, economic, and political problems for the republic. The Roman people grew dissatisfied with the leadership of the Senate and the aristocratic elite, and they increasingly looked to strong military leaders to address the problems.

A number of factors contributed to these problems and transformations. From the foundation of the republic, most Roman citizens had owned and operated small family farms. Indeed, to serve as Roman soldiers, men had to own property. However, the Punic Wars had strained this traditional system. Roman soldiers were often away from home for long periods of time, leaving the women and children to maintain their holdings. When they ultimately did return, many found their property in another's hands. Others decided to sell their neglected farms and move their families to the expanding city of Rome, where they joined the growing ranks of the landless working class known as the proletariat. By the first century BCE, the population of the city of Rome may have exceeded one million.

The growth of the proletariat disrupted the Roman political system and invited large-scale corruption. The traditional patron-client system collapsed, since landless Romans didn't need the assistance of patrons to settle property disputes. Politicians therefore had to win the support of the urban masses with free food and entertainment, such as gladiatorial combats, and promises to create jobs through public works projects. Some even organized the poor into violent gangs to frighten their political rivals. These conditions resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the government of the republic.

To meet the growing demand for grain, wine, and olive oil to feed the urban population, large landowners bought land from poor Roman farmers and leased public land from the Roman state to create large plantations. These were very profitable because landowners could cheaply purchase enslaved people, who were plentiful. For example, after the defeat of Perseus of Macedon in 168 BCE, the Romans enslaved 150,000 people from Epirus as punishment since this kingdom had been allied with Perseus in the war. Pirates from Cilicia (in southeast Turkey) and from the Greek island of Crete also kidnapped people throughout the eastern

Mediterranean and sold them to Roman traders. The island of Delos in the Aegean Sea became a massive human market in the second century BCE, where reportedly ten thousand people were bought and sold every day.

Terrible working conditions resulted in massive revolts by the enslaved, beginning in the second half of the second century BCE. The most famous was led by Spartacus, an enslaved man and gladiator from Thrace (modern Bulgaria). In 76 BCE, Spartacus and other enslaved gladiators rose against their owners and were quickly joined by hundreds of thousands of others (Figure 6.33). Spartacus's forces defeated two Roman armies before being crushed in 71 BCE. The Romans crucified thousands of the rebels along Italy's major roads to send a warning to enslaved people across Italy.



Figure 6.33 Spartacus. This is a detail of a larger-than-life marble statue by the nineteenth-century French sculptor Denis Foyatier, showing Spartacus breaking his chains. Now in the Louvre, the statue originally stood in Paris's famous Jardin des Tuileries on the Avenue of Great Men. (credit: "Spartacus, Denis Foyatier, 1830" by Gautier Poupeau/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In addition to the proletariat and enslaved people, new classes of wealthy Romans were also unhappy with the leadership of the traditional elite. The most profitable enterprise for these new Roman entrepreneurs was acting as bankers and public contractors, or publicans. The republic relied on publicans to construct public works such as aqueducts and theaters, as well as to operate government-owned mines and collect taxes. Roman governors often looked the other way when publicans squeezed additional tax revenues from the populations of the provinces.

This tumultuous and complicated environment led to the rise of two of the Late Republic's most intriguing political figures, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. The Gracchi, as they are collectively known, were plebian brothers whose families had been members of the elite for generations (Scipio Africanus was their grandfather). Tiberius, the elder brother, was concerned to see the large plantations being worked by enslaved foreigners rather than Roman farmers. He feared Rome's military was in danger since Rome relied on its land-owning farmers to equip themselves and serve in the army. In 133 BCE, as a tribune, he proposed a law to distribute public land to landless Romans. This measure struck a blow at the senatorial class, many of whom had accumulated huge swaths of land formerly owned by independent farmers who had gone to war. The assembly voted to approve the proposal, but many senators were horrified not only because they stood to lose land but also because, to win the vote, Tiberius had violated the traditions of the Republic. The Republic was ruled by the upper classes, and in courting popular opinion, the brothers had challenged elite control over high political institutions. Convinced he was assuming too much popular support and violating the traditions of Rome, the Senate declared a state of emergency and a group of senators beat Tiberius to death.

Ten years later Tiberius's brother Gaius, an astute politician as well, was also elected tribune. He won over poor Roman farmers with his proposal to establish new colonies to give them land. He also provided free grain for the poor and called for new public works projects to create jobs for the working class and lucrative contracts for wealthy publicans. His measures passed the Plebian Assembly. Gaius was also elected tribune for two years straight, in violation of Roman political tradition. The final straw for the Senate was Gaius's proposal to establish a new court system that could try senators for corruption. In 121 BCE, the senators took

action to subdue Gaius. He attempted to use force himself to resist the Senate, but in the end his supporters were massacred and he died, either by his own hand or at the hands of senators who had opposed his rise to power.

The Rise of Client Armies

After the assassination of Gaius Gracchus, Rome's political class was divided into two warring factions. The *populares* were politicians who, like Gaius, sought the political support of discontented groups in Roman society, whereas the *optimates* were the champions of the old order and the traditional leadership of the elite in the Roman Senate. In 112 BCE, Rome went to war against Jugurtha, the king of Numidia (modern Algeria/Tunisia) in North Africa, after he slaughtered Romans there who had supported his brother as king. Roman armies suffered defeat after defeat, and due to the decline in numbers of Roman farmers, Rome was having difficulty filling the ranks.

Gaius Marius was a plebian and commoner who rose up the ranks of the Roman army and emerged as the leader of the *populares*. In 107 BCE, he ran for consul by denouncing the traditional Roman elites as weak and ineffective generals and promising to quickly end the war with Jugurtha. Such rhetoric was wildly popular with the common people who supported him. Once in power, Marius reformed the entrance requirements for the army to open it to proletariats, extending them the opportunity for war gains and even land for their service. These reforms led to the emergence of professional client armies, or armies composed of men more loyal to their commander than to the state.

By 105 BCE, Jugurtha was captured and then paraded through the Roman streets in chains. That same year, Rome faced new threats from the north in the form of Germanic tribes crossing the Rhine River and seeking to invade Italy. The Romans elected Marius consul for five consecutive terms (105–101 BCE) to lead his professional army against these enemies. After his victories, however, his enemies in the Senate wanted to embarrass him politically, so they prevented his proposal to give veterans land from becoming law. Marius was intimidated by these events and retired from politics.

In 90 BCE, Rome was again in turmoil when its Italian allies revolted after years of providing troops without having any voice in governing. During this "Social" War (90–88 BCE), the Romans under the leadership of Sulla, an *optimate*, defeated the rebels. Shortly thereafter, in 88 BCE, Rome's provinces in Greece and Asia Minor also revolted, after years of heavy taxes and corrupt governors. The rebels massacred thousands of Roman citizens and rallied around Mithridates, the Hellenistic king of Pontus in north Asia Minor. *Optimates* in the Senate appointed Sulla to lead an army against Mithridates. Like Marius, Sulla had promised his recruits land in return for their service. *Populares* in the Plebian Assembly, however, assigned command of the army to Marius, who had come out of retirement.

Sulla, then outside Rome with his client army, convinced his soldiers to choose personal loyalty to their general and his promise of land over their allegiance to Rome, and they marched on the city. Sulla's army hunted down and murdered many *populares*, and after establishing his own faction in charge of Rome, Sulla marched against Mithridates (Figure 6.34).

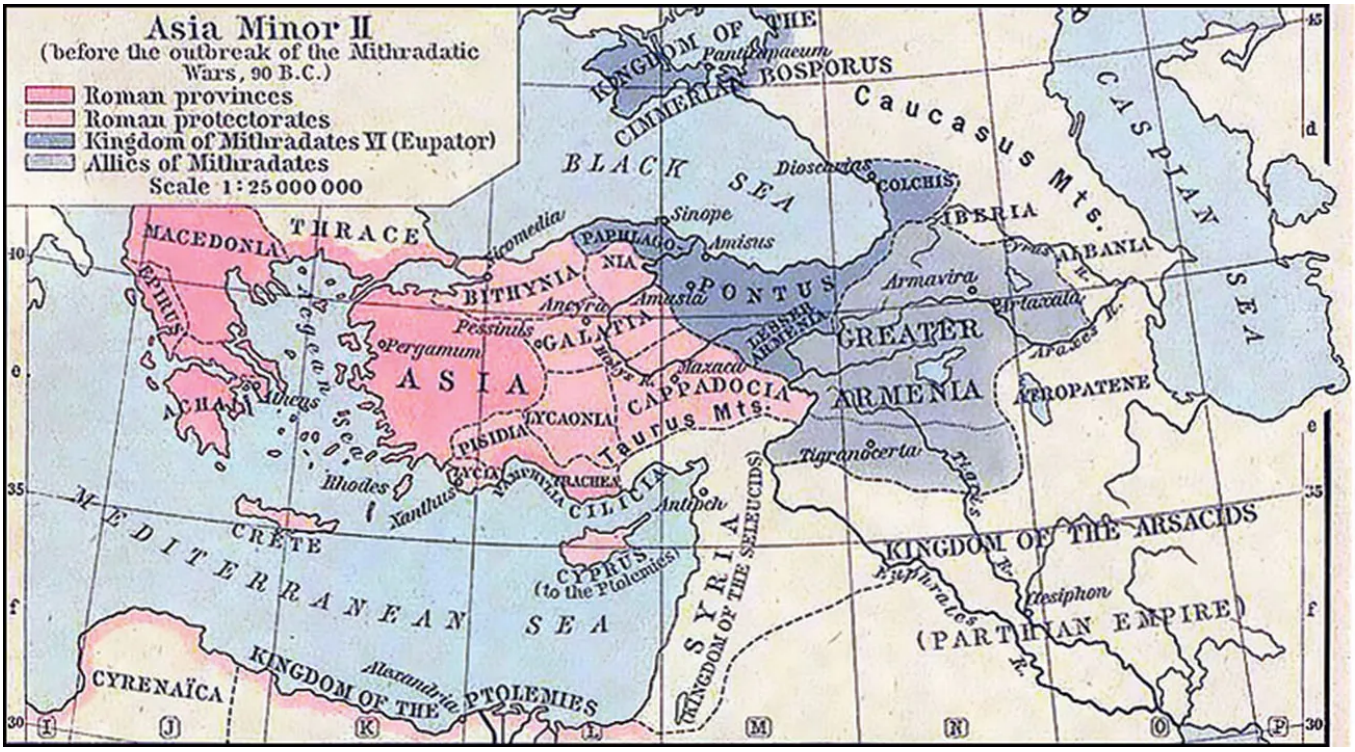


Figure 6.34 Rome and King Mithridates. As Rome expanded far beyond Italy, keeping its citizens in distant provinces safe could be a challenge. That was the case when parts of Greece and Asia Minor rebelled and rallied around King Mithridates of Pontus. This 1911 map of the eastern Mediterranean in 88 BCE shows Rome and its allies (red) and King Mithridates's kingdom and his allies (gray). (credit: modification of work" Asia Minor at the time of the First Mithridatical War" by The Historical Atlas by William River Shepherd, University of Texas Libraries/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 87 BCE, Marius, who had been in hiding, rallied his old veterans and marched on Rome, marking the second time in two years that Roman soldiers had chosen personal loyalty to their general over obedience to Rome's laws. Marius's men now hunted down and murdered *optimates*. After winning his seventh term as consul in 87 BCE, Marius died in office from natural causes. Having forced Mithridates out of Greece and restored Roman rule there, Sulla led his army back to Rome in 83 BCE to overthrow the *populares* who were still in charge. While in Rome, he compelled the Senate to appoint him dictator. The office of dictator was an ancient republican office used only during emergencies because it granted absolute authority for a limited time to handle the emergency. When Sulla assumed the office, it hadn't been used since the Second Punic War.

During Sulla's time as dictator, he ordered the execution of his political enemies and reformed the laws. In 79 BCE, he relinquished the office and retired from public life, convinced he had saved the republic and preserved the power of the traditional elite in the Senate. Instead, however, within half a century the Roman Republic was dead.

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5.6: The Age of Augustus

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the key events of the First and Second Triumvirate
- Analyze the personal charisma and leadership styles of Julius Caesar and Augustus
- Explain the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the first emperor

The social troubles that rocked Rome following the Punic Wars led to populists like the Gracchi and military leaders like Sulla, who marched on Rome in his attempt to restore order. Such events made it clear to many that Rome's republican institutions were no longer able to adapt to the transformed landscape produced by decades of territorial expansion. These problems also presaged the political transformations Rome was to suffer through in the following decades. Between 60 BCE and 31 BCE, a string of powerful military leaders took the stage and bent the Republic to their will. In their struggle for power, Rome descended further into civil war and disorder. By 27 BCE, only one leader remained. Under his powerful hand, the Republic became a mere façade for the emergent Roman Empire.

The First Triumvirate

Sulla was unable to crush the *populares* completely since some discontented groups still opposed the Senate leadership. After his retirement, new military and political leaders sought power with the support of these groups. Three men in particular eventually assumed enormous dominance. One was Pompey Magnus, who became a popular general, and thousands of landless Romans joined his client army on the promise of land. In 67 BCE, Roman armies under Pompey's command suppressed pirates in the eastern Mediterranean who had threatened Rome's imported grain supplies. Pompey next conclusively defeated Mithridates of Pontus, who had again gone on the attack against Rome. By 63 BCE, Pompey had subdued Asia Minor, annexed Syria, destroyed the Seleucid kingdom, and occupied Jerusalem.

Another politician and military commander of this era was Crassus. He had served under Sulla, achieved popularity in Rome by fighting against Spartacus, and used the support of disaffected wealthy Romans such as publicans to amass a huge fortune. The third influential figure was Julius Caesar, whose original source of popularity was the fact that Marius was his uncle. When Sulla took control, Caesar lost much of his influence, but by 69 BCE he was making a political comeback and winning the support of *populares* in Rome.

The *optimates* in the Senate distrusted all these men and cooperated to block their influence in Roman politics. In response, in 60 BCE the three decided to join forces to advance their interests though a political alliance known to history as the First Triumvirate ("rule by three men"). Together its members had the wealth and influence to run the Roman Republic, but they were all very ambitious and each greatly distrusted the others. After serving as consul in 60 BCE, Julius Caesar took command of the Roman army in Gaul (modern France). Over the next ten years, his armies conquered all Gaul and launched attacks against German tribes across the Rhine, and on the island of Britain across the English Channel. The Roman people were awed by Caesar's military success, and Pompey and Crassus grew jealous of his popularity. In 54 BCE, Crassus invaded the Parthian Kingdom in central Asia, hoping for similar military and political triumphs. The invasion was a disaster, however, and Crassus was captured by the Parthians and executed.

The Roman Empire had now grown large, thanks to Pompey's and Caesar's conquests (Figure 6.35). After Crassus's death, Pompey decided to break with Caesar and support his old enemies the *optimates.* In 49 BCE, the *optimates* and Pompey controlled the Senate and demanded that Caesar disband his army in Gaul and return to Rome to stand trial on various charges. Instead, Caesar convinced his client army to march on Rome. In January of that year he famously led his troops across the Rubicon River, the traditional boundary between Italy and Gaul. Since Caesar knew this move would trigger war, as it was illegal to bring a private army into Rome proper, the phrase "crossing the Rubicon" continues to mean "passing the point of no return." In 48 BCE, Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus in northern Greece. Shortly after this, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was murdered by the Egyptian pharaoh Ptolemy XIII, who hoped to win Caesar's favor.



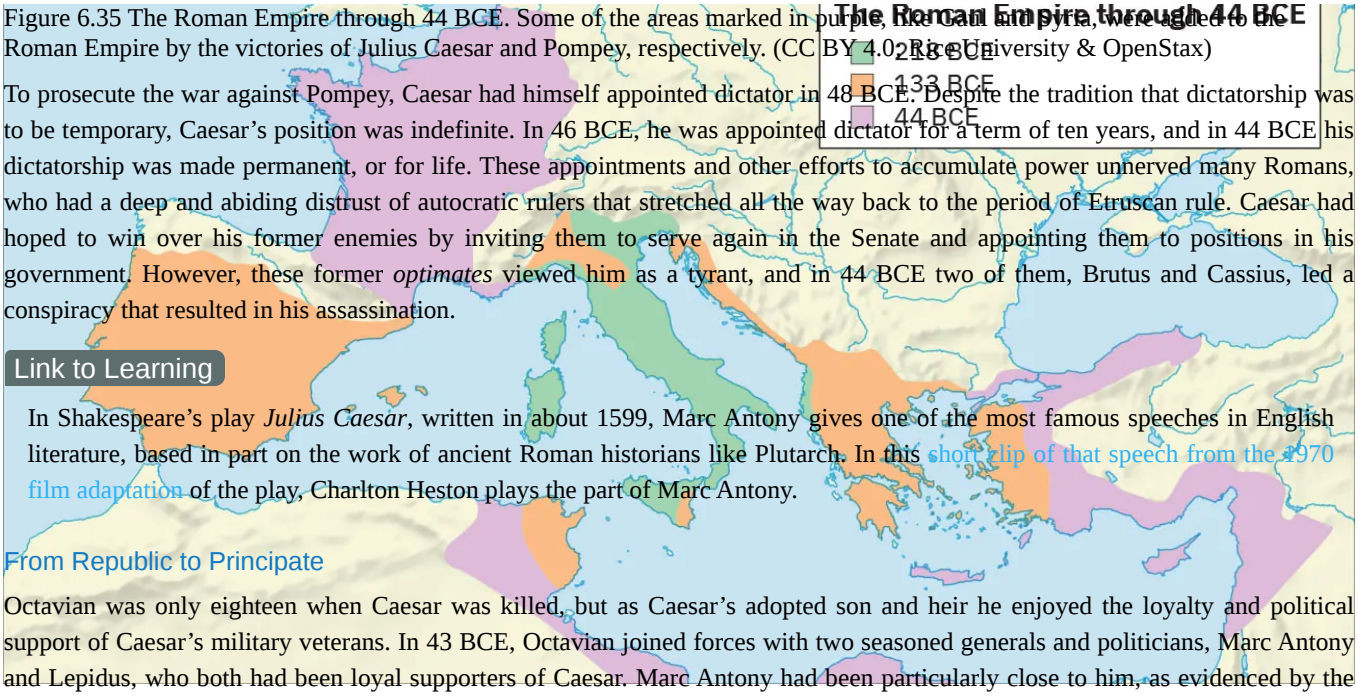


Figure 6.35 The Roman Empire through 44 BCE. Some of the areas marked in purple, like Gaul and Syria, were added to the Roman Empire by the victories of Julius Caesar and Pompey, respectively. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

To prosecute the war against Pompey, Caesar had himself appointed dictator in 48 BCE. Despite the tradition that dictatorship was to be temporary, Caesar's position was indefinite. In 46 BCE, he was appointed dictator for a term of ten years, and in 44 BCE his dictatorship was made permanent, or for life. These appointments and other efforts to accumulate power unnerved many Romans, who had a deep and abiding distrust of autocratic rulers that stretched all the way back to the period of Etruscan rule. Caesar had hoped to win over his former enemies by inviting them to serve again in the Senate and appointing them to positions in his government. However, these former *optimates* viewed him as a tyrant, and in 44 BCE two of them, Brutus and Cassius, led a conspiracy that resulted in his assassination.

Link to Learning

In Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, written in about 1599, Marc Antony gives one of the most famous speeches in English literature, based in part on the work of ancient Roman historians like Plutarch. In this short clip of that speech from the 1970 film adaptation of the play, Charlton Heston plays the part of Marc Antony.

From Republic to Principate

Octavian was only eighteen when Caesar was killed, but as Caesar's adopted son and heir he enjoyed the loyalty and political support of Caesar's military veterans. In 43 BCE, Octavian joined forces with two seasoned generals and politicians, Marc Antony and Lepidus, who both had been loyal supporters of Caesar. Marc Antony had been particularly close to him, as evidenced by the fact that Caesar left his legions under Antony's command in his will. Together these three shared the power of dictator in Rome in a political arrangement known as the Second Triumvirate. Unlike the First Triumvirate, which was effectively a conspiracy, the Second Triumvirate was formally recognized by the Senate. In 42 BCE, the army of the Second Triumvirate, under the command of Antony, defeated the forces of Julius Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi in northern Greece. The Second Triumvirate also ordered the execution of thousands of their political opponents.

After crushing the remnants of the *optimates*, the three men divided the Roman Empire between them: Octavian took Italy, Hispania, and Gaul; Lepidus Africa; and Antony Macedon, Greece, and Asia Minor. Soon they quarreled, however, and civil war erupted once again. Having greater support from Caesar's troops than his two opponents, in 36 BCE Octavian forced Lepidus into retirement. Antony countered by forming an alliance with Cleopatra VII, the Macedonian queen of Egypt, whom he married. Cleopatra was at that time co-ruler with Ptolemy XV, her son by Julius Caesar. With her financial support, Antony raised an army and fleet. In 31 BCE, in the naval Battle of Actium off the coast of northern Greece, Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra. When he afterwards invaded Egypt, the pair died by suicide (Figure 6.36), and Octavian installed himself as the new Egyptian pharaoh after executing Ptolemy XV. Octavian used the wealth of his kingdom in Egypt to finance his restructuring of the Roman state.

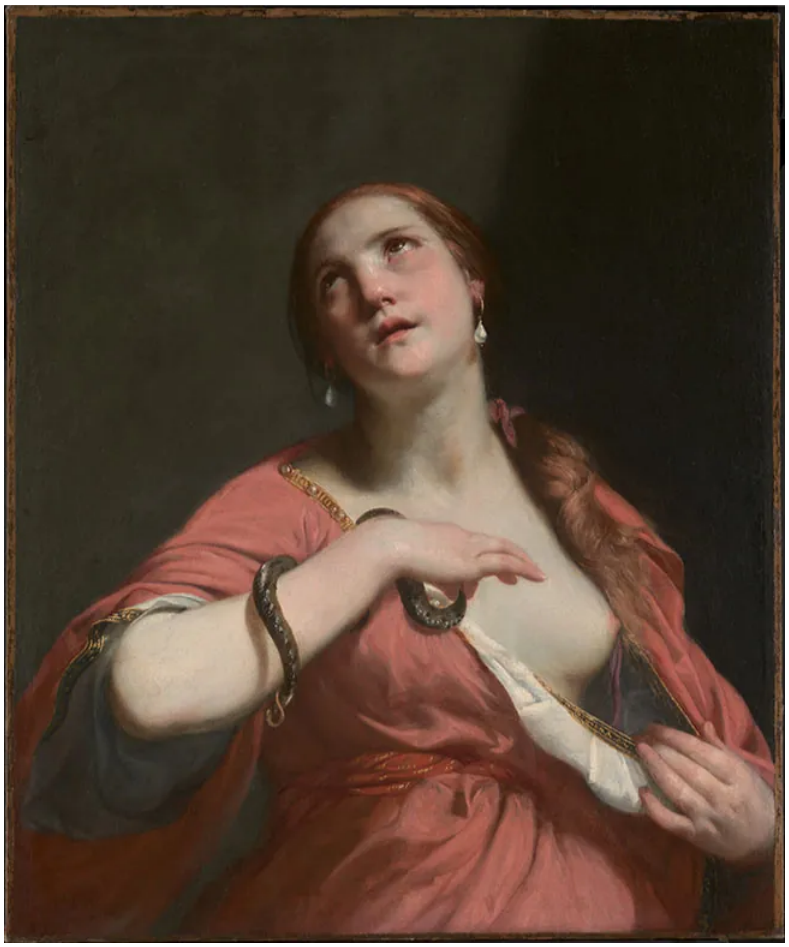


Figure 6.36 Cleopatra and the Asp. This mid-seventeenth-century painting by the Italian artist Cuido Cagnacci was modeled on one of many ancient accounts about how Cleopatra died. In this version, she allows a poisonous Egyptian snake, an asp, to bite her. If the story is true, she may have been incorporating Egyptian symbolism in her final act, the asp being associated with the Egyptian god Re. (credit: "The Death of Cleopatra" by Purchase, Diane Burke Gift, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, by exchange, Friends of European Paintings Gifts, Gwynne Andrews Fund, Lila Acheson Wallace, Charles and Jessie Price, and Álvaro Saieh Bendeck Gifts, Gift and Bequest of George Blumenthal and Fletcher Fund, by exchange, and Michel David-Weill Gift, 2016/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

One of Octavian's primary tasks after 31 BCE was to consolidate his position in order to preserve the peace and stability he had created. To avoid the fate of his adopted father, he successfully maintained a façade that the Roman Republic was alive and well, assuming titles and powers traditionally associated with it. After stacking the Senate with his supporters, in 27 BCE Octavian officially stepped down as dictator and "restored" the Republic.

The Senate immediately appointed him proconsul or governor of all Roman frontier provinces, which made him effectively the commander of the entire Roman army. The Senate also recognized him as the *Princeps Senatus*, or "leader of the Senate," meaning the senator who enjoyed the most prestige and authority due to his service to the Republic. (The name of this political order, the principate, derives from this title.) Finally, the Senate voted to honor Octavian with the title of *Augustus* or "revered one," used to describe gods and great heroes of the past. As these honors and titles suggest, Octavian, traditionally referred to as Augustus after 27 BCE, had assumed enormous power. Despite his claim that he had restored the Republic, he had in fact inaugurated the Empire, with himself as emperor possessing almost godlike authority (Figure 6.37).



Figure 6.37 A Temple in the Roman Empire. The power of Augustus laid the foundation for the emergence of the imperial cult, in which Roman emperors were worshiped during their reigns (largely in the east) and assumed demigod status after their deaths. At temples like this one in Vienne, France, built during Augustus's lifetime, people demonstrated their loyalty to the Roman Empire through the rituals of this cult. (credit: "Temple of Augustus and Livia in Vienne" by O.Mustafin/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

After 27 BCE, Augustus held elected office as one of the two consuls, so he could sit in the Senate, oversee the law courts, and introduce legislation to the Centuriate Assembly, but the senators disliked this arrangement because it closed the opportunity for one of them to hold this prestigious office instead. In 23 BCE, therefore, the Senate gave Augustus several powers of a tribune. He could now veto any action taken by government officials, the Senate, and the assemblies, and he could introduce laws to the Plebian Assembly. He could wield political and military power based on the traditional constitution of the Republic.

As emperor, Augustus successfully tackled problems that had plagued Rome for at least a century. He reduced the standing army from 600,000 to 200,000 and provided land for thousands of discharged veterans in recently conquered areas such as in Gaul and Hispania. He also created new taxes specifically to fund land and cash bonuses for future veterans. To encourage native peoples in the provinces to adopt Roman culture, he granted them citizenship after twenty-five years of service in the army. Indigenous cities built in the Roman style and adopting its political system were designated *municipia*, which gave all elected officials Roman citizenship. Through these "Romanization" policies, Augustus advanced Roman culture across the empire.

Augustus also finally brought order and prosperity to the city of Rome. He began a vast building program that provided jobs for poor Romans in the city and reportedly boasted that he had transformed Rome from a city of brick to a city of marble. To win over the masses, he also provided free grain (courtesy of his control of fertile Egypt) and free entertainment (gladiator combats and chariot races), making Rome famous for its bounty of "bread and circuses." He also established a permanent police force in the city, the Praetorian Guard, which he recruited from the Roman army. He even created a fire department.

Augustus provided wealthy Romans outside the ranks of the Senate with new opportunities for advancement via key positions he reserved for them, such as prefect (commander/governor) of the Praetorian Guard and prefect of Egypt. These officials could join the Senate and become members of the senatorial elite. Augustus thus created an effective new bureaucracy to govern the Roman Empire. Emperors who followed him continued these practices.

Augustus was keenly aware that the peace and prosperity he had created was largely built upon his image and power, and he feared what might happen when he died. As a result, the last few decades of his life were spent arranging for a political successor. This was a complicated matter since there was neither an official position of emperor nor a republican tradition of hereditary rule.

Augustus had no son of his own, and his attempts to groom others to take control were repeatedly frustrated when his proposed successors died before him. Before his own death in 14 CE, Augustus arranged for his stepson Tiberius to receive from the Senate the power of a proconsul and a tribune. While not his first choice, Tiberius was an accomplished military leader with senatorial support.

Despite the smooth transition to Tiberius in 14 CE, problems with imperial inheritance remained. There were always risks that a hereditary ruler might prove incompetent. Tiberius himself became dangerously paranoid late in his reign. And he was succeeded by his grandnephew and adopted son Gaius, known as Caligula, who after a severe illness became insane. The prefect of the Praetorian Guard assassinated Caligula in 40 CE, and the guard replaced him with his uncle Claudius (40–54 CE). The Roman Senate agreed to this step only out of fear of the army. Claudius was an effective emperor, however, and under his reign the province of Britain (modern England and Wales) was added to the empire.

The government of Claudius's successor, his grandnephew Nero (54–68 CE), was excellent as long as Nero's mother Agrippina was the power behind the throne. After ordering her murder, however, Nero proved a vicious despot who used the Praetorian Guard to intimidate and execute his critics in the Senate. By the end of his reign, Roman armies in Gaul and Hispania were mutinying. The Senate declared him an enemy of state, and he died by suicide. During the year after his death, 68–69 CE, four different generals assumed power, thus earning it the name "Year of the Four Emperors."

Of the four, Vespasian (69–79 CE) survived the civil war and adopted the name Caesar and the title Augustus, even though he was not related to the family of Augustus or their descendants (the Julio-Claudian dynasty). On Nero's death, he had been in command of Roman armies suppressing the revolt of Judea (Roman armies eventually crushed this revolt and sacked Jerusalem in 70 CE). In his administration, Vespasian followed the precedents established by Augustus. For example, he ordered the construction of the Colosseum as a venue for the gladiator shows he provided as entertainment for the Roman masses, and he arranged for his two sons, Titus (79–81 CE) and Domitian (81–96 CE), to succeed him as emperor. Domitian, like Nero, was an insecure ruler and highly suspicious of the Senate; he employed the Praetorian Guard to arrest and execute his critics in that body. In 96 CE, his wife Domitia worked with members of the Senate to arrange for his assassination. Thus the flaws of the principate continued to haunt the Roman state long after its founder was gone.

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5.7: Key Terms

dictator

a Roman Republican office with absolute authority over the state for a limited time during emergencies

Hellenistic

a description of Greek history, language, and culture in the period 323–31 BCE

Levant

a historical geographical term referring to an area in the eastern Mediterranean consisting roughly of modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria

Linear A

a script developed by the Minoans but not yet deciphered by modern scholars

Linear B

a Mycenaean script developed from Linear A that was used to write an early form of the Greek language

mystery religions

religious cults that featured secret rituals (the so-called mysteries) and became popular in Hellenistic cities

optimates

politicians who supported the old order and the traditional leadership of elites

polis

a city-state in Ancient Greece

populares

politicians who sought the political support of discontented groups in Roman society

principate

the political system established by Augustus Caesar after 27 BCE, which relied on Rome's traditional institutions and practices to legitimize a military dictatorship

proletariat

the landless working class

Struggle of the Orders

a political contest during the first centuries of the Republic in which Rome's commoners sought equal rights with elites

Twelve Tables

the first set of written laws in Rome, from about 450 BCE

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5.8: Section Summary

6.1 Early Mediterranean Peoples

The Late Bronze Age witnessed the development of a common culture that linked the diverse states of the eastern Mediterranean from Asia to the Aegean region. The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations emerged on the Aegean island of Crete and on mainland Greece. Minoan culture strongly influenced the art and culture of the Mycenaean civilization that followed it. Around 1200 BCE, these Late Bronze Age states collapsed in a wave of wars and migrations.

The Iron Age began with the development of technology to produce iron tools and weapons. During this transition, the Phoenicians built their civilization and invented the alphabet around 1100 BCE, establishing trade networks that linked the entire Mediterranean basin. The arrival of Phoenicians and especially Greeks in central Italy after 700 BCE contributed to the evolution of a new culture in Italy, the Etruscans. Their civilization made a deep impact on the later development of ancient Rome.

6.2 Ancient Greece

During the Archaic period that began the Greek renaissance, the city-state, or polis, developed its defining characteristic—self-government. Sparta was an oligarchy whose elite class of soldier-citizens alone participated in government, while Athens developed a democracy in which all adult male citizens participated. During this period, well-known features of Greek culture emerged such as the Greek script, the epic poems of Homer, and the Olympic Games.

The Classical period of Greece was marked by increased creativity and innovation, especially in Athens. The philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, the plays of Athenian dramatists, and the art of Greek sculptors, architects, and painters have inspired European thinkers and artists for centuries. These developments were partially a result of the success the Greek city-states achieved in their efforts to withstand two invasions by the Persian Empire. Following these wars, however, the Greek city-states turned on themselves. Sparta and its allies first fought the Athenian empire in the Peloponnesian War. Following this long and destructive conflict, Sparta and Thebes struggled for dominance in Greece, often with meddling from the Persian Empire. By 350 BCE, the many decades of fighting had left the Greek city-states exhausted and vulnerable.

6.3 The Hellenistic Era

By 338 BCE, King Philip II's empire of Macedon had become the ruling power in Greece. Philip's son Alexander the Great adopted his father's plan to unite the Greek city-states in a war of revenge against the Persian Empire. He defeated the Persians at the battles of Issus (333 BCE) and Gaugamela (330 BCE), and after the assassination of the Persian king Darius III, he claimed the Persian throne for himself and advanced deep into central Asia and India. After his own soldiers mutinied, however, Alexander withdrew to Babylon, where he died in 323 BCE.

Alexander's generals and their children competed for control of his empire between 323 BCE and 272 BCE. The descendants of Alexander's generals, Antigonus, Seleucus, and Ptolemy, ruled over separate kingdoms in Macedon and Greece, western and central Asia, and Egypt, building new Greek cities for their Greek colonists. Alexandria in Egypt, the largest Hellenistic city, was a center of Greek science and literature, with its massive library and museum. Having lost sovereignty and self-government, many Greeks sought personal happiness through new philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism.

6.4 The Roman Republic

The Romans overthrew the Etruscan dynasty at the close of the sixth century BCE and became a republic. The Struggle of the Orders ended with the plebeians winning equality with the patricians under the law, and by the third century BCE Roman citizens were electing officials and passing legislation through various assemblies under the watchful eye of the Senate. By the third century BCE, Rome had united the Italian peninsula by pledging to defend all new allies from their enemies. With these allies, Rome possessed the military resources to crush the other Mediterranean powers, Carthage and the Hellenistic monarchies of the eastern Mediterranean.

By the mid-second century BCE, Rome was the dominant power in the Mediterranean. But the wars had created a number of social problems tearing the Republic apart. These conflicts led to the rise of the Gracchi and later the partisan battle between the *populares* who opposed the governing elite and the *optimates* who supported it. By the end of the second century BCE, powerful military commanders and their client armies had assumed great authority in the republic. One of these commanders, General Sulla,

twice marched on Rome to secure power for his political faction, the *optimates*. In 79 BCE, he retired, but his marches on Rome and his resurrection of the office of dictator laid the groundwork for the permanent overthrow of the Republic later.

6.5 The Age of Augustus

United by their opposition to the *optimates*, in 60 BCE, Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar formed a political alliance, the First Triumvirate. After Crassus was killed in a failed conquest of the Parthians, Pompey joined his former enemies to oppose Caesar, whose success against the Gallic and Germanic tribes had made him popular. In 49 BCE, Caesar marched on Rome and initiated a civil war that ended in Pompey's defeat. Considering Caesar a tyrant, Pompey's former supporters assassinated him in 44 BCE.

Caesar's heir Octavian formed the Second Triumvirate in 43 BCE with Lepidus and Marc Antony. The three defeated Caesar's assassins but afterwards quarreled. With the support of Caesar's veterans, Octavian emerged the sole inheritor of Roman power. In 27 BCE, he announced the restoration of the Republic but in form only, receiving the honorary title of Augustus. He set up a system of government, the principate, in which the traditions of republican government legitimized his position as de facto emperor. In power, Augustus provided land for veterans; secured jobs, free grain, and internal order for the urban proletariat; and offered wealthy Romans political and social advancement. However, he was not able to create an orderly system of succession, and the hereditary monarchs who succeeded him were often weak and ineffective.

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5.9: Review Questions

1. On what Aegean island did Minoan civilization develop?

a. Crete
b. Sardinia
c. Cyprus
d. Rhodes

2.The Etruscan culture arose in the central area of what modern country?

a. Greece
b. Anatolia
c. Spain
d. Italy

3. Who developed the first alphabet?

a. Egyptians
b. Akkadians
c. Greeks
d. Phoenicians

4. What is an example of the Greeks borrowing and adapting Phoenician cultural traits?

a. Greeks adopted the Phoenician *fasces* to symbolize power.
b. Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet.
c. Greeks adopted Phoenician deities to worship as gods.
d. Greeks adopted Phoenician warfare tactics in their athletic competitions.

5. What likely set Athens on the path toward democracy as early as the eighth century BCE?

a. the decline in literacy
b. the decline in population
c. its growing prosperity
d. a rising conflict with Phoenicia

6. What Athenian leader played an instrumental role in the founding of a democracy in Athens in the late sixth century BCE?

a. Socrates
b. Cleisthenes
c. Pericles
d. Alcibiades

7. Though unsuccessful, the Spartans inspired the Greeks with their defense against the Persian army of what mountain pass in 480 BCE?

a. Salamis
b. Mantinea
c. Thermopylae
d. Leuctra

8. What two Greek city-states led their respective alliances on either side in the Peloponnesian War?

a. Corinth and Thermopylae
b. Athens and Corcyra
c. Thebes and Syracuse
d. Sparta and Athens

9. What Greek philosopher founded his own school at the Lyceum in Athens?

a. Aristotle
b. Plato
c. Socrates

d. Democritus

10. At what battle did the forces of Philip of Macedon defeat the allied armies of Athens and Thebes in 338 BCE?
    a. Thermopylae
    b. Chaeronea
    c. Leuctra
    d. Salamis

11. What land did Alexander the Great and the Macedonians conquer?
    a. Egypt
    b. Italy
    c. Sicily
    d. Carthage

12. What Greek city was the largest in the Hellenistic period?
    a. Alexandria
    b. Carthage
    c. Athens
    d. Sparta

13. Around what Persian sun god did a mystery religion form?
    a. Zeus
    b. Isis
    c. Baal
    d. Mithras

14. In what branch of government was Rome's Council of Elders?
    a. Senate
    b. praetors
    c. censors
    d. tribunes

15. What Roman officials could veto the actions of Roman law courts, the popular assemblies, and the Senate?
    a. consuls
    b. praetors
    c. censors
    d. tribunes

16. The common people of the Roman Republic were known as:
    a. patricians
    b. *optimates*
    c. plebeians
    d. senators

17. With what group did Rome fight a war for control of the Mediterranean?
    a. Latins
    b. Carthaginians
    c. Samnites
    d. Etruscans

18. What were private contractors called who constructed public works and collected taxes in Rome?
    a. publicans
    b. equestrians
    c. *populares*
    d. proletariat

19. Who were the members of the First Triumvirate?

a. Lepidus, Caesar, Octavian
b. Caesar, Pompey, Crassus
c. Marc Antony, Octavian, Lepidus
d. Pompey, Lepidus, Marc Antony

20. What event led to the establishment of the Second Triumvirate?

a. the assassination of Caesar
b. the succession of Tiberius
c. the retirement of Lepidus
d. the suicide of Cleopatra

21. Julius Caesar won popularity among the Roman people for his successful military campaigns in _____.

a. Pontus
b. Parthia
c. Carthage
d. Gaul

22. Octavian's success in the civil war was due largely to support from _____.

a. Pompey's veteran soldiers
b. *optimates*
c. Julius Caesar's veteran soldiers
d. Julius Caesar's assassins

23. Octavian's naval forces defeated those of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of _____.

a. Pharsalus
b. Actium
c. Philippi
d. Zama

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5.10: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What were the three major Phoenician cities and where were they located?
2.
What explains why iron replaced bronze as the metal of choice between 1200 and 900 BCE in the Near East and eastern Mediterranean?
3.
What evidence suggests that Minoan civilization was conquered by the Mycenaeans?
4.
What was the primary reason that Greeks established colonies overseas in the Archaic period?
5.
What were Athens's and Sparta's expectations of their respective allies before and during the Peloponnesian War?
6.
Under Athens's democracy in the Classical period, how were Athenian citizens (free adult males) able to participate in the government?
7.
In what ways did the efforts of Philip II ultimately lead to the success of Alexander the Great?
8.
What were the boundaries of Alexander the Great's empire by the time of his death in 323 BCE?
9.
Why was there a period of wars following Alexander's death in 323 BCE?
10.
Who were the tribunes and what were their main powers as elected officials?
11.
How did the plebeians win concessions from the ruling patricians during the Struggle of the Orders?
12.
During the Punic Wars and the wars fought by Rome thereafter, why did Rome's farmers come under stress?
13.
What did Augustus actually accomplish with his efforts to "restore" the Republic?
14.
Why did some Roman senators assassinate Julius Caesar?
15.
During the wars between the members of the Second Triumvirate, what advantage did Octavian enjoy over his rivals?

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5.11: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
Given that iron, when properly manufactured, was far superior in strength to bronze, why did it take a civilizational collapse for metalworkers to experiment with it? Does the absence of tin seem sufficient to explain the shift to iron? Why or why not?

2.
Historians and archaeologists have long recognized connections between different Mediterranean cultures like the Greeks, Etruscans, and Phoenicians. Why do you think these different cultures borrowed from each other? What might encourage one culture to adopt elements from another?

3.
People often associate advancements in technology with human progress. Why did the development of iron technology and the alphabet occur at a time of societal collapse at the end of the Late Bronze Age?

4.
How does the development of the Athenian political system over the course of the Archaic period compare to that of Sparta? In which of these cities would you have preferred to live? Why?

5.
Alliances led the Greeks to victory during the Persian Wars but also contributed to the Peloponnesian War between the Greek city-states. What does this suggest about the role of alliances in the Greek world? Would Greece have been better off without them? Why or why not?

6.
Many influential philosophies and celebrated works of art emerged from the Greek world in the fifth century BCE, when the Greeks were busy fighting Persia and each other. What does this suggest about the connection between conflict and the arts?

7.
Alexander's march into India has been celebrated as a great achievement because of its boldness and as a terrible mistake because it led his troops to mutiny, and he died not long after. What do you think of this move? How might things have played out differently if Alexander hadn't tried to extend his empire in this way?

8.
In the aftermath of Alexander's conquest and death, much of the former Persian Empire remained in the hands of Greek and Macedonian rulers. Why do you think this happened? Why didn't local rulers and dynasties reestablish their rule over these lands?

9.
The Romans believed they had overthrown Etruscan kings in the sixth century BCE to establish their republic. What does this feature of their own history suggest about their reaction to the stresses on the Republic in the second century BCE and to the rise of military leaders like Sulla?

10.
Given the problems experienced by small farmers and the lower classes in Rome as a result of the wars of expansion, why did Rome continue the wars? Why didn't populist leaders like the Gracchi suggest an end to them?

11.
How did Sulla's march on Rome in 88 BCE set the stage for the civil wars of the First and Second Triumvirates?

12.
To what extent were Octavian's political and military successes due to the achievements of his adoptive father Julius Caesar? Explain your answer.

13.
What was the primary cause of the fall of the Roman Republic? Could modern republics such as the United States collapse for the same reason? Why or why not?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Africa in Ancient Times

6.1: Introduction
6.2: Africa’s Geography and Climate
6.3: The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations
6.4: The Kingdom of Kush
6.5: North Africa’s Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections
6.6: Key Terms
6.7: Section Summary
6.8: Review Questions
6.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
6.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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6.1: Introduction



Figure 9.1 San Men among Elephants. This rock art in the Cederberg Caves, South Africa, depicts a group of twenty San men interacting with a group of six elephants. In the center of the image, a small elephant extends its trunk as if to sniff one of the men. Painted around 5500 BCE, the artwork likely depicts the special bond between the San people and the elephants, and it demonstrates that even thousands of years ago these African peoples had developed a keen understanding of elephant behavior and characteristics. (credit: modification of work "Cave painting created by the San people in the Cederberg Cave near Stadsaal" by "Valroe"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

9.1 Africa's Geography and Climate
9.2 The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations
9.3 The Kingdom of Kush
9.4 North Africa's Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections

More than eleven million square miles in size, Africa is Earth's second-largest continent and home to a huge diversity of geographies and climates. Its environments range from arid desertscapes with sand dunes hundreds of feet high to lush tropical rainforests blanketed by impenetrably dense foliage. Its peoples have adapted to these environments over millennia (Figure 9.1), and their achievements were great, but extreme climates wreak havoc on the historical record. Ancient Africa was nevertheless a marvelous mosaic of unique civilizations, and the more historians work at uncovering their pasts, the clearer our picture will be of their accomplishments and contributions to world history.

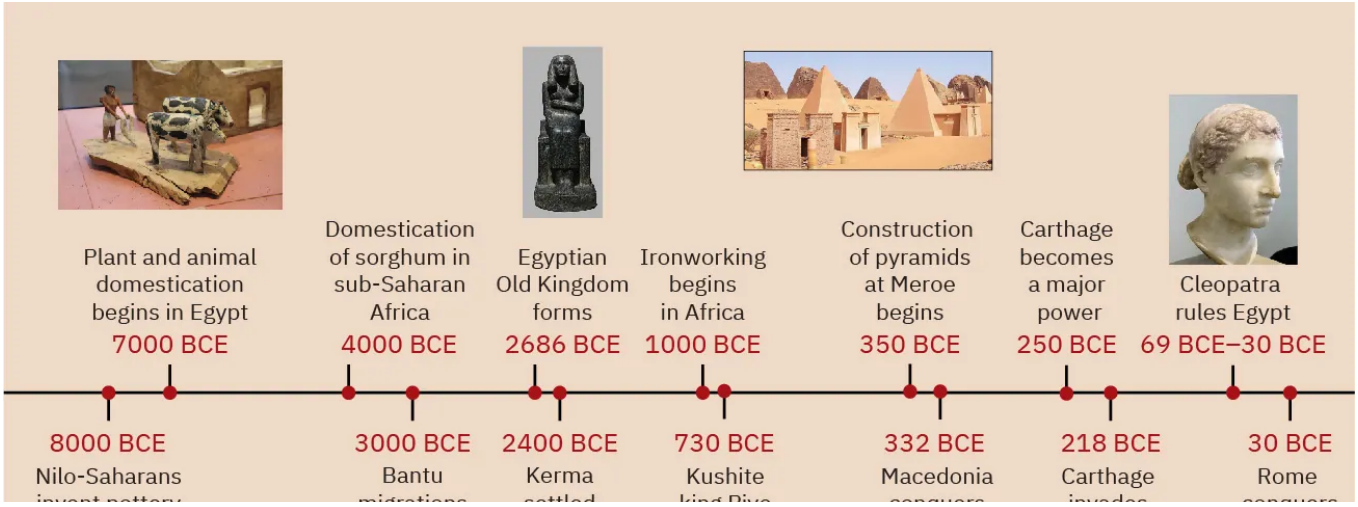


Figure 9.2 Timeline: Africa in Ancient Times. (credit “7000 BCE”: modification of work “Ancient Egypt Wooden Farmer & Oxen Model, Middle Kingdom, c. 2000 BC” by Gary Todd/Flickr, CC0 1.0; credit “3000 BCE”: modification of work “‘Spread of the "Early Iron Age' in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa, a proxy for the Bantu migrations” by Kevin Shillington/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “2686 BCE”: modification of work “Statue of princess Redji” by Museo Egizio/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “2400 BCE”: modification of work “Classic Kerma Beaker” by Rogers Fund, 1920/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit “350 BCE”: modification of work “Pyramids N26 and N27” by “Wufei07”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “332 BCE”: modification of work “Ptolemy III Euergetes” by Szilas/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “69 BCE–30 BCE”: modification of work “Marble bust of Cleopatra VII of Egypt” by Altes Museum Berlin/Louis le Grand/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

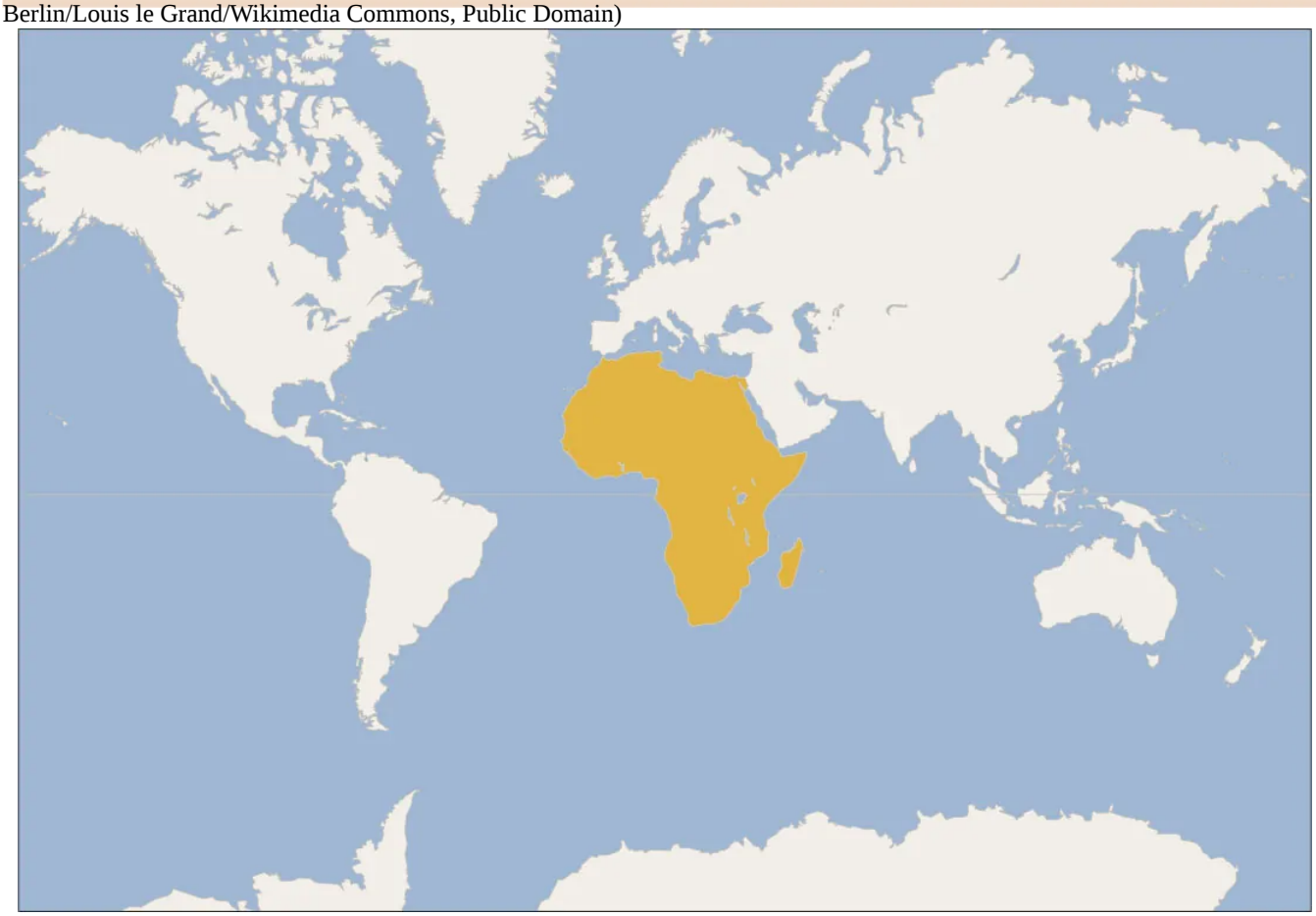


Figure 9.3 Locator Map: Africa in Ancient Times. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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6.2: Africa's Geography and Climate

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the way geography and climate shaped Africa's ancient societies
- Discuss the various Neolithic and hunter-gatherer societies in early Africa

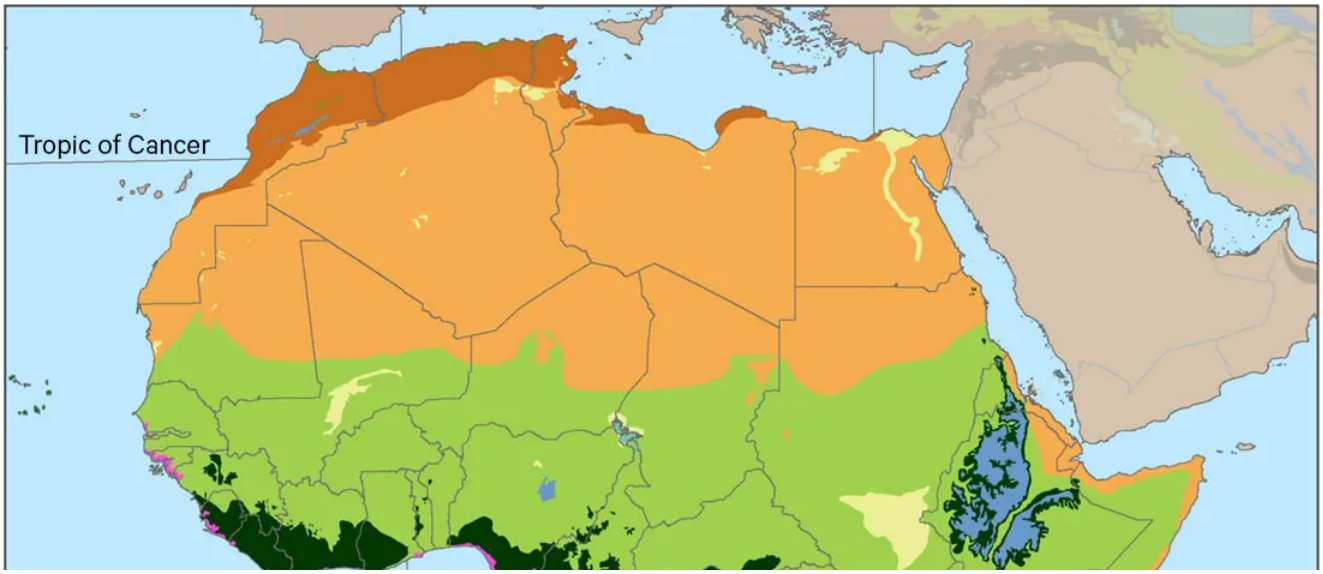
Geography played a vital part in shaping early human societies. Landscape, climate, wildlife, vegetation, and the availability of natural resources all helped influence what early societies looked like, whether they were nomadic units that kept animals and survived by hunting and foraging or settled communities that grew crops, tended herds or flocks, and built shelters. Such characteristics depended on factors like weather patterns and soil fertility, as well as the proximity of drinking water and toolmaking resources.

Well-watered regions in Africa, such as the grassy plains of the savannas and the northern and southern fringes of the continent, have historically produced environments that foster settled human communities. Here abundant rain, adequate forestation, and a host of wildlife provided conditions that could support ever-growing populations over long periods of time. More arid regions, such as the narrow transitional belts separating the savannas from Africa's deserts, experience less rain and have less fertile soil, producing land that cannot be successfully farmed. These areas lent themselves to nomadism and the herding of grazing animals to provide many of the necessities of life, from milk and meat for food to leather and fur for clothing and bones for toolmaking. Throughout most of human history, geography has been an important factor in human development. As a result, exploring Africa's diverse geography opens a window into the development of the earliest human civilization on the continent.

Geographic Diversity on the African Continent

Owing to its position across the equatorial and subtropical latitudes of both the northern and southern hemispheres, Africa is home to a range of climates, including searing deserts, frozen glaciers, sweltering rainforests, and lush grasslands. These divergent environments exist because most of the continent lies between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, in the tropical climate zone. Only its northernmost and southernmost fringes are beyond the tropical area.

Across the center of Africa, stretching like a band from Guinea in the northwest to parts of Mozambique in the southeast, lies a swath of wet, tropical land subject to extremely heavy rainfall. Here we find the deep canopy and undergrowth of Africa's equatorial rainforest (Figure 9.4). Centered on the Congo River Basin, the rainforest is densest in the present-day central state of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Here there is very little space between trees, resulting in thick layers of leaf covering that prevent much sunlight from reaching the forest floor. Approximately 386,000 square miles in extent, the Congo rainforest is the second largest in the world. Overall, it receives between sixty-three and seventy-eight inches of rain every year.



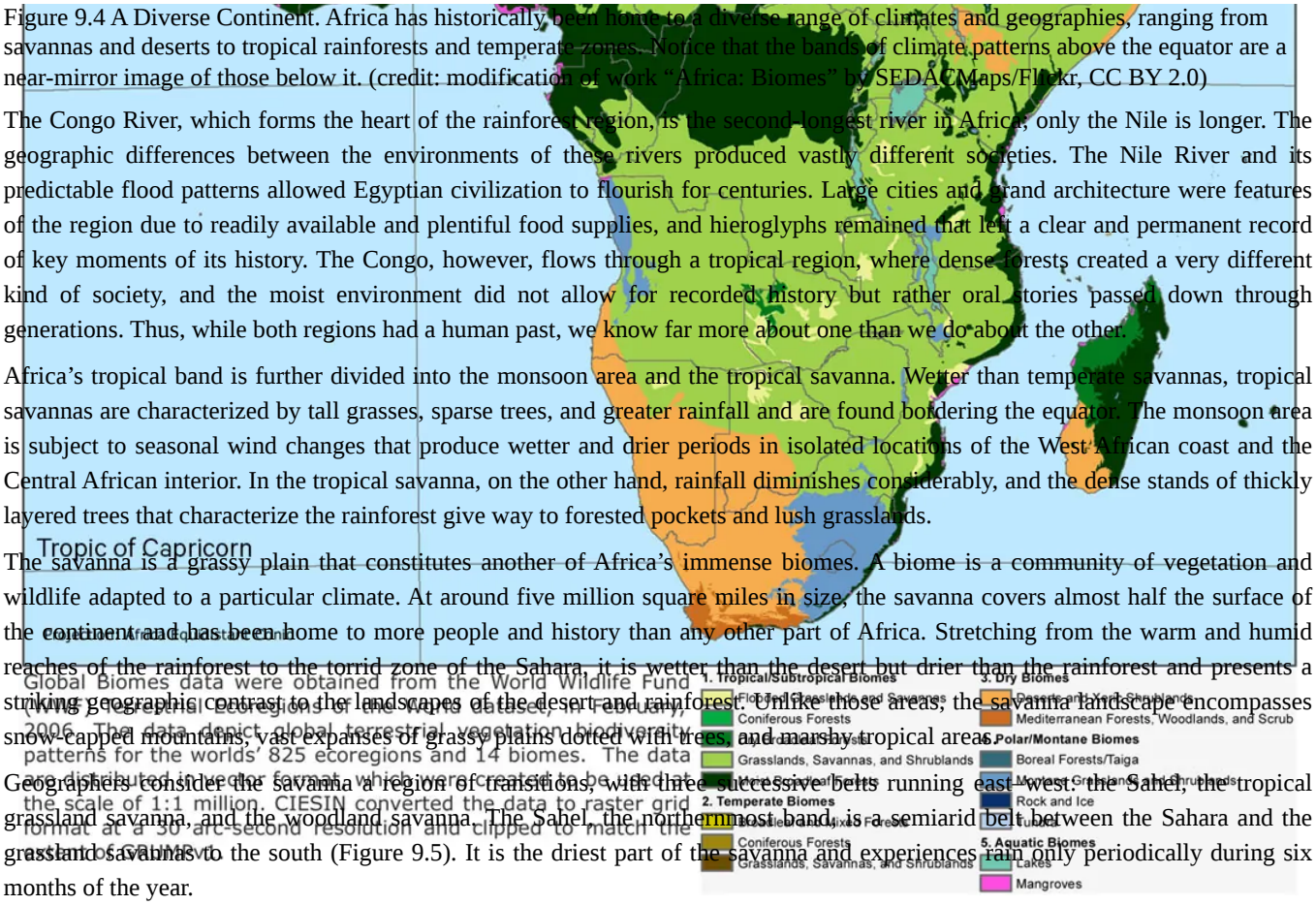


Figure 9.4 A Diverse Continent. Africa has historically been home to a diverse range of climates and geographies, ranging from savannas and deserts to tropical rainforests and temperate zones. Notice that the bands of climate patterns above the equator are a near-mirror image of those below it. (credit: modification of work "Africa: Biomes" by SEDAC Maps/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The Congo River, which forms the heart of the rainforest region, is the second-longest river in Africa; only the Nile is longer. The geographic differences between the environments of these rivers produced vastly different societies. The Nile River and its predictable flood patterns allowed Egyptian civilization to flourish for centuries. Large cities and grand architecture were features of the region due to readily available and plentiful food supplies, and hieroglyphs remained that left a clear and permanent record of key moments of its history. The Congo, however, flows through a tropical region, where dense forests created a very different kind of society, and the moist environment did not allow for recorded history but rather oral stories passed down through generations. Thus, while both regions had a human past, we know far more about one than we do about the other.

Africa's tropical band is further divided into the monsoon area and the tropical savanna. Wetter than temperate savannas, tropical savannas are characterized by tall grasses, sparse trees, and greater rainfall and are found bordering the equator. The monsoon area is subject to seasonal wind changes that produce wetter and drier periods in isolated locations of the West African coast and the Central African interior. In the tropical savanna, on the other hand, rainfall diminishes considerably, and the dense stands of thickly layered trees that characterize the rainforest give way to forested pockets and lush grasslands.

The savanna is a grassy plain that constitutes another of Africa's immense biomes. A biome is a community of vegetation and wildlife adapted to a particular climate. At around five million square miles in size, the savanna covers almost half the surface of the continent and has been home to more people and history than any other part of Africa. Stretching from the warm and humid reaches of the rainforest to the torrid zone of the Sahara, it is wetter than the desert but drier than the rainforest and presents a striking geographic contrast to the landscapes of the desert and rainforest. Unlike those areas, the savanna landscape encompasses snow-capped mountains, vast expanses of grassy plains dotted with trees, and marshy tropical areas.

Geographers consider the savanna a region of transitions, with three successive belts running east–west: the Sahel, the tropical grassland savanna, and the woodland savanna. The Sahel, the northernmost band, is a semiarid belt between the Sahara and the grassland savannas to the south (Figure 9.5). It is the driest part of the savanna and experiences rain only periodically during six months of the year.



Figure 9.5 The African Sahel. This photograph shows acacia trees that grow on the road to Timbuktu in the African Sahel, between the Sahara and the grasslands. (credit: modification of work "The road to Timbuktu in the Sahel, Mali" by Annabel Symington/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

The people of the Sahel have historically been seminomadic—that is, they have adopted a mixed-farming system of crop production and the breeding and raising of livestock. Although the soil of the Sahel lacks sufficient nutrients to grow forests of trees, it is rich in the kind of nutrients that support the growth of plants in gardens as well as those that allow for small-scale

farming and foster the growth of abundant grasses for the grazing of larger animals, particularly cattle and sheep. These herding animals also provide a key ingredient to help African farmers grow crops: manure. With the use of manure and the process of composting, the people of the region successfully navigate the challenges posed by their environment. Its conditions have tended to produce limited agriculture and smaller homesteads that are spaced farther apart to accommodate livestock. Many people of the region continue to live a seminomadic lifestyle rooted in animal husbandry. They do not cling to the past, a recurring myth about Africa; rather, their lifestyle is still the best way to harness what their climate provides.

The Sahel gradually gives way in the south to a grassland savanna carpeted by short grasses and studded by scattered trees. At the extreme, this area can see as much as forty-eight inches of rain per year (the rainy season lasts from May to October). The most famous of all Africa's tropical savannas is the Serengeti. Located in northern Tanzania, the Serengeti is a tremendously diverse ecosystem that witnesses some of the world's largest mass migrations of animals. In January each year, for example, nearly 1.75 million wildebeests begin migrating out of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area at the southern extreme of the Serengeti, following the rainfall in search of food (Figure 9.6).



Figure 9.6 Migrating Wildebeests. Every year between January and November, nearly two million wildebeests migrate in a great circular sweep across the Serengeti, arcing from northern Tanzania through southern Kenya and returning to the Ngorongoro Conservation Area nearly eleven months later. (credit: "Wildebeest Migration in Serengeti National Park, Tanzania" by Daniel Rosengren/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

Moving clockwise in a northerly direction toward the Masai Mara Reserve in Kenya, along the way these wildebeests encounter hundreds of thousands of other animals, including zebras and gazelles, that preceded them on their migration. They confront many obstacles and dangers on their trek, including rivers that hide dangerous hippopotamuses and crocodiles, not to mention numerous predators they face on land. When they finally arrive in Kenya, the female wildebeests birth around half a million calves. Their migration comes to an end in early November, after months spent grazing in the savanna grasslands of the Masai Mara Reserve. The herds then migrate south on their return trip to northern Tanzania from Kenya.

Link to Learning

> The Serengeti migration is one of the most impressive movements of animals anywhere on earth. Watch a short video of the annual wildebeest migration of over a million of these animals across the Serengeti.

The woodland savanna is the last of the belts separating the great northern desert from the equatorial rainforest. It is characterized by tall grasses occasionally interrupted by scattered trees, and corridors of gallery forests along streams and rivers. The area receives plentiful rainfall, usually nine months of the year, and farmers in the region cultivate palm oil trees and root crops such as yams.

As distance from Africa's tropical zone increases, so too does the unpredictability of the rainfall. Progressively, to the north and south of this region, the bands of tropical and temperate climate give way to increasingly drier environments. Limits on resource availability in the more arid parts of Africa, as elsewhere in the world, have necessarily restricted the growth and expansion of civilizations. Regions that lack accessible supplies of water in the form of underground aquifers or wells, rivers, or lakes or that receive little rainfall are ill-suited to farming. Because only farming can support larger human population centers, the lack of accessible water is a barrier to human settlement. This helps explain why no large civilizations emerged in the more obviously arid parts of Africa, such as the Sahara and the Kalahari Desert and also why certain of the drier transitional zones between savanna and desert remain so thinly populated.

The Sahel transitions to desert in the extreme north of the savanna belt. Deserts are the sunniest and driest parts of the continent. Africa's largest desert—in fact, the world's—is the Sahara. At 3.6 million square miles, about the size of the United States, the Sahara covers much of North Africa (excluding the fertile coastal zones along the Mediterranean and the Nile delta) and stretches from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. The Sahara has not always been a vast desert, however. In the period following the last Ice Age, this was a lush region that experienced monsoon-like weather conditions and was home to pastoralists and large herds of cattle. In fact, the earliest evidence we have of the domestication of cattle was discovered on Saharan rock art. But between 6000 and 2500 BCE, the region witnessed a great drying, which resulted in the retreat of the rainforest and the expansion of desert zones. These changes prompted crises for the human inhabitants of the formerly tropical zones, who found their old hunting and gathering techniques no longer suitable in the changed environment.

This desertification is what produced the modern Sahara, which receives less than an inch of precipitation per year with variations of some regions experiencing up to four inches per year, while other places go decades with no rain(Figure 9.7). The average daytime high is 99°F, and average nighttime lows are as cool as 68°F, but highs can reach up to 120°F during the warmer months from April to June, and lows can dip below 37°F in the cooler period between December and January. The only plants that can survive in this hostile environment rely on the water that collects in dry riverbeds during the exceptional periods of rain, but they are few.



Figure 9.7 The Sahara Desert. Aside from its rare oases, the Sahara is one of the most inhospitable places on earth, with sparse rainfall and extreme temperature swings from day to evening. (credit: modification of work “Sahara” by “Not So Dusty”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Among the Sahara’s thousand-foot-tall sand dunes, hard stony surfaces, and vast mountain ranges with peaks as high as eleven thousand feet are oases, green dots of civilization formed around underground water sources that reach the surface via wells or springs. Although together these oases take up only eight hundred square miles—about 0.02 percent of the desert’s total landmass—they are home to some three-quarters of the people living in the desert. The remainder of the population are nomads, including the Tuareg and Teda. These peoples engage in a range of economic activities, such as farming and herding, but on a severely restricted basis. Pasturage, for example, exists only in marginal areas such as mountain borders and the somewhat moister areas to the west, limitations that govern the herders’ nomadic lifestyle.

As famous as it is, the Sahara is not Africa’s only desert; there is also a desert region in the African Horn (the area corresponding to Somalia, Ethiopia, and northern Kenya), as well as the Namib and the Kalahari Desert, Africa’s great southwestern desert (Figure 9.8). The Kalahari Desert presents perhaps the most interesting contrast to the extremes of the Sahara.

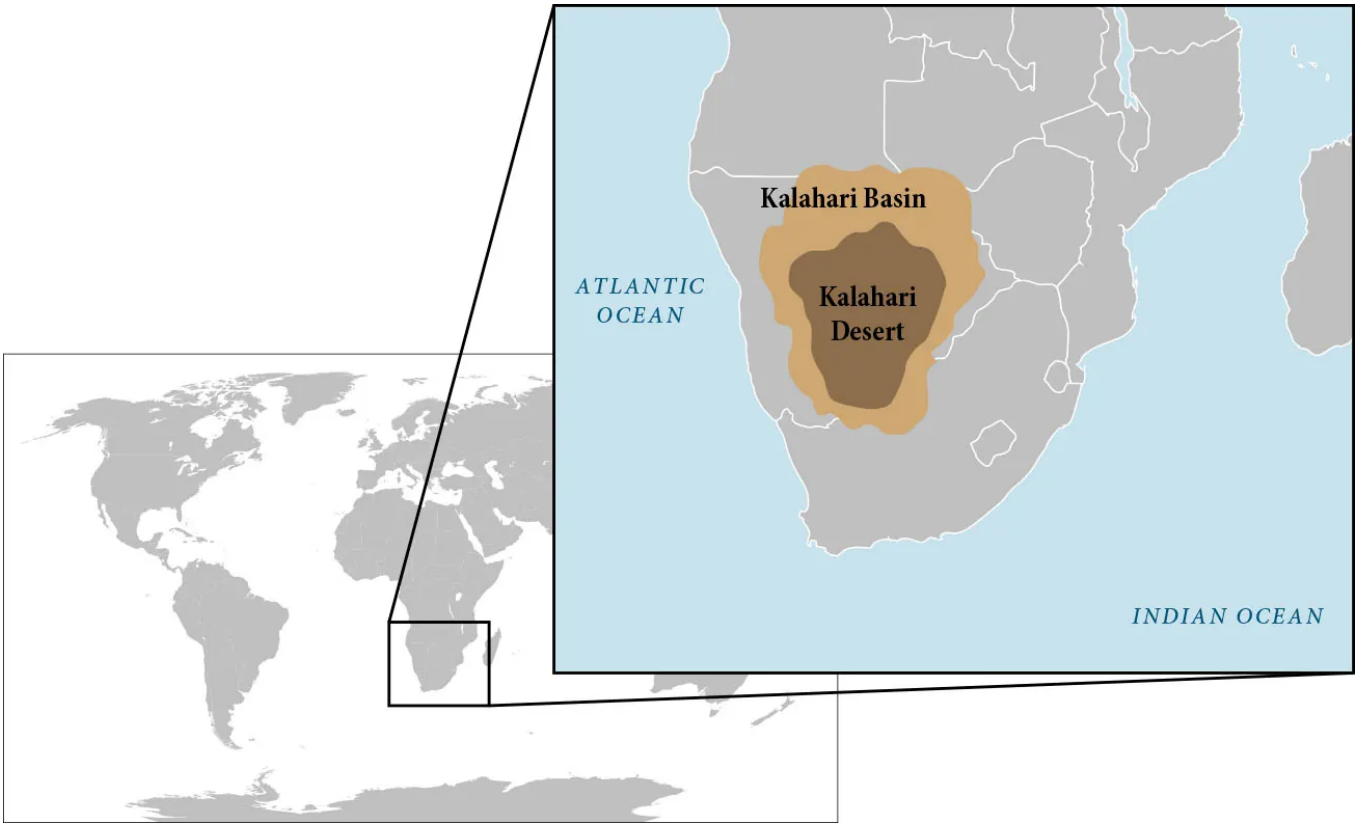


Figure 9.8 The Kalahari Desert. The Kalahari in southwest Africa is the second largest of Africa’s deserts. (credit: modification of work “Kalahari Desert and Kalahari Basin map” by “Quadell”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Kalahari is a semiarid sandy savanna some 350,000 square miles across. Occasionally referred to as the southern African equivalent of the Sahel, it stretches south from modern-day Namibia into South Africa’s Northern Cape province, extends deep into the interior of the South African veld or grassland, and covers almost the whole of Botswana. While Saharan sand dunes are typically large, in the Kalahari they are much smaller, ranging between twenty and two hundred feet high and measuring at least one mile in length and several hundred feet in width. The landscape is also distinguished by numerous “dry lakes” or pans, evidence of a wetter period earlier in the region’s history. Even today, some of the northeastern parts of the Kalahari receive more than ten inches of water per year and thus climatically do not qualify as “desert.” However, they do lack surface water. When they experience rain, it drains instantly through the deep sands, leaving the soil completely devoid of moisture.

Precipitation in the Kalahari depends largely on weather patterns influenced by the Indian Ocean and is highly variable. While the northeastern part receives comparatively abundant rainfall, the southern fringe of the desert sees less than five inches of rain per

year. This rainfall accompanies severe thunderstorms, which often appear suddenly and produce violent downpours that deluge the landscape. Still, for six to eight months of the year, the region receives no rainfall. As a result, there is very little ecologically to distinguish the southwestern landscape beyond flat sand plains—aside from a few drought-resistant shrubs and bushes. On the other hand, the central Kalahari, which enjoys more rain, is dotted with scattered trees, shrubs, and grasses. At the extreme end, the northern reaches of the Kalahari appear to be an entirely different biome with woodlands, palm trees, and forests.

The final major climate in Africa is the Mediterranean climate, found only on the northernmost and southernmost fringes of the continent in the coastal regions of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia in the north, and in South Africa. The combination of dry summers with lower humidity (relative to the tropical band) and mild rainy winters makes them ideal environments for the growing of olive trees, cereal grains, and grapes—the so-called Mediterranean triad of crops that dot the landscapes of both regions. The temperatures there are pleasant, with average daily highs of 77°F and average nightly lows hovering around 60°F.

Africa also offers regional climates, each with its own local variations. East Africa, for example, straddles the equator and includes Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Along the coast and around Lake Victoria, hot and humid conditions prevail, but there are much cooler climates in the highlands and mountains (Figure 9.9). Many areas of the region experience extreme amounts of rainfall. Coastal islands and the tropical area around Lake Victoria, for example, receive upward of fifty-nine inches of rain per year. To the north, the Ethiopian highlands form a drier climate region, thanks to the influence of the eastern desert. Locally, Africa's diverse microclimates belie the continent's broad regional climate patterns and suggest the impressive variety of ecosystems that span it—and to which people have adapted over the millennia.


LAKE VICTORIA
KAMPALA
JINJA
ENTEBBE
KISUMU
MWANZA
Speke Gulf
Kavirondo Gulf
Sango Bay
Emin Pasha Gulf
Mwanza Gulf
Majita Bay
Mori Bay
Musoma
Bukoba
Goma
Masaka
Entebbe
Jinja
Kisumu
Tarime
Kisii
Kericho
Kakamega
Eldoret
Nakuru
Kampala
Mukono
Mpigi
Bombo
Mubende
Masaka
Kalisizo
Rakai
Lyantonde
Sembabule
Mityana
Luwero
Kayunga
Iganga
Bugiri
Busia
Tororo
Soroti
Lira
Gulu
Kitgum
Pader
Arua
Moyo
Adjumani
Yumbe
Koboko
Nebbi
Pakwach
Hoima
Masindi
Kiryandongo
Apac
Kumi
Pallisa
Mbale
Sironko
Kapchorwa
Bududa
Manafwa
Tororo
Busia
Bungoma
Webuye
Kitale
Lodwar
Kitale
Eldoret
Kapsabet
Kisumu
Kericho
Kisii
Migori
Homa Bay
Rusinga Island
Mfangano Island
Ukerewe Island
Maisome Island
Kome Island
Bukasa Island
Bugala Island
Damba Island
Bunjako Island
Bugaia Island
Sigulu Island
Mageta Island
Rubondo Island
Ukara Island
Bukondo Point
Nansio
Bukumbi
Mwanza
Usagara
Speke Gulf
Magu Bay
Majita Bay
Mori Bay
Musoma
Tarime
Nyamwaga
Kisaka
Iramba
Nyakanga
Mugango
Bukima
Nyamuswa
Ushashi
Kasuguti
Kalamere
Nyashimo
Kayenzi
Rugezi
Ukerewe Island
Nansio
Bukondo Point
Massoma Bay
Baumann Gulf
Ukara Island
Bukumbi

Figure 9.9 Lake Victoria. Hot and humid Lake Victoria, home to one of Africa's regional climates, is centrally located in East Africa and bordered by Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. (credit: modification of work "Lake Victoria 1968" by U.S. Army/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

A staggering variety of wildlife has also adapted to these climates. Because of the abundance there of grasses as sources of food, Africa's savannas are home to a range of large grazing mammals including gazelles, wildebeests, elephants, ostriches, and zebras. Large herds of these animals are commonly seen in the savanna, none more spectacular than the wildebeests on their annual migration in East Africa. Although giraffes, elephants, hippopotamuses, and rhinoceroses can be found in many places on the continent, including modern-day Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia in the interior of south-central Africa and East Africa, one of the greatest concentrations of these animals on the continent is found in the sub-Saharan savanna.

Types of Ancient African Societies

The variety of African climates directly influenced the evolution of human societies there. People adapted to these climates in many ways, developing techniques and technologies that both helped them survive and altered their surroundings. Understanding the connection between climate, geography, and humans opens the way to understanding Africa's early history.

Before the domestication of plants and animals, life in prehistoric Africa was characterized by the hunter-gatherer stage of human civilization. Hunter-gatherers survive by hunting prey and foraging for fruits and vegetables, or by exchanging game for crops grown by others. In some regions, such as Tanzania and Kenya in East Africa and Botswana in southern Africa, hunter-gatherers followed the seasonal migrations of large game animals, such as wildebeests and elephants. Hunter-gatherers do not plant crops or build permanent shelters but rather live nomadic lifestyles guided by the seasons, limited resource availability, conflict with other groups, or a combination of these factors. They must be highly mobile so their communities tend to be small, consisting of only several dozen interrelated people. Their mobility means that they often play an important role in connecting different regions and cultures and in transmitting goods and ideas across great distances.

Hunting and gathering peoples of Africa have historically included the rainforest-dwelling Baka of Central Africa and the San people of the Kalahari Desert. The Baka, found today in Cameroon, Gabon, and northern Congo, eat wild roots, nuts, fruits, vegetables, a variety of insect species, fish, and wild game they hunt using bows, poison-tipped arrows, and traps (Figure 9.10). Baka villages are made up of small single-family huts of branches and leaves, built predominantly by women and usually dismantled after about a week so the Baka can follow the available food supply. Baka society has a well-defined structure. In addition to building the family hut, women also dam small streams to catch fish and carry material gathered while foraging with their husbands. Men hold a higher social status derived from the fact that they engage in the more hazardous task of hunting and trapping animals.



Figure 9.10 The Baka People of Central Africa. Peoples such as the Baka have historically dwelled in the rainforest regions of Gabon, Cameroon, and northern Congo. This photo of Baka people was taken in 1904. (credit: modification of work “Group of Pygmies from the Department of Anthropology at the 1904 World's Fair) by Missouri History Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Like that of many other African peoples, the Baka religion was and remains centered on a belief in animism—that is, it teaches that certain objects, places, and creatures have spirits. Those who can interpret what those spirits desire have positions of leadership. Animism is also polytheistic, meaning it has numerous gods, each of whom typically personifies a natural force such as rain, wind, or lightning. Given the impact of weather on survival, it is not surprising that trying to control the natural environment was a key factor in religious observance. Among the gods of the Baka are Kamba, the creator of all things, and Jengi, the spirit of the forest. The Baka live in and rely on the forest for their survival, so they view Jengi as a parental figure and, perhaps most importantly, the protector of the forest.

Although ancient African religions were remarkably complex, and their rituals, practices, and beliefs varied greatly among the continent’s diverse populations, some commonalities can be identified in the pre-Judaic, pre-Christian, and pre-Islamic periods, including polytheism. Another typical feature of the pantheon of traditional African deities is a supreme being, like the Ngai of the Kikuyu, held to be the creator god from whom the universe originated. The supreme being was a distant deity who played no role in the ordinary affairs of Africans. Instead, management of the day-to-day fell to specialized secondary deities, such as Obatala, the Yoruba god of earth, and Makasa, the Baganda god of harvest and fertility. Other shared features of many ancient African religions include the worship of ancestors as protectors and guides and ceremonial practices to mark important life events, such as the Bantu Okuyi, a rite of passage celebrating the transition between youth and adolescence.

The San people of southwest Africa were and remain seminomadic hunter-gatherers and are polytheistic (Figure 9.11). Their diet is dictated by the arid conditions in which they live. Lack of water in the Kalahari Desert means there are fewer vegetables and fruits to forage, although seasonal nuts, plant buds, and certain roots are food staples. The San also hunt a variety of big game animals, including giraffe and antelope species such as kudu and hartebeest, using poison-tipped arrows and traps. They do not build permanent homes. Rather, their shelter types vary by season: they erect nightly rain shelters in the spring, when they move

constantly in search of budding greens, and in the dry season, when water is scarce and most plants are dead or dormant, they congregate around the only permanent water holes in the area.



Figure 9.11 The San. A San family in present-day South Africa. (credit: “Bushman family” by Aino Tuominen/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The hunt is a key part of San society, and all the San gods have jobs related to it. The supreme deity Cagn ensures a successful hunt, often by protecting the San hunters from animals or people who could endanger the hunt. Hei-tusi the hero god assists Cagn in leading and protecting the hunt. To these are added a host of lesser spirits, including predators and tricksters.

The most important of the San religious rituals depends on the hunt. The curing or great trance dance is initiated by a San shaman through the hunting of a “power animal” such as an antelope, whose fat is believed to have supernatural potency and is used in different ritualistic settings, including rites of passage. The shaman enters a trance-like state after a night-long dance around a fire surrounded by clapping women. The San believe the trance dancers can be affected physiologically and mystically by the ritual, giving them powers to heal or provoking in them an out-of-body experience. The dance, often depicted on ancient San rock art, is the key source of all spiritual knowledge for the San and is often prompted at times of great social stress such as during times of settler incursion, outbreaks of disease or illness, and poverty.

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6.3: The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the introduction and emergence of farming in Africa
- Analyze the origin and impact of ironworking technology in Africa
- Describe the geographic extent and impact of the Bantu migrations

For tens of thousands of years, people across Africa lived in relatively small groups and relied on hunting and gathering. This lifestyle began to change dramatically beginning around 7000 BCE when plant and animal domestication methods from the Fertile Crescent were first adopted in Africa. Often called the Neolithic Revolution, the adoption of domestication led some groups to build permanent settlements and support large populations. Over thousands of years, these methods spread up the Nile River and across North Africa. Below the Sahara, plant domestication was developed independently in both the east and the west as the people in those areas learned to cultivate their own unique plant varieties. By approximately 1000 BCE, large populations in both north and sub-Saharan Africa supported themselves by working the land. This wave of transformation effectively transformed the continent and over time led to the emergence of a number of large and sophisticated civilizations.

The Emergence of Farming

Although scholars still debate the origins of agriculture in Africa, there is a general consensus that agriculture emerged in three distinct regions: along the Nile River in Egypt, in the eastern Sahara of Sudan, and in the great bend of the Niger River of West Africa. The oldest evidence for agriculture in Africa can be found in Egypt along the Nile River valley. There, sometime after 7000 BCE, agricultural technology and knowledge about the domestication of wheat, barley, sheep, goats, and cattle were introduced into the region, likely from southwest Asia. The introduction of these methods transformed the region and put Egypt on the path to greatness. Over the next few thousand years, these practices were disseminated west across North Africa to Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

In the grasslands south of the Sahara, agriculture emerged independently. The origins of that process can be traced to as early as 9000 BCE, when the Nilo-Saharan people of the region began to adopt the grain-collecting and grinding techniques of their northern neighbors and applied them to sorghum and pearl millet, the tropical grasses of the Nile region. These changes were made possible by a millennia-long wet phase beginning around 11,000 BCE. During this period, monsoon-like weather conditions prevailed, drenching the region of the Sahara and creating lakes and a lush landscape covered in grasses and acacia forests that was home to countless varieties of wildlife. By around 8000 BCE, the Nilo-Saharans had domesticated wild cattle of the Red Sea hills and had begun to produce pottery they used to store and cook these grains. By as early as 6000 BCE, the gathering of these wild grains had begun to evolve into deliberate domestication. Over the next few thousand years, the Nilo-Saharans domesticated a host of other plants, including watermelons, cotton, and gourds.

Agriculture also emerged independently, far to the west of the Nilo-Saharans in the bend of the Niger River of West Africa. There, the domestication of yams by the Niger-Congo peoples developed gradually and likely in a piecemeal fashion beginning possibly around the same time the Nilo-Saharans of the eastern Sahara were adopting agriculture. Certainly, by 3000 BCE, the Niger-Congo peoples of West Africa were actively clearing land with stone tools to plant crops such as yams, the oil palm, peas, and groundnuts. Over the next couple thousand years, the Niger-Congo peoples also domesticated a uniquely African variety of rice, which they grew in the wetlands of the Niger River region.

Link to Learning

In this article, the ancient climate and geography of the Congo River Basin are examined.

The impact of farming was enhanced by advances in metallurgy. Bronze was introduced into Egypt from the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean a little before 3000 BCE. From there, bronze technology was gradually disseminated west across North Africa as well as south up the Nile into sub-Saharan Africa. Being far harder than the farming materials these populations were previously

using, the introduction of bronze greatly increased agricultural production. Unlike wooden plows, which allow only scratch farming, bronze-bladed plows pulled by oxen could dig deep into the ground and turnover large amounts of earth.

Iron tools in Egypt during the Bronze Age were not unknown. Indeed, an iron dagger was placed in Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb in 1323 BCE, and archaeologists have found several hundred iron objects in sites around the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean which date to centuries before the start of the Iron Age. Most of these iron objects, however, were ornamental and include things like iron jewelry. It was only after about 1000 BCE that the number of iron tools began to overtake the number of bronze tools across the Near East. The reason for this is that iron is far more difficult to produce than bronze. The types of iron objects that could be produced earlier were inferior to bronze in strength, which is why the early objects tended to be ornamental. Only during the Late Bronze Age Collapse (1200–1100 BCE), when tin was difficult to acquire, did people begin experimenting with iron more seriously. By about 900 BCE, numerous blacksmiths around the Near East had mastered the art of creating iron tools that were far superior in strength to bronze. Evidence of sophisticated ironworking technology in Egypt dates to the seventh century BCE, introduced to the area from other parts of the Near East.

For many years, modern historians assumed that ironworking technologies spread to other parts of Africa from Egypt. The prevailing consensus now, however, is that ironworking technology was likely developed independently in sub-Saharan Africa. Most modern scholars agree that iron smelting in sub-Saharan Africa likely preexisted its introduction into Egypt by a few centuries. The earliest evidence dates to about 1000 BCE and comes from Central Africa—modern Chad, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. From there the technology appears to have spread west to the Niger River area and, by 500 BCE, was being used by the Nok culture of West Africa.

Settling around the confluence of the Benue and Niger Rivers in present-day Nigeria, the Nok initially used iron to fashion jewelry. Eventually they began using it to make farming tools and weapons as well. The obvious utility of iron for fashioning tougher and more durable tools used to clear forests, aerate land, and dig trench-based irrigation systems led others to adopt the new material. As a result, over the next several centuries, ironworking technology spread around West Africa and later far beyond. In the hands of migrating Bantus, iron technology was indispensable. They used iron tools to clear the surrounding trees and extended prehistoric irrigation systems by digging deeper furrows, shored up with embankments, to create Iron Age farms. In the process, they spread ironworking technology throughout equatorial and subequatorial Africa.

Beyond the Book

The Iron Age in Africa

It had been thought that ironworking originated in modern-day Turkey around 1500 BCE. However, new evidence suggests that the discovery of iron metallurgy happened in Central Africa—modern Chad, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan—around the same time, likely as a by-product of firing ceramics. Today, most modern scholars agree that iron smelting in sub-Saharan Africa likely preexisted its introduction into Egypt by a few centuries with the earliest evidence dating to about 1000 BCE.

Ironworking revolutionized human civilization in Africa. It helped make large-scale agriculture possible because it produced stronger tools for farming, including shovels and furrow-diggers. Iron axes and knives enabled Africans to clear paths through the densest parts of the Central African rainforest. In so doing, they exposed new areas for settlement and opened corridors between historically isolated regions, connecting them for the first time.

These corridors allowed for migration as well as the diffusion of cultures, a process that introduced to other prehistoric peoples not only new technologies but also new languages and the innovations of the Neolithic Revolution: the domestication of plants and animals. The advent of iron metalworking was a vital component in the laying of common cultural foundation throughout much of southern Africa and utterly transformed the societies found there.

Watch this short video about the origins of ironworking in Africa to learn more. Pay close attention to the circumstances that led to the discovery of iron smelting in Africa and why iron metallurgy proved so revolutionary to the societies that adopted it.

Click to view content

- How was iron discovered in Africa? What were some of the first uses of iron?
- In what ways did iron transform African societies?
- Can you name other discoveries/innovations that had a similar impact on human civilization? What were they, and what was their impact?

The Bantu Migrations

The word “Bantu” is a modern term invented by linguists who have studied the languages of Africa. The word is made up of the common stem “ntu” and the plural prefix “ba” which put together literally means “people.” It describes a large and geographically widespread subfamily of African languages that make up part of the larger Niger-Congo language family. There are well over four hundred known Bantu languages spoken today across a large portion of the southern half of Africa (Figure 9.12). Linguists believe that these similar languages derived from an ancient parent language often described as “proto-Bantu.”

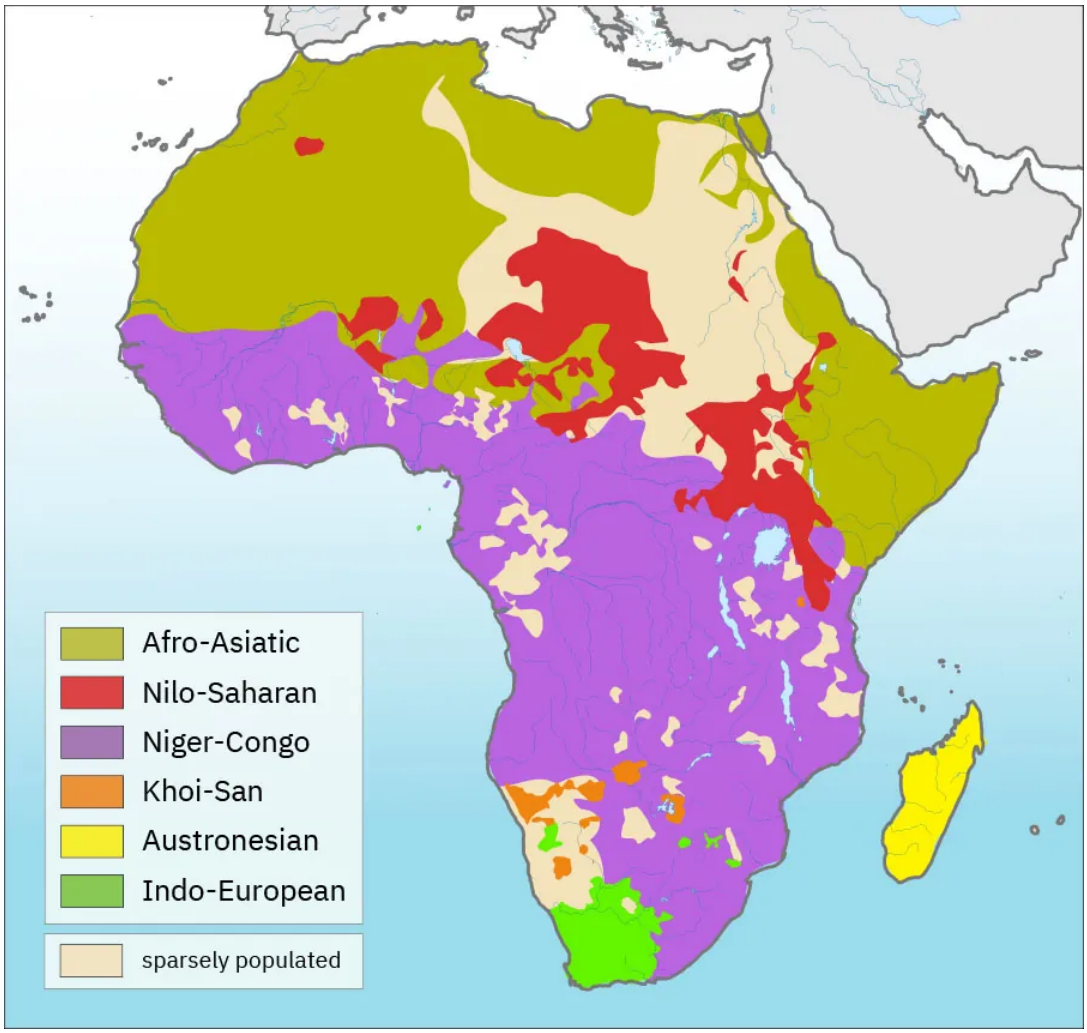


Figure 9.12 Africa's Wealth of Languages. This map shows the distribution of language groups in Africa that resulted from ancient migrations. The Bantu subfamily is part of the Niger-Congo family and extends from western Africa to the far south. (credit: modification of work "Languages of Africa map" by "Seb az86556"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

Theories about the spread of the Bantu speakers have changed over the last several decades. For example, it was once believed that the spread occurred relatively recently, meaning over the last several centuries. It was also assumed that the process took the form of conquering bands of Bantu speakers who subjugated or even annihilated those they came into contact with. We know now that the process began several thousand years ago and proceeded in a piecemeal fashion as small groups of Bantu speakers spread across the larger area, integrating and intermarrying into the largely hunter-gatherer communities they met.

It is generally accepted today that the original proto-Bantu speakers emerged and lived in the area between modern-day Nigeria and Cameroon in West and Central Africa. A Neolithic people, the proto-Bantu were farmers who subsisted by cultivating pearl millet and yams and extracting oil from the abundant palm and bush candle trees of the region's luxuriant rainforests. Gradual changes in weather patterns caused the rainforests to recede and, together with increasingly seasonal (rather than constant) rainfall, opened tracts of savanna between forested areas. Over time, these open patches merged to form the Sangha River Interval, a 200-mile-wide grassland running north–south between modern-day southeastern Cameroon, southern Central African Republic, and northern Republic of Congo. This grassland corridor allowed the previously forest-dwelling Bantu to move southward, through what had once been impenetrable tropical rainforest.

The expansion of the Bantu speakers beyond that region and across other parts of sub-Saharan African likely began between 3000 and 2000 BCE and is referred to as the Bantu migrations (Figure 9.13). Although scholars debate the precise timing, motivation, and directions of these migrations, linguistic evidence and archaeological traces of pottery and ironmaking technology suggest there were multiple waves. The earliest seems to have consisted of two phases: an initial eastern stream or "early split," and a

somewhat later western “rivers and coasts” stream. In both phases, pioneering groups moved gradually and sporadically, first proceeding eastward across the northern reaches of the Congo Forest and arriving in the Great Lakes region of East Africa around 1500 BCE.

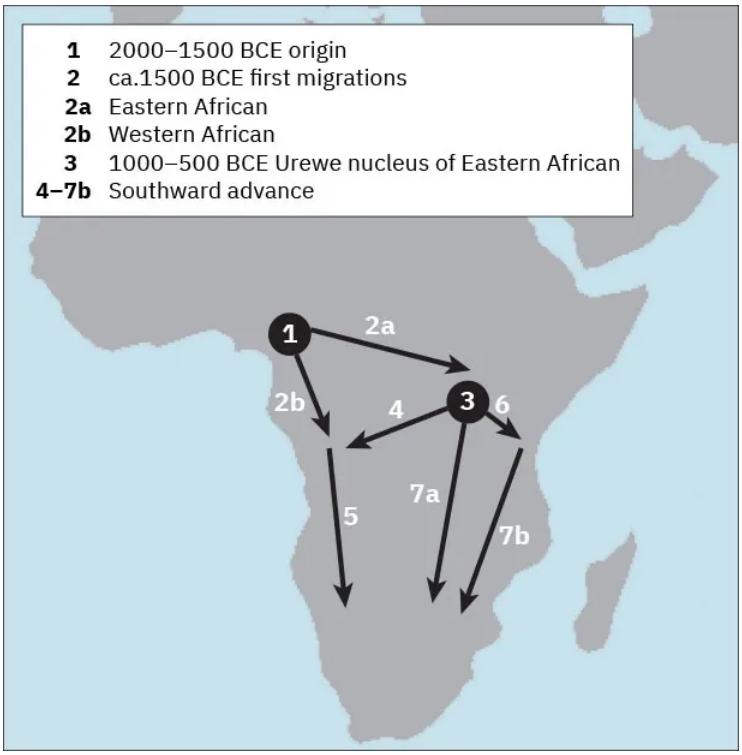


Figure 9.13 The Bantu Migrations. Two streams of ancient Bantu migration originated in the Bantu homeland, located in West and Central Africa: (1) an eastward “early split” (2a) and a southward “western” expansion (2b). In later waves of migration, Bantu groups moved on from the Great Lakes region (3) in a generally southward advance (4–7). (credit: modification of work “Map showing the Bantu expansion” by Derek Nurse und Gérard Philippson/“Botev”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Dominated by the Urewe culture, the Great Lakes region was one of the oldest centers of iron smelting in Africa. It was likely from the Urewe that the Bantu learned the iron-forging techniques that enabled them to later produce carbon steel. The Urewe also produced the earliest East African Iron Age pottery, called Urewe ware. Confidently dated to between the second and fifth centuries CE, Urewe ware is found in the Great Lakes region and is recognizable by the distinctive indentation on the bases of its bowls and pots, which gives it the name “dimple-based” pottery. Kwale ware, a related style, has been discovered in the region to the east of the Rift Valley, in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. Kwale ware appears to be an offshoot of the earlier Urewe ware and dates to the Early Iron Age, around the third century. Archaeologists and historians have traced the southward thrust of the eastern stream of Bantu in the third and fourth centuries by uncovering Iron Age slag sites and related styles of pottery in Malawi and Mozambique.

As small clusters of Bantu advanced into modern Kenya and Tanzania, some turned toward Congo, while other groups pushed southward in the direction of southern East Africa. By the seventh century, Bantu communities stretched from the extreme southern reaches of Somalia in the north to Natal and Eastern Cape in present-day South Africa. Along the way, they created key cultural elements that were the bases for later civilizations, including the Swahili speakers of the East African coast.

The western stream of Bantu migration progressed considerably more slowly than the eastward stream, advancing south along the West African coast into modern Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with small groups branching off to follow the Congo River system inland as early as 1500 BCE. Early Iron Age farm settlements dating from around the second century CE have been uncovered in southwestern Congo, near Kinshasa, but some of the most impressive and revealing evidence of Iron Age Bantu settlements comes from the savanna woodlands around Lake Kale in southeastern Congo. Here, archaeologists have uncovered evidence of extensive copper and iron smelting, with copper used for trade and to fashion jewelry, while iron was forged into tools and weapons. The westward stream penetrated deeper into the south-central African interior, where Kalundu and Dambwa pottery,

Early Iron Age styles specific to this flow of Bantu, have been identified in the Zambezi valley. This evidence dates to the same period of southward expansion that has been linked to the eastward early split Bantu.

It was not until the early centuries of the Common Era that the western stream penetrated Angola in the far southern extreme of West Africa. Around this time, East Africa witnessed a third phase of Bantu expansion, with groups moving through and settling in parts of modern Mozambique, Botswana, and eastern South Africa. It appears that all three streams of Bantu migration—the western stream, the early split, and its later southward-bound branch—converged on the Zambezi valley (Figure 9.13). By 500 CE, all parts of the vast tropical rainforest had been settled by Bantu farming communities. Populations of Bantu-speaking peoples could now be found throughout southern Africa, from the savanna woodland south of the Congo forest and that of northern Namibia in the west, to the Great Lakes region of East Africa, western Tanzania, and eastern Botswana in the east, to the Transvaal high veld, Natal, and Eastern Cape in the south.

Link to Learning

As the Bantu migrated, did they arrive as conquerors, colonizers, or explorers? Listen to the BBC's "The Story of Africa" and learn more.

The Bantu were among the earliest groups to benefit from the diffusion of farming, herding and animal keeping, and advanced metalworking technologies, and they dispersed across the continent changing its linguistic and cultural landscape along the way. Pioneers originating in West and Central Africa advanced sporadically as small groups of people moving from one point to another. During the earliest centuries of expansion, groups of Bantu arrived in regions that were only thinly populated by groups of nomadic hunter-gatherers. The land was unsettled, enabling the Bantu to select the best sites for their farms, and because there was no need to clear thick forest or adopt new techniques to suit a difficult environment, their expansion across the subcontinent proceeded relatively rapidly. New generations could simply move to new areas. Initially, then, Bantu farm settlements were typically confined to fertile river valleys and regions with favorable rainfall—which helps explain why they moved toward the southeast, a path that avoided the much drier southwest.

The situation changed, however, as the birth of each new generation put pressure on a given area's limited resources. Growing needs necessitated further expansion, and as the Bantu advanced into the rainforest—their path helpfully cleared with new iron tools—they began to adjust their cultivation techniques to a variety of conditions. Although it may seem so, the tropical rainforest is not—and has never been—a uniform ecosystem: its topography and climate vary greatly from river valleys and swampy regions to dense forest canopies and plateaus, and across highlands and lowlands. Each of these environments requires different cultivation techniques, knowledge the Bantu acquired only after their gradual occupation of all parts of the rainforest and centuries of experimentation and adaptation. Their efforts were so effective that by the sixth century CE, Bantu farming communities had settled in virtually all parts of the tropical rainforest.

But the Bantu did not stop at the rainforest. Rather, they continued to drift southward and eventually emerged into the southern savanna, where they found an environment not unlike the grasslands they had encountered north of the rainforest. Like the rainforest, southern Africa was also lightly populated by foragers and hunter-gatherers, leaving vast swaths of land open for the Bantu farmers to inhabit. They expanded into this region seeking new land, a migratory process repeated by generations of their successors. Initially, the diffusion of the Bantu speakers south of the rainforest followed an easterly direction and hugged the southern and eastern edges of the rainforest. When they began to settle around Lake Victoria, the Bantu acquired cattle. From there, a general dispersal into eastern and southern Africa began.

Although the areas into which the Bantu migrated were only sparsely populated, interactions with the peoples who already lived there were unavoidable. It is not entirely clear what these meetings were like, but evidence suggests that interactions were complex and included elements of cultural absorption and assimilation as well as displacement, often at the same time. Early on, the Bantu moved in relatively small numbers, so there were no large-scale displacements of hunter-gatherer societies. It was some time before the Iron Age farmers came to dominate their Neolithic contemporaries.

At first, there was enough room for both societies to coexist in relative harmony. Oral tradition and linguistic evidence indicate that the Bantu intermingled with some of these populations, including rainforest-dwelling peoples such as the Twa and the Khoekhoe herders of South Africa. Had it not been for the rainforest dwellers, the Bantu may have had a far more difficult time adjusting to the environment. Indeed, Bantu oral tradition holds that it was rainforest dwellers like the Twa who taught them to adapt. It is also

likely that the Bantu acquired their cattle—or at least their cattle-herding techniques—from the Khoisan, a cattle- and goat-herding people who preceded them in southern Africa. In fact, many of the words in the southern Bantu language that relate to cattle and cattle-herding practices are derived from Khoisan. This linguistic heritage is reinforced by the presence today of Khoisan “click” sounds in certain Bantu languages, particularly those of the south.

Yet displacements did occur. The peoples who dwelled in the rainforest had all descended from a common population, but the arrival of the more technologically advanced Bantu farmers caused them to scatter into separate groups. On entering San territory, for example, the Bantu farmers displaced the previously dominant San and Khoekhoe peoples, the first inhabitants of South Africa. Forced from their home territories by the Iron Age farmers, the San and Khoekhoe embarked on their own widespread migrations. The Bantu were not dominant everywhere in southern Africa, however. In the drier, sandier areas of the western Kalahari Desert and Namibia, Khoisan speakers remained the dominant group until more recent times.

Overall, the Bantu migrations had a significant impact on Africa’s economic and cultural practices. As they migrated, the Bantu encountered different groups whose adaptations to their environments had produced innovations in plant and animal husbandry and metalworking. The Bantu borrowed and adapted these over a generations-long expansion across and throughout sub-Saharan Africa, forging a package of common cultural advances that they gradually diffused among the peoples in the areas they settled. In the long term, the Bantu laid a common cultural framework throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa. This enabled them to forge complex settled societies that later became the bases of large African states, such as medieval Great Zimbabwe, that could dominate whole regions.

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6.4: The Kingdom of Kush

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

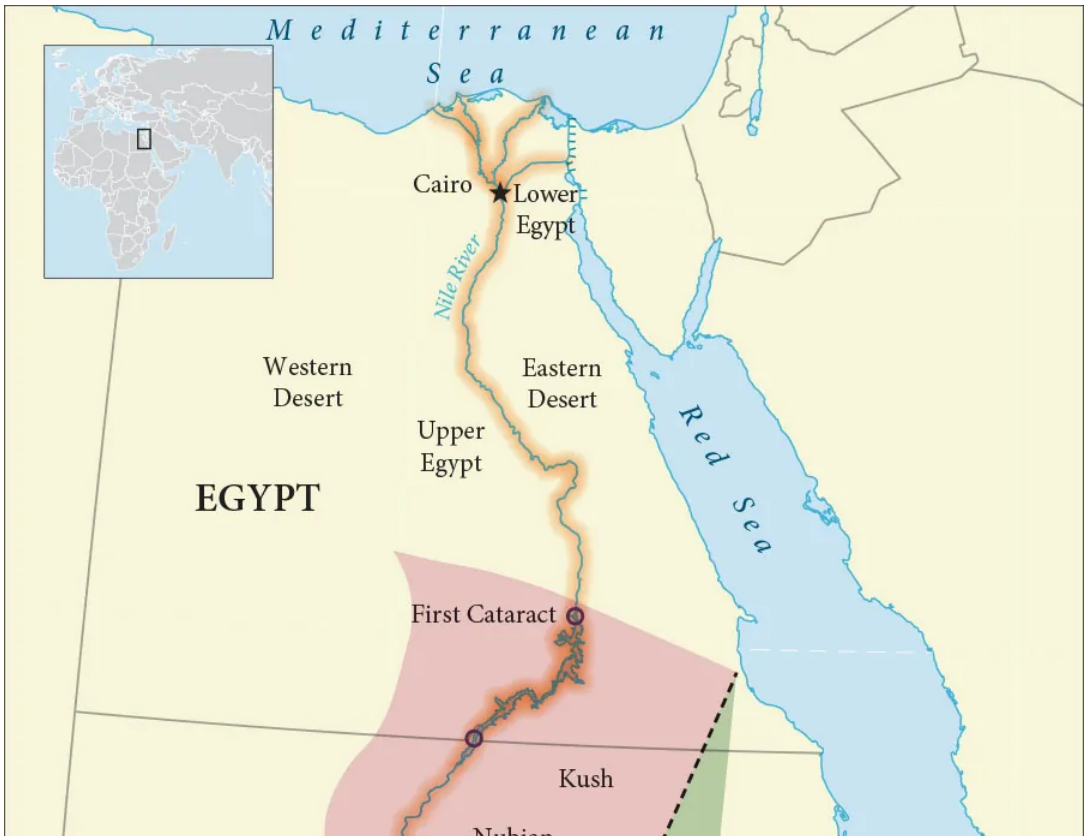
- Explore the origins and rise of the Kingdom of Kush
- Describe the relationship between the Kingdom of Kush and Egyptian culture
- Analyze the transformations in Nubia following the founding of Meroe

The traditional southern boundary of Ancient Egypt was the first cataract of the Nile. A cataract is a place in a river where the otherwise placid flow is upset by a waterfall, a shallow portion, or the presence of boulders that make the river impassable by boats. Downriver of the first cataract, the river is largely unobstructed and serves as a fertile highway skirting through an otherwise desert and connecting the Egyptian settlements and facilitating the dissemination of a uniform Egyptian culture. Since the cataract served as a physical barrier, it largely limited Egyptian influence south of it and thus allowed distinct cultures and kingdoms to emerge along the upper reaches of the Nile.

Nubia was the name Egyptians gave to the expansive area south of the first cataract and extending into sub-Saharan Africa. The kingdom that first emerged in Nubia was called Kush. Because of its location along the Nile, throughout its long history the Kingdom of Kush was culturally influenced by Egypt. However, because it was sufficiently distant from Egypt, it also had the liberty to develop its own traditions, culture, language, and impressive history.

The Origin and Rise of the Kingdom of Kush

The history of the Nubian Kingdom of Kush is bound up in the history of Egypt, its northern neighbor. It was heavily influenced by Egypt throughout much of its long history. And at one point during the eighth century BCE, a line of Kushite kings even sat on the throne of Egypt. At that time, the kingdom stretched from the Nile delta south to the confluence of the Blue and White Niles outside Khartoum, the capital of present-day northern Sudan (Figure 9.14). But the origins of the Kingdom of Kush date back almost two thousand years before that impressive period.



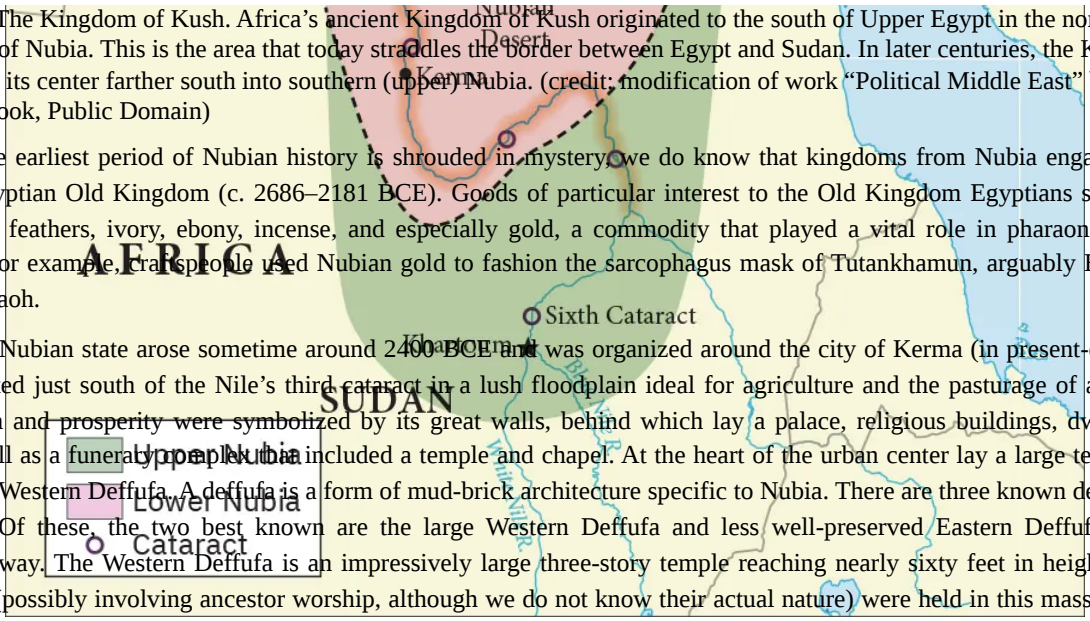


Figure 9.14 The Kingdom of Kush. Africa's ancient Kingdom of Kush originated to the south of Upper Egypt in the northern (lower) part of Nubia. This is the area that today straddles the border between Egypt and Sudan. In later centuries, the Kingdom of Kush moved its center farther south into southern (upper) Nubia. (credit: modification of work "Political Middle East" by CIA/The World Factbook, Public Domain)

Although the earliest period of Nubian history is shrouded in mystery, we do know that kingdoms from Nubia engaged in trade with the Egyptian Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE). Goods of particular interest to the Old Kingdom Egyptians seem to have been ostrich feathers, ivory, ebony, incense, and especially gold, a commodity that played a vital role in pharaonic ritual and ceremony. For example, Kerma people used Nubian gold to fashion the sarcophagus mask of Tutankhamun, arguably Egypt's most famous pharaoh.

The earliest Nubian state arose sometime around 2400 BCE and was organized around the city of Kerma (in present-day northern Sudan) located just south of the Nile's third cataract in a lush floodplain ideal for agriculture and the pasturage of animals. The city's wealth and prosperity were symbolized by its great walls, behind which lay a palace, religious buildings, dwellings, and roads, as well as a funerary complex that included a temple and chapel. At the heart of the urban center lay a large temple known today as the Western Deffufa. A deffufa is a form of mud-brick architecture specific to Nubia. There are three known deffufas in the area today. Of these, the two best known are the large Western Deffufa and less well-preserved Eastern Deffufa some two kilometers away. The Western Deffufa is an impressively large three-story temple reaching nearly sixty feet in height. Religious ceremonies (possibly involving ancestor worship, although we do not know their actual nature) were held in this massive structure (Figure 9.15). At its height, around the eighteenth century BCE, Kerma may have supported a population of about ten thousand people.



Figure 9.15 The Western Deffufa. Kerma's Western Deffufa is one of three such massive temples known to exist. It is fifty-nine feet tall, and its complex extends over fifteen thousand square feet. (credit: "Western Deffufa – Kerma" by Walter Callens/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

It seems to have been the Egyptians who first referred to the Nubian city-state of Kerma as "Kush." Beginning during the rise of Egypt's Middle Kingdom (2040–1782 BCE), the Egyptian state initiated a centuries-long but intermittent expansion southward, a process that entailed the establishment of fortresses to consolidate its control over regional trade. Over time, its trade with Kush grew, and the area became increasingly wealthy. Although the Egyptians' southward advance was periodically stymied, usually by internal political problems occasioned by the death of a pharaoh and the chaos that ensued, their progress seemed inexorable.

When the Middle Kingdom collapsed and the Second Intermediate Period (1782–1570 BCE) began, trade and Egyptian contact with Kush declined. This left the Egyptian fortresses to fend for themselves. For a short time, the fortress communities attempted to become independent entities. But by at least 1650 BCE, the expanding power of the emerging Kingdom of Kush absorbed them. As this happened, the Kingdom of Kush also adopted elements of Egyptian culture, integrating Egyptian artistic styles and technology into their practices. Additionally, the leaders of Kush during this time cooperated with Hyksos-controlled Lower Egypt to keep the native Egyptian center of power located at Thebes weak.

Leaders in Kush had good reason to believe that a strong Egypt threatened their survival. And when the native Egyptian rulers began to grow their power and inaugurated the New Kingdom (1570–1069 BCE), they soon expanded into Kush. By the time Pharaoh Thutmose I came to the throne in about 1506 BCE, the Egyptians had extended their control of the Nile valley as far as the Nile's second cataract. Thutmose was determined to conquer Kerma. His forces sacked and burned the city, desecrating its great temple with the unsettling inscription, "There is not one of them left. The Nubian bowmen have fallen to slaughter, and are laid low throughout their land." Decades later, Thutmose III built a temple to the god Amun at Napata, just below the fourth cataract of the Nile. For the next five hundred years, Egypt controlled Nubia, and the region was further Egyptianized—that is, it was made Egyptian in character. The Kingdom of Kush was crushed as New Kingdom pharaohs asserted their control over Nubia, constructed Egyptian-style architecture, and promoted the use of Egyptian hieroglyphs on temples and Demotic (ancient Egyptian) script by the region's Egyptian administrators.

In Their Own Words

The Nubian Travels of Harkhuf, Egyptian Governor of Aswan

Nubia was rich in resources, and Egyptian pharaohs often sent provincial governors there to trade for gold, ivory, and feathers and recruit soldiers. Following is an excerpt from the travel writings of Harkhuf, an Egyptian noble from Aswan in southern Egypt. Harkhuf held many titles, including governor of the south and ritual priest. A caravan trader by profession, he made multiple journeys into Nubia for the Old Kingdom monarchs, the details of which were inscribed on his tomb.

> *The majesty of Mernere, (my) lord, sent me together with (my) father, the "sole companion" and lector-priest Iri, to(wards) Yam (Upper Nubia) in order to explore the way to this country. I accomplished it within seven months, and I brought all kinds of products therefrom, beautiful and exotic. I was much praised about it.*
>
> *When his majesty sent me a second time, I was alone: I went forth on the "Ivory Road" and I descended from Irthet, Mekher, Tereres, Irtheth in a period of eight months. And I went down, and I brought (back) of the product from this country very much, the like of which had never been brought to this land (i.e. Egypt) before.*
>
> *And when his majesty sent me a third time to Yam, I departed from the Thinite districts on the Oasis Road. I discovered that the chief of Yam had gone by himself to the land of Temeh in order to beat Temeh to the western corner of heaven. When I had gone out in his support to the land of Temeh, I appeased him, so that he was praising all gods for the sovereign . . .*
>
> *I descended with three hundred asses loaded with myrrh, ebony, heknu, grain, leopard skin, ivory tusks . . . (and) all beautiful products. And when the chief of Irthet, Sethu,*

> *and Wawat saw that the troops of the Yamians, who had descended with me for the Residence, and the soldiers, who had been sent with me, were strong and numerous, then this chief supported me and gave me cattle and goats and showed me the ways of the ridges of Irthet, as the vigilance which I carried out was more excellent than that of any associate-overseer of mercenaries sent to Yam before.*
>
> *—Harkfuf's tomb inscription*

- Why were the Egyptian kings interested in Nubia?
- What does the excerpt suggest about the strength of the Nubian army?

With the decline of the New Kingdom and the beginning of Egypt's Third Intermediate Period (1069–525 BCE), local leaders in Nubia were able to reassert their independence. As Egypt withdrew, Nubians built up a new independent Kushite kingdom around the city of Napata, just above the fourth cataract and beyond the Nile floodplain but within the zone of tropical summer rainfall and a region of fertile soil. Despite efforts to assert a specifically Nubian culture, the rulers at Napata were still largely Egyptianized—they built temples to Egyptian gods in Egyptian styles, increased trade with Egypt, and governed their state along Egyptian lines.

By the year 736 BCE, the Kushite kingdom centered on Napata was growing in power and influence, as evidenced by the fact that a Kushite king named Piye managed to install his own sister as high priestess of Amun in Thebes. Such a move was tantamount to an assertion of Kushite authority over Upper Egypt itself and appears to have precipitated a war. During the war, King Piye of Kush marched his army down the river to the Nile delta, effectively conquering all of Egypt. This move inaugurated a period of Nubian rule in Egypt that lasted for several decades. Egyptologists refer to this unique period as the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty or the Ethiopian dynasty.

The Nubian leaders who ruled Egypt during this period were thoroughly Egyptianized in culture and religious traditions. As a result, they ruled as Egyptian leaders, carefully preserving Egyptian cultural practices and traditions as a way to strengthen legitimacy. Like other pharaohs, the Kushite pharaohs wore the traditional double crown, promoted the worship of Egyptian deities, and constructed architectural testaments to their rule in the Egyptian style (Figure 9.16).



Figure 9.16 Pharaoh Chabaka. Like pharaohs before and after, the Kushite pharaohs of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty inscribed their names on temples using traditional Egyptian hieroglyphics. This stone remnant displays the name of the Kushite pharaoh Chabaka. (credit: modification of work “Cartouche au nom du pharaon Chabaka (Ägyptisches Museum Berlin AM 31235)” by “Tangopaso”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Meroitic Period in Nubia

The rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and completion of its conquest of Egypt in 656 BCE brought an end to Nubian rule in Egypt. The Kushite leadership fled Thebes and reconstituted their kingdom at a new capital, Meroe, located well south of the fifth cataract. This effort inaugurated the Meroitic period of the Kingdom of Kush. Sometimes called the Island of Meroe because of the way the Nile and Atbara rivers flowed around it, the new capital had several distinct advantages. One advantage was its distance from Egypt, which helped to protect it from raiding and conquests coming from the north. Another advantage was the plentiful iron ore in the surrounding land. As discussed previously, iron smelting technology had only recently reached Egypt in the early 600s BCE. But after facing the well-trained iron-wielding army of Assyria, the Kushite leadership came to appreciate the utility of this metal both as a part of their economy and as a defensive measure against possible invasion. Over time, the iron workers in Meroe earned a reputation for producing high-quality tools well regarded by kingdoms and empires far beyond its boundaries.

Archaeological work done at Meroe suggests that the site was occupied at least a couple hundred years before the Assyrians arrived in Egypt. There is evidence of possibly royal or at least elite tombs at the site which have been dated to the early ninth century BCE. While the earliest inhabitants may not have recognized the benefits of the rich iron ore deposits, they surely would have appreciated the environmental conditions. Unlike lower reaches of the Nile, which were known for wide floodplains and insufficient rainfall, Meroe is far enough south to receive natural watering from the sub-Saharan tropical rains. This meant that the agriculturalists of Meroe were not entirely reliant on the waters of the Nile. Instead, they could expand their farms of sorghum and millet out across the landscape and depend on the plentiful rainfall.

Given its proximity to the Red Sea, Meroe became an important trading center. Evidence from Persia, Egypt, and Rome indicates that iron, wood, elephants, and ivory flowed from Meroe to the wider world. Meroe was also known for its distinctive jewelry produced by highly skilled artisans and made with a great variety of materials. As the goods flowed out, wealth flowed back in. According to some accounts, the wealth of Meroe was so well known that Persia in the sixth century BCE once attempted to conquer the kingdom and add it to its enormous empire. Whether this story is based in fact is up for debate, though it is undeniable that the Persians were quite familiar with the wealth of Meroe. Records indicate that ivory from Meroe was used to decorate the palace of Darius I at Susa. Additionally, stone reliefs at Persepolis appear to show a Nubian delegation bringing gifts of ivory and exotic animals to the Persian king.

Having had many centuries of cultural contact with Egypt, it is no surprise that Egyptian influences in writing, architecture, and religion persisted despite the great geographic distance. The use of Egyptian hieroglyphs, for example, continued for centuries until it was ultimately replaced by Meroitic, an alpha-syllabic script derived from the Egyptian Demotic script. Similarly, the Meroitic rulers constructed pyramids for their rulers just as they had seen and clearly admired in Egypt. Unlike the much older pyramids in Egypt, however, the Meroitic variants were smaller, with steep sides and blunt tops (Figure 9.17). Finally, traces of Egyptian religious practices endured throughout Meroe's long history, albeit gradually and predictably deviating from the original practices as time went on. For example, the Kushite religious traditions eventually included the worship of the lion-headed god Apademak. This was a war god worshipped exclusively by the people of Kush, though it was often depicted in an artistic style clearly influenced by Egyptian culture.



Figure 9.17 Pyramids at Meroe. The royal necropolis at Meroe contains distinctive burial pyramids for dozens of royal officials including kings, queens, and crown princes. The tallest is ninety-six feet high. Two other cemeteries contain more than a hundred additional pyramids. (credit: "Pyramids N26 and N27" by "Wufei07"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Through trade and conflict, Egypt left a deep mark on Nubian culture, manifesting in architecture, art, architecture, religion, and even language. Yet Nubian culture was not entirely subsumed by Egyptian influences, and the two often coexisted in the same work of art.

Use these links to explore the Nubian art collection and Egyptian collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The majority of people worked in the fields and the grazing pastures. They lived in mud homes within small rural villages overseen by minor chiefs of family clans. The elite, ruling families, and artisans, on the other hand, lived in larger towns. The entire kingdom was ruled by monarchs from the reigning family. However, unlike in Egypt where succession to the throne tended to flow from

father to son, in the Meroitic kingdom, the monarch was carefully selected by a group made up of local chiefs, military officials, and other high officials. While theoretically the ultimate authority in the land, the power of the kings was limited by customs, taboos, and the consent of the nobility and the priestly class. Unpopular monarchs could be and were removed if they fell out of favor with either of these groups. There was also the position of the *kentake*, or queen mother. The *kentake* exercised a degree of official power somewhere above the highest officials and below that of the king. On several occasions, the *kentakes* themselves, given the right circumstances, could assume complete power and even lead armies into battle.

Dueling Voices

Witnessing Kush: Kushite and Greek Perspectives

Eyewitness accounts of ancient civilizations provide invaluable primary source evidence for historians. Such sources are far scarcer than modern ones, and written accounts of ancient sub-Saharan Africa are even rarer. Often, what source material we have comes not from Africans but from outsiders—travelers, invaders, or occupiers (perhaps all three).

The first excerpt that follows is an inscription attributed to Aspalta, king of Kush (c. 600 BCE), and the other is an account by the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 430 BCE). Consider the approaches they adopted to documenting Kush and what the differences suggest about the values of their respective societies.

> *Now then, the trusted commanders from the midst of the army of His Majesty were six men, while the trusted commanders and overseers of fortresses were six men. [. . .] Then they said to the entire army, "Come, let us cause our lord to appear, for we are like a herd which has no herdsman!" Thereupon this army was very greatly concerned, saying, "Our lord is here with us, but we do not know him! Would that we might know him, that we might enter in under him and work for him, ..." Then the army of His Majesty all said with one voice, "Still there is this god Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of It-Tjwy, Resident in Napata. He is also a god of Kush. Come, let us go to him. . . . .*
>
> *So the commanders of His Majesty and the officials of the palace went to the Temple of Amon. . . . They said to [the priests], "Pray, may this god, Amon-Re, Resident in Napata, come, to permit that he give us our lord, to revive us, to build the temples of all the gods and goddesses of Kemet, and to present their divine offerings! We cannot do a thing without this god. It is he who guides us. . . . Then the commanders of His Majesty and the officials of the palace entered into the temple and put themselves upon their bellies before this god. They said, "We have come to you, O Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of It-Tjwy, Resident in Napata, that you might give to us a lord, to revive us, to build the temples of the gods of Kemet and Rekhyt, and to present divine offerings. That beneficent office is in your hands—may you give it to your son whom you love!"*
>
> *—attributed to Aspalta, king of Kush (c. 600 BCE)*

> *I went as far as Elephantine [Aswan] to see what I could with my own eyes, but for the country still further south I had to be content with what I was told in answer to my questions. . . .*
>
> *The Ethiopians . . . are said to be the tallest and handsomest men in the whole world. In their customs they differ greatly from the rest of mankind, and particularly in the*

> *way they choose their kings; for they find out the man who is the tallest of all the citizens, and of strength equal to his height, and appoint him to rule over them. [. . .] The spies were told that most of them lived to be a hundred and twenty years old, while some even went beyond that age—they ate boiled flesh, and had for their drink nothing but milk. Among these Ethiopians copper is of all metals the most scarce and valuable. Also, last of all, they were allowed to behold the coffins of the Ethiopians, which are made (according to report) of crystal, after the following fashion: When the dead body has been dried, either in the Egyptian, or in some other manner, they cover the whole with gypsum, and adorn it with painting until it is as like the living man as possible. Then they place the body in a crystal pillar which has been hollowed out to receive it. . . . The next of kin keep the crystal pillar in their houses for a full year from the time of the death, and give it the first fruits continually, and honor it with sacrifice. After the year is out they bear the pillar forth, and set it up near the town. [. . .]*
>
> *Where the south declines towards the setting sun lies the country called Ethiopia, the last inhabited land in that direction. There gold is obtained in great plenty, huge elephants abound, with wild trees of all sorts, and ebony; . . . . The Ethiopians were clothed in the skins of leopards and lions, and had long bows made of the stem of the palm-leaf, not less than four cubits in length. On these they laid short arrows made of reed, and armed at the tip, not with iron, but with a piece of stone, sharpened to a point, of the kind used in engraving seals. They carried likewise spears, the head of which was the sharpened horn of an antelope; and in addition they had knotted clubs. When they went into battle they painted their bodies, half with chalk, and half with vermilion.*
>
> *—Herodotus, The Histories, Book III*

- What do these accounts tell us about how Nubian civilization had changed from Aspalta's time to that of Herodotus?
- Consider how the authors' viewpoints may have influenced their accounts and why. Is one voice more dependable than the other? Why or why not?

During the second and first centuries BCE, Roman power spread across the Mediterranean and, in the year 30 BCE, assumed control of Egypt. Around this same time, the Kushite kings of Meroe were also expanding their power northward. These two expanding powers inevitably clashed as Rome sought to secure its southern border and prevent further Meroitic expansion. In one reported encounter, the Romans came face-to-face with a possibly battle-scarred *kentake* leading an army. In another encounter at Syene (modern Aswan in southern Egypt), the Kushite forces of Meroe appear to have gotten the better of the Romans. Kushite soldiers pillaged the city and took with them a number of statues and other valuables, including a bronze head of the Roman emperor Augustus.

Not a group to leave such an affront unanswered, the Romans counterattacked and nearly destroyed Napata. When they finally left, they took with them several thousand Kush subjects whom they sold into slavery. Historians debate the nature of the subsequent relationship between Rome and the Meroitic Kingdom of Kush. Evidence suggests that at some point during the Augustan period, Kush was a client state of the Roman Empire. In exchange for its internal autonomy, Kush helped Rome secure its East African frontier by providing soldiers and support for garrisoned legions stationed in the kingdom.

The Kingdom of Kush reached a new high-water mark in its power and artistic achievement a few decades later under King Natakamani, in the early first century CE. During his reign, Kush also attained its maximum geographic extent, stretching from the Ethiopian foothills in the south to the Nile's first cataract in the north. Testifying to its wealth and influence during this period are

the pyramids built under Natakamani as well as the temples that were constructed and restored, including one for the lion-headed god Apademak and the Egyptian god Amun (Figure 9.18).



Figure 9.18 Apademak, God of War. This small fragment of a votive plaque was carved from red siltstone in about 100 BCE and honors the Kushite war god Apedemak, who has a lion's head and carries a scepter with a small seated lion on top. (credit: "Votive Plaque of King Tanyidamani" by Walters Art Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Despite earlier tensions, Meroe and Roman Egypt enjoyed mostly friendly relations for the next two centuries. During this time, however, Meroe's power began to wane, and the kingdom came to an end sometime in the fourth century CE. Scholars are uncertain what caused its decline, although environmental degradation due to the overuse of timber for charcoal manufacture may have been a factor. Trees were being cut down faster than they could replace themselves, which would likely have led to erosion and reduced fertility of the soil, so the land could no longer support a large urban population.

In addition, the weakening of the Roman Empire and its economic contraction in the third century led to a steep decline in demand for the types of luxury goods traded through Kush, especially the ivory, enslaved peoples, perfume, exotic animals, and hardwoods on which its economy depended. Having no partners of similar size and wealth with whom to trade African goods on a large scale, the kings of Kush found that Rome's economic crisis triggered a fiscal crisis for them. Perhaps the final blow was the rise of the kingdom of Aksum. Better placed to take advantage of the Red Sea trade, Aksum starved Kush of regional commerce. Sometime around 350, the Aksumite king Ezana invaded Meroe but found the island capital of the Kingdom of Kush had been abandoned.

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6.5: North Africa's Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the interactions between North Africa, the Levant, and Europe
- Analyze the trade routes from North Africa to the Mediterranean, the Sahara, and the Levant

The Mediterranean coast of North Africa has been a crossroads of civilizations for millennia. Beginning in the first millennium BCE, it was occupied successively by a string of invaders, including the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, and Arabs, and it has been the site of countless internal migrations, as in the case of the Mauri and Massylii peoples. One result of these interactions was a long-term process of cultural commingling, reabsorption, and acculturation that has left a rich tapestry of human societies in its wake.

North Africa and Egypt

The Phoenicians were responsible for the earliest known trade network that unified the Mediterranean world. A Semitic-speaking and seafaring people originally from the Levant, or eastern Mediterranean coast, the Phoenicians emerged initially from the areas around Tyre in what is present-day Lebanon (or Canaan in the Bible, which refers to the Phoenicians as the Canaanites). Around the end of the tenth century BCE, the Phoenicians began to found a series of trading posts and colonies along the Mediterranean coast, a loop of interconnected settlements that eventually stretched from Byblos in the east to Nimes and Gadir (Cadiz) in the west and Libdah (Leptis Magna) in the south (Figure 9.19). In 814 BCE, they established what would become their greatest settlement, Carthage. Located on the North African coast in modern-day Tunisia, Carthage was in an ideal position to dominate the trade activities of the western Mediterranean.



Figure 9.19 Phoenician Settlements and Trade Routes. Beginning in the tenth century BCE, the Phoenicians established colonies and trading outposts along the Mediterranean coasts of North Africa and southern Europe. Areas that experienced either Phoenician contact or settlement are those identified with the green dotted line. Carthage, the most impressive Phoenician settlement, juts out

into the western Mediterranean from the North African coast, making it an ideal place to manage and control trade in the sea. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The government of Carthage was originally a monarchy, but by the turn of the fourth century BCE, it had given way to a republic. The Carthaginian republic was singled out for praise by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who considered it the perfect balance between monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. By this time, Carthage had been the dominant military power of the western Mediterranean for almost a century. By 300 BCE, the city controlled dozens of the trading towns that dotted the North African coast. Thus, by the start of the third century BCE, Carthaginian power and influence could be felt along a thousand-mile stretch of the Mediterranean.

At the time of Carthage's founding, the population of the Maghreb—the western half of North Africa, including most of present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—spoke indigenous languages and had adapted their lives to the landscape. Those who lived on the coastal plains were mostly settled farmers, while those who lived in the Atlas Mountain range were seminomadic pastoralists, and nomadic peoples lived in the Sahara. To the Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans, these North African natives were collectively known as Berbers[1], a pejorative term equating to "barbarian." This simplification belies the political, social, and cultural complexities of what was actually a wide range of different African ethnic groups and societies, including the Mauri, Massylii, Musulamii, Masaesylii, Garamantes, and Gaetuli. These groups had built impressive societies of their own. For example, the Garamantes developed a major urban society in the Libyan Fezzan, and the Masaesyli established the kingdom of Numidia. Over centuries of interaction, cooperation, and tension, a rich tapestry of customs, values, and traditions developed among these groups—who typically refer to themselves as Amazigh, or Imazighen, rather than Berber—to produce societies and cultural practices well suited to the Maghreb region of North Africa.

A city like Carthage, with its republican form of government and leaders who exercised political authority, levied taxes, enforced laws, and employed armed forces for defense, was foreign to the indigenous systems of the area. Early in its history, Carthage adopted a pragmatic relationship with its neighbors; it paid tribute to them to forestall attacks and facilitate good relations. But that changed after 480 BCE, when Carthage stopped paying tribute and moved to subjugate the region's peoples. In time, not only were the coastal towns dominated by Punic-speaking elite of Carthaginian origin, but the peoples of the inland towns began to adapt and adopt Carthaginian culture. Not only did they speak Punic, the language of the Phoenicians, but on occasion they also spoke Greek, particularly if they held positions of power or engaged in trade with Carthage. Moreover, the urban elite in these towns began to emulate Carthage, and eventually they founded their own states inland, such as Mauretania, which was established by the Mauri and Massylii peoples of the Atlas Mountains.

Carthaginian control over North Africa did not go unchallenged. The most significant threat to its dominance emerged with the rise of the Roman Republic in the third century BCE. To that point, the Romans had been preoccupied with consolidating their control over the Italian peninsula south of the River Rubicon, a process finally brought to an end with the defeat of Magna Graecia (as southern Italy was then called) in the Pyrrhic War in 275 BCE. Rome's encounter with Carthage led to three long and exhaustive conflicts known as the Punic Wars. The first began in 264 BCE, and the third wrapped up in 146 BCE.

The most famous of these is the Second Punic or Hannibalic War, during which the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca (Figure 9.20) invaded Italy with tens of thousands of soldiers and dozens of war elephants. For over a decade, Hannibal terrorized the Romans, destroying their armies at Trebia (218 BCE), Lake Trasimene (217 BCE), and, in one of the most lethal battle days in history, the village of Cannae in 216 BCE. The Carthaginians were unable to inflict a decisive defeat on the Romans, however, and the deadlock remained unbroken until the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio took the war to Carthage, forcing Hannibal to return from Italy to North Africa to defend it.



Figure 9.20 Hannibal. This marble bust, believed to be of the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca, was found in Capua, Italy, and may have been made in Hannibal's lifetime. (credit: "Image from page 299 of 'Republican Rome; her conquests, manners and institutions from the earliest times to the death of Caesar' (1914)" by Havell/Internet Archive Book Images/Flickr, Public Domain)

Carthage was finally defeated at the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE, a victory that earned Scipio the honorary name *Africanus* (Figure 9.21). Five decades later, urged on by the conservative senator Marcus Portius Cato (known to history as Cato the Censor), Rome returned to finish the job. The Third Punic War (149–146 BCE) ended with the destruction of Carthage. Tunis, some twenty miles inland, became the capital of Rome's new African province.



Figure 9.21 Hannibal's War (218–203 BCE). This map shows the route taken by Hannibal's invading forces in the Second Punic War. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The absorption of North Africa into the Roman Empire greatly affected the Indigenous African peoples of the region. Carthage had needed very little from the peoples who lived beyond its hinterland. What food the population required was supplied by Carthaginian estates located on the outskirts of the city. Rome, on the other hand, needed a great deal from the Maghrebi interior, including grain and olive oil to feed the capital's growing urban population. Decades of Roman development of the inland territory resulted in farms that, by the first decades of the Common Era, were generating hundreds of thousands of gallons of olive oil and millions of tons of wheat per year—all destined to feed the residents of Rome. This bounty earned North Africa the nickname "the breadbasket of Rome."

The intensification of agricultural production in the Maghreb led to the institution of individual land ownership and huge seasonal migrations of nomads and their animals to the coastal plains for work. To help control the flow of people during these periods and to protect crops from migrating cattle, the Romans established *limes* (lee-meis), or lines of fortified frontier posts that marked out the territorial limits of Roman occupation. Agricultural production also led to new growth for the old Phoenician coastal cities, which became commercial centers for shipping produce and livestock to Rome.

Eastern North Africa was also the site of great change in antiquity. In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great, king of Macedon in Greece, conquered Egypt, and before leaving to continue his advance into western Asia, he founded the great city of Alexandria on the Nile River. Following Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his generals warred with each other over control of the empire and eventually divided the vast territory among themselves. One officer, Ptolemy, took Egypt and founded a dynasty that ruled it for the next three centuries. Of necessity, the Ptolemies styled themselves as pharaohs to demonstrate continuity from pharaonic times through Alexander to themselves (Figure 9.22). They adapted the Egyptian style partially because they were awed by the history and grandeur of Egypt and also because the Ptolemies wanted the people to see them as legitimate rulers of Egypt, not foreigners. Like all the Hellenistic (or Greek-like) monarchs of the three-hundred-year period following the death of Alexander, they encouraged Greeks from around the Mediterranean to settle in one of the three Greek city-states established by the Macedonian conquerors, including Alexandria. The Ptolemies also enticed Jewish people from Palestine to settle in northern Egypt, making Alexandria one of the most cosmopolitan cities in all antiquity.



Figure 9.22 Ptolemy III. As the Macedonian Greek rulers of Egypt, the Ptolemies styled themselves as pharaohs. This basalt statue from about 220 BCE is believed to be of Ptolemy III and shows him wearing Egyptian clothes and a pharaonic headdress. (credit: "Ptolemy III Euergetes" by "Szilas" in the Neues Museum, Berlin/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The focal point of Greek culture in Egypt was the *Museon* or Museum of Alexandria. This "Home of the Muses" was much more than a place to see artifacts from the past; it was also the world's largest library, housing some 700,000 scrolls representing all the knowledge of the known world. It had laboratories for the study of human anatomy and astronomy and was the home of dozens of intellectuals, who studied everything from geography and physics to literature and geometry. In many ways, it displaced the Academy at Athens as the ancient world's center of learning. It was at the *Museon*, for example, that the canonical versions of Homer's *Iliad* were identified, and that Eratosthenes developed his geographic understanding of the earth and estimated its circumference as between 24,500 and 29,000 miles (today we know it is 24,900 miles).

Day-to-day governance of Ptolemaic Egypt was in the hands of Egyptian officials and of Greek officials who brought Egyptian translators. To convincingly style themselves as pharaohs, the Ptolemies turned to religion. One of Ptolemy's first acts as ruler of Egypt was to seize the body of Alexander the Great as it was being transported from Babylon home to Macedonia. Ptolemy had an elaborate tomb built for Alexander and made it a focal point of the capital at Alexandria. He then declared Alexander a god, a move fully in keeping with the status bestowed upon him in life by Egypt's priests of Amun at Siwah in 332 BCE. In addition, Ptolemy had a temple dedicated to the new god Serapis built in the capital city. Serapis was an extraordinary deity demonstrating how astute Egypt's Greek rulers were. A fusion of the Egyptian deities Osiris and Apis and the Greek deities Zeus and Helios, Serapis allowed the very different subjects of Ptolemaic Egypt to find common ground in worship. To further cement their position as Egypt's legitimate rulers, the Ptolemies carried out the religious duties of the pharaoh, including dedicating new temples to Egyptian gods, visiting shrines throughout the country, and declaring themselves the inheritors of Alexander's godlike mantle.

The last of the Ptolemies was Cleopatra VII (Figure 9.23). A brilliant politician with a strong character, Cleopatra spoke upward of a dozen languages and was the only Greek ruler of Egypt fluent in Egyptian. Politically ambitious, she was determined to preserve

what autonomy she could in the face of Rome's growing dominance of the Mediterranean. To this end, she had an affair with the Roman general and dictator Julius Caesar and bore him a child named Caesarion. When Caesar fell afoul of the Roman Senate (whose members suspected him of wanting to be king) and was assassinated in 44 BCE, Cleopatra shifted her affection to the inheritor of Caesar's armies, Marc Antony. This strategy was ill-fated, however, because Marc Antony was increasingly embroiled in a conflict with Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, which soon erupted in an all-out civil war between the two.

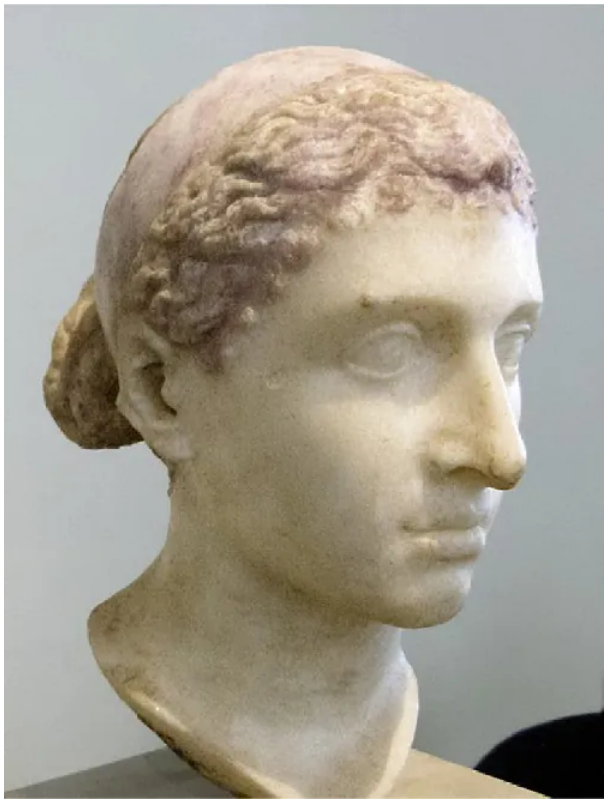


Figure 9.23 Cleopatra. This marble bust of Cleopatra (69–30 BCE), the last of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt, was made during her lifetime. (credit: "Marble bust of Cleopatra VII of Egypt" by Altes Museum Berlin/Louis le Grand/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The climax of the war came at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, during which the naval forces of Octavian and Marcus Agrippa met to defeat those of Marc Antony and Cleopatra. Octavian pursued the vanquished pair, and soon after he invaded Egypt in 30 BCE, Marc Antony and Cleopatra died by suicide. Cleopatra's death ushered in the start of Roman rule in Egypt as it marked the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

The Past Meets the Present

Ancient Perspectives on Cleopatra

Can we ever know history with certainty? Only the smallest fraction of anything ever written in antiquity survives today, and much of that was set down long after the events and people it describes, possibly by writers hostile to their subject matter. Figures such as Cleopatra have been the source of endless ancient propaganda and character assassinations. Read the following excerpts by ancient writers describing Cleopatra, and consider the information they provide.

> *Why Cleopatra, who heaped insults on our army, a woman worn out by her own attendants, who demanded the walls of Rome and the Senate bound to her rule, as a reward from her obscene husband? . . . Truly that whore, queen of incestuous Canopus, a fiery brand burned by the blood of Philip, dared to oppose our Jupiter with yapping Anubis, and forced Tiber to suffer the threats of Nile, banished the Roman trumpet with the rattle of the sistrum, chased the Liburnian prow with a poled*

> *barge, spread her foul mosquito nets over the Tarpeian Rock, and gave judgements among Marius' weapons and statues.*
>
> *—Propertius, Poems III*

> *It would have been wrong, before today, to broach the Caecuban wines from out the ancient bins, while a maddened queen was still plotting the Capitol's and the empire's ruin, with her crowd of deeply-corrupted creatures sick with turpitude, she, violent with hope of all kinds, and intoxicated by Fortune's favor. But it calmed her frenzy that scarcely a single ship escaped the flames, and Caesar reduced the distracted thoughts, bred by Mareotic wine, to true fear, pursuing her close as she fled from Rome, out to capture that deadly monster, bind her, as the sparrow-hawk follows the gentle dove or the swift hunter chases the hare, over the snowy plains of Thessaly.*
>
> *—Horace, Cleopatra*

> *For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and a knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her rôle to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic and at the same time pity-inspiring guise. When she had perfected her schemes she entered the city (for she had been living outside of it), and by night without Ptolemy's knowledge went into the palace.*
>
> *—Cassius Dio, Roman History XLII*

> *For her beauty, as we are told, was in itself not altogether incomparable, nor such as to strike those who saw her; but converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character which was somehow diffused about her behaviour towards others, had something stimulating about it. There was sweetness also in the tones of her voice; and her tongue, like an instrument of many strings, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased.*
>
> *—Plutarch, Life of Antony XXVII*

- Who was Cleopatra? What was her character like? What might have motivated these widely varying descriptions of her?
- How might have these ancient accounts gotten Cleopatra wrong? How much do you think we are likely to "know" about ancient people?

Link to Learning

The tradition of interpreting and depicting Cleopatra is presented in this article.

Rome's conquest of Egypt added yet another layer of complexity to Egyptian society. While Latin-speaking governors and administrators continued to run the affairs of state from Alexandria, they did so in Greek, which remained the language of

government. Rome invested heavily in the development of Egypt's largest cities and creating inviting cosmopolitan spaces eventually inhabited by Greeks, Jewish people, Romans, and assimilated Egyptians. Still, under the Romans, the majority of Egyptian subjects lived in rural areas. In more than two thousand villages scattered throughout the Nile delta and along the Nile valley, people labored to produce the tons of grain that supplied the imperial capital with bread. These people were also hardest hit by Roman taxation, a circumstance that inspired periodic revolts against the empire.

Roman imperial administration over North Africa remained constant until the fourth and fifth centuries CE, when the weakened Western Roman Empire confronted a new series of challenges, including widespread barbarian invasions. One invading group was the Vandals. A Germanic people originating in present-day Poland, the Vandals migrated westward in the second century CE and settled in the region of Silesia. By the third century, they had been contained in the Roman province of Pannonia (a sizable territory that included parts of modern-day Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia), but they pushed west in the face of the advance of the Huns, nomadic steppe people from central Asia.

By the fifth century, Vandals had migrated to Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula. Around 430, under their leader Genseric, they were invited by Bonifacius, Rome's governor in North Africa, to help him establish himself as a ruler independent of Rome. For the next several years, the Vandals fought Rome's imperial forces on behalf of Bonifacius, who died at the Battle of Remini in Italy in 432. Rome finally agreed to a peace treaty that granted the Vandals control of Mauretania and the western half of Numidia. Unsatisfied, Genseric then pursued a plan to extend his control over Roman North Africa by breaking the treaty and invading Carthage, which he seized in 439.

The Vandals remained in control of the Maghreb region of Roman North Africa until the early sixth century, when Byzantine forces under the general Belisarius reconquered the territory and forced the Vandal king Gelimer to surrender in 534. Less than a century later, a new power from the east threatened the Byzantine position in North Africa. Beginning in the 640s, the armies of Islam advanced, conquering Byzantine Egypt in 642. Using Egypt as a forward position, they then launched successive invasions across the region until the final Byzantine strongholds of North Africa including Carthage fell. By 709, the whole of North Africa had been conquered.

North African and Trans-Saharan Trade

Trans-Saharan trade—the movement of goods between oases and larger settlements in North and West Africa—has existed in one form or another since at least the ninth century BCE. Over time, this system grew from the relatively localized trade in agricultural products and iron goods centered on the Phoenician city of Carthage. It became a continent-wide system of exchange that moved commodities such as copper, salt, ivory, enslaved people, textiles, and gold between what is now Senegal in West Africa and Egypt in the east, reaching as far south as Niger and as far east as Somalia in the Horn of Africa (Figure 9.24). At its height, the trans-Saharan exchange of goods influenced commerce and finance across the whole of North Africa, as well as the economies of Europe and the Near East. This system of trade was made possible by the nomadic peoples of North and West Africa.

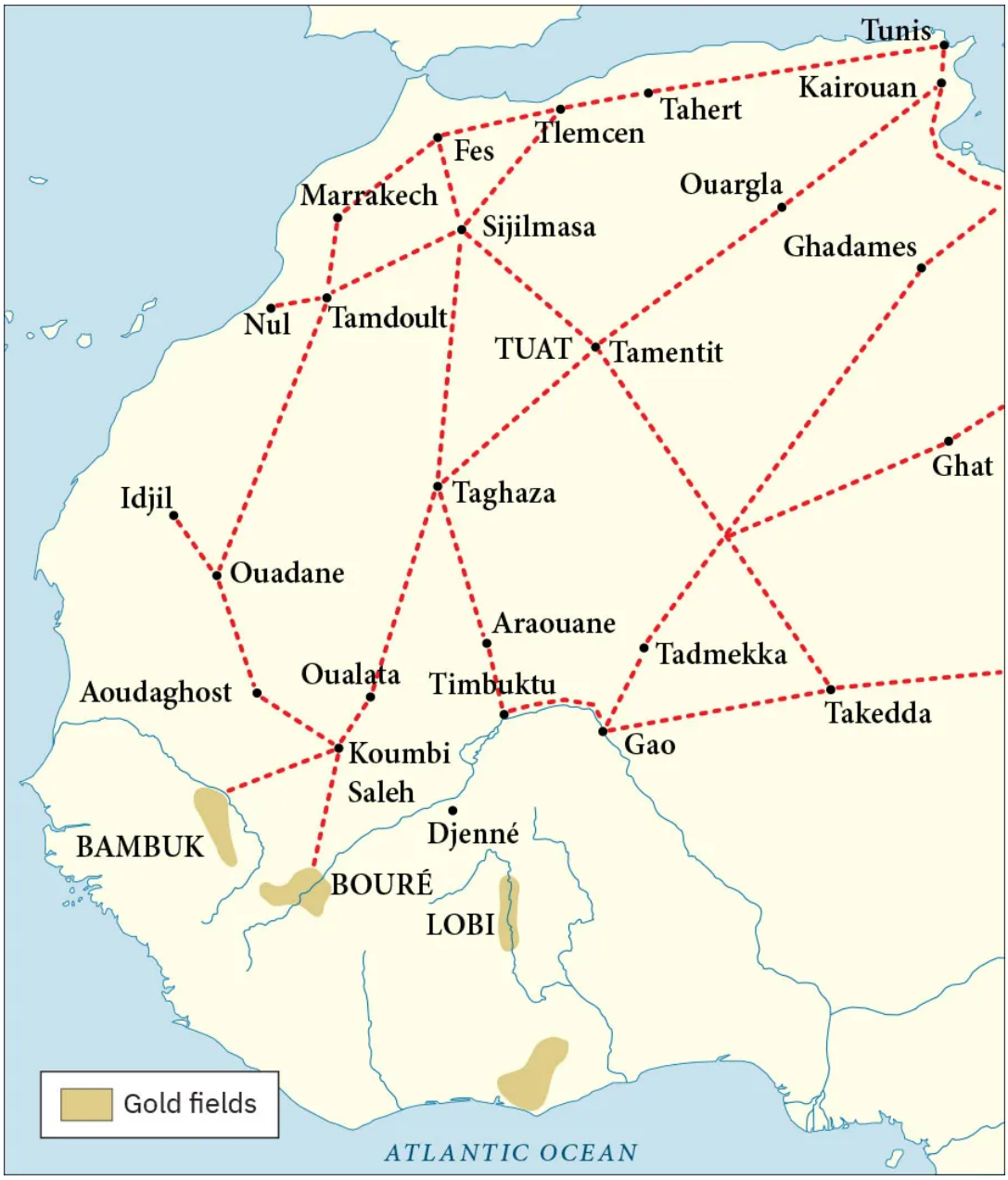


Figure 9.24 Trans-Saharan Trade. This map shows the historical trans-Saharan trade routes that crisscrossed ancient North Africa, linking cities on both sides of the Sahara in a network that grew and expanded over several hundred years. (credit: modification of work “Trade routes of the Western Sahara c. 1000-1500” by “Aa77zz”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

In the ninth century BCE, African farmers supplied the Phoenician towns of North Africa with food. In exchange, the Phoenicians introduced these peoples to innovative technologies such as ironworking. Over centuries of interaction, the two groups intermarried and became an integral part of North African society. From around the seventh century BCE, Phoenician merchants relied on the herders of the Atlas Mountains (in present-day Morocco) and the stretch of the northern Sahara to the south.

Indigenous peoples of North Africa had long maintained contact across the Sahara, but it could be tenuous due to the inherent risks of desert travel, including attacks on trading caravans and slave raids by the Garamantes desert people of Libya. Helping facilitate contact in the desert extremes were small settlements of seminomadic peoples at a fragile line of oases forging a point-to-point trading system. Thus, early trade in the Sahara was a matter not of transporting goods across the vast desert expanse but rather of passing them from oasis to oasis. A principal commodity exchanged during this early stage of trade was salt, which was carried to the south and acted as a sort of currency. Salt was highly prized in the agricultural communities south of the Sahara where the mineral is scarce. This is because humans require salt to maintain healthy bodily functions and must regularly consume salt to

replace its loss through sweat and urination. The Saharan traders knew where the salt was located, accessed it for themselves, and traded in the substance for goods they could otherwise obtain. Only gradually were highly valuable trading goods introduced, such as gold and copper, which were then brought across the desert from tropical West Africa to the far reaches of the North African coast.

During the period of Carthaginian dominance in Tunisia, goods were carried by pack animals such as mules, horses, and donkeys between the Phoenician imperial capital and the independent African kingdoms in the mountainous and coastal regions to its west. These kingdoms, known to the Romans as Mauretania and Numidia, had extended their control of much of North Africa by the second century BCE as Carthage declined and Rome ascended. For a time, the Romans and the North African kingdoms enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous alliance, but gradual Roman interference in the domestic political affairs of the Numidian state caused their relations to sour, and eventually Rome conquered both Numidia and Mauretania.

In typical fashion, the Romans established large estates as well as towns in the newly conquered territories. Their administration outside these enclaves reached only so far, however. Beyond them, the region remained under the dominance of the people native to the area, in both language and culture. But it was in the strategic interests of Rome to secure the southernmost frontiers of these new provinces. Doing so effectively required not only establishing a border but also patrolling it. This was impossible with horses, so the Romans used the dromedary camel (one-hump camel) (Figure 9.25). Biologically equipped to survive desert extremes, the camel was the ideal means to help secure Rome's new southernmost frontier.



Figure 9.25 The Dromedary Camel. The widespread use of dromedary camels by the Romans in North Africa helped to popularize the animal's use in trans-Saharan trade. (credit: "Animals of Iran - Kavir National Park - Qom Province - Deir-e Gachin Caravansarai 20" by Mostafameraji/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The introduction of the dromedary camel originally from Arabia into North Africa revolutionized the trans-Saharan trade, but its adoption across the region was slow. The first camels in North Africa may have reached Egypt by as early as the ninth century BCE, but it was not until the third and fourth centuries CE that its use spread to the African nomad groups of the northern Sahara, likely helped along by Roman use of the animal. By the fifth century, it had become a major form of transportation in the region. The camel had many advantages over other pack animals. It could maintain a steady pace over much longer distances than oxen,

and it could carry upward of three hundred pounds of goods an average of fifteen to eighteen miles a day. Further, the camel's capacity to store fat and water enabled it to travel up to ten days without stopping for fresh water, more than twice the time and distance of almost every other pack animal. Added to this was the camel's unique splayed foot, which allowed it to walk easily in the soft, sandy conditions of the Saharan environment.

The camel enabled desert nomads to reach more distant oases than ever before and so open entirely new routes across the desert. Although desert travel remained precarious and filled with risk, it certainly became more reliable. For the first time, it was possible for desert travelers to consider dispatching large-scale and regular long-distance trading caravans across the Sahara. Despite this, desert transport remained largely in the hands of the nomadic peoples of the region, principally the Sanhaja in the west and the Tuareg of the central and southern Sahara. Although trans-Saharan trade was growing at this time, it was not yet full-time work, so these groups remained largely nomadic pastoralists, harvesting date palms and grazing their flocks and herds at oases.

In many cases, they tended goats and sheep, but they often also had camel and cattle and occasionally horses. These animals all had to graze, and when they were unable to do so at oases because of either distance or weather, the nomads were forced to find other grazing land. This was particularly the case during the hottest and driest seasons, when the nomads migrated their flocks and herds to the better grazing areas of the Maghreb in the north or the Sahel in the south. Inevitably, this brought them into contact with the more settled agricultural peoples of these areas, and often into conflict as they competed for precious resources in a hostile environment. Beyond these settlements, the nomadic pastoralists dominated the Sahara. Yet there were other peoples in the desert, including small groups such as the Haratin who also called the oases home. They harvested dates and dug salt to exchange for food but were often kept in a subordinate position by the nomads, who controlled the oases.

As the camel transformed desert transport, the products of sub-Saharan Africa became more readily available to the Mediterranean world. Trade in West African gold expanded, demand increased for such goods as ivory and ostrich feathers, and large animals were hunted to extinction in North Africa. As cross-desert traffic grew, several new settlements developed to aid the movement of goods north and south of the Sahara, including Sijilmasa, Ghat, Gao, Awdaghust, and Kano. At sites such as these, goods were exchanged, and camel caravans were unloaded and replenished to continue their journey across the desert. While the desert traffic in goods remained in the hands of nomads, the actual demand for and exchange of goods was largely the work of peoples of settled societies to the north and south of the Sahara.

Footnotes

- 1There is a growing awareness about the use of the term *Berber* to describe indigenous North Africans, many of whom self-identify as Amazigh, or Imazighen (plural). With this understanding, although we have introduced the term *Berber* as the most commonly used name in English, we have generally preferred to use the term *Amazigh* in this text.

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6.6: Key Terms

Bantu migrations
the millennia-long expansion of Bantu-speaking peoples southward from West and Central Africa, spreading a common cultural foundation that included language, farming, and ironworking

Berbers
the name used by Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans to describe the native peoples of the Maghreb; today, this population generally self-identifies as Amazigh, or Imazighen

biome
a community of vegetation and wildlife adapted to a particular climate

cataract
a place in a river where the otherwise placid flow is upset by a waterfall, a shallow portion, or the presence of boulders

deffufa
a type of monumental mud-brick structure unique to Nubian civilization and believed to have served a religious function

kentake
a Kushite title that roughly translates to “queen mother” and was a powerful position in Meroitic Kush

Maghreb
the western half of North Africa, including most of present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya

Nubia
the name Egyptians gave to the expansive area south of the first cataract and extending into sub-Saharan Africa; it included the Kingdom of Kush

Sahel
an east–west belt of semiarid grassland that forms a transitional zone between the Sahara to the north and the equatorial rainforest to the south

savanna
a grassy plain with scattered trees found to the north and south of the tropical African rainforest

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6.7: Section Summary

9.1 Africa's Geography and Climate

Geography played a critical role in the development of early human civilization in Africa. Climate conditions such as temperatures and rainfall dictated agricultural growing seasons, and soil fertility governed what crops—if any—could be grown in a particular area, as well as the availability of fodder for grazing animals. In particular, the availability of water dictated the likelihood of fixed settlement. A wide range of peoples populated Africa's diverse geography, from the desert-dwelling San to the Baka people of the rainforest. All developed lifestyles and cultures that were not only suited to their geography but were also greatly influenced by it.

9.2 The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations

The earliest evidence of plant domestication in Africa has been uncovered in three different areas: Egypt, the eastern Sahara, and West Africa. In Egypt, agricultural technologies were introduced from southwest Asia, where the Neolithic Revolution first occurred. From there, wheat and barley agriculture spread across North Africa over thousands of years. In the other two locations, plant domestication appears to have emerged independently. In these locations, early Neolithic societies grew crops of sorghum, yams, watermelons, and African rice. In Central and West Africa, the farming of these crops was aided greatly by iron technology.

Once believe to have been introduced to Africa through Egypt, scholars now generally agree that iron smelting was developed independently in Central Africa. Iron tools allowed sub-Saharan African farmers to more efficiently clear forested areas to establish farms. By at least 500 BCE, Bantu-speaking peoples migrating across Africa were using iron tools to aid them in their gradual expansion.

The Bantu speakers likely originated in West and Central Africa and began spreading east and south as early as 3000 BCE. Their migrations were gradual, protracted, and took a few different routes. As they spread, they established farms, introduced others to agricultural practices, and dramatically transformed the linguistic makeup of much of subequatorial Africa.

9.3 The Kingdom of Kush

Long the center of prehistoric African civilization, the region of Nubia, between Aswan in southern Egypt and the confluence of the Blue and White Nile Rivers in northern Sudan, flourished thanks to its links with Nile-based trade and its well-watered hinterland. Beginning with the city-state of Kerma in the early second millennium BCE, the Nubian people of Kush steadily absorbed Egyptian culture, including its language, religious practices, and architecture. During periods of Egyptian weakness, such as during the Second Intermediate Period, the Kingdom of Kush was able to achieve political independence. Similarly, during periods of great Egyptian regional strength, Kush was again subjugated by Egypt. Incredibly, in the eighth century BCE, the Kushite king Piye turned the tables on Egypt and placed himself on the Egyptian throne.

Once Egypt was conquered by Assyria in seventh century BCE, the Kingdom of Kush retreated to Meroe far to the south of Egypt. There they built up a kingdom known for its iron production and trade goods. For many centuries, the kingdom blended its many Egyptian cultural practices with Nubian traditions to develop its own distinctive styles and even writing system. After confronting Rome in Egypt in the first century BCE, it settled into a centuries-long trading relationship with the imperial Roman province of Egypt until it finally declined and died out sometime in the fourth century CE.

9.4 North Africa's Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections

From the earliest Phoenician forays across the sea in the first millennium BCE, North Africa played an increasingly prominent role in the trade-based economies of the Mediterranean and the polities that surrounded it. It was the source of rare and valuable commodities such as salt, gold, and ivory, transported from the African interior across the Sahara by Indigenous nomadic peoples and long sought after by Egyptians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, and Arabs, each in their turn. Many parts of the Mediterranean coastline of North Africa were also renowned for their fertility, particularly the Maghrebi region immediately surrounding Carthage and the Egyptian Nile delta, whose bountiful lands constituted the "breadbasket" of Rome.

Egypt's stability was thus critically important. When Cleopatra of Egypt began influencing Roman officials, including Julius Caesar and Marc Antony, to the benefit of her kingdom, Rome responded with force, and Egypt came under Roman rule. Three hundred years later, the Romans' introduction of the camel to North Africa enlarged the practical scope of truly trans-Saharan trade from the far south of the great desert to the Mediterranean coast.

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6.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What is the Serengeti?

a. a desert in southern Africa
b. a climate pattern in the Horn of Africa
c. a grassy plain in Africa that witnesses some of the world's largest annual animal migrations
d. a semiarid transition zone between the Sahel and the Mediterranean coast

2.
What is a key characteristic of Africa's Mediterranean climate?

a. It is very similar to the climate of the Sahel.
b. It is arid and known for its sandy soils.
c. It is tropical.
d. It is sunny and well suited for farming.

3.
What characteristic best describes the traditional religious beliefs of the Baka people?

a. animistic
b. monotheistic
c. pre-Islamic
d. ritualistic

4.
For the San people of southern Africa, religion _____.

a. included elements of animism
b. was polytheistic and intimately bound up in the hunt for prey
c. was based on early Christian models
d. centered on ritualized foraging for plant buds and seasonal nuts

5.
What African region independently developed agriculture based on yams?

a. West Africa
b. the eastern Sahara
c. North Africa
d. South Africa

6.
In what part of Africa did sophisticated ironworking technology develop independently?

a. South Africa
b. the eastern Sahara
c. Central Africa
d. North Africa

7.
How was ironworking technology likely disseminated throughout sub-Saharan Africa?

a. It was introduced by Egyptian traders.
b. It was introduced by Nilo-Saharan farmers.
c. It was introduced by Near Eastern conquerors.
d. It was introduced by migrating Bantus.

8.
What was the likely original location of the proto-Bantu speakers?

a. the area west of Egypt

b. the area between Nigeria and Cameroon
c. the Ethiopian highlands
d. the central Sahara region

9.
What areas remained largely untouched by Bantu migrants until recent times?

a. the western Kalahari Desert
b. the Lake Victoria region
c. Western Tanzania
d. Eastern Botswana

10.
What city was the site of the earliest iteration of the Kingdom of Kush?

a. Thebes
b. Meroe
c. Kerma
d. Napata

11.
During what period did the Kingdom of Kush cooperate with the Hyksos rulers of the Nile delta to keep the Egyptian rulers at Thebes weak?

a. the Old Kingdom
b. the First Intermediate Period
c. the New Kingdom
d. the Second Intermediate Period

12.
What two items of trade helped the Kingdom of Kush become wealthy and powerful in its early centuries?

a. iron and gold
b. diamonds and copper
c. fish and dates
d. wheat and rice

13.
What is the Kushite king Piye most famous for?

a. defeating the Romans
b. giving tribute to Persia
c. conquering Egypt
d. trading with Greece

14.
The Kingdom of Kush was most heavily influenced by its long connection with which culture?

a. Persian
b. Egyptian
c. Greek
d. Nok

15.
During the Meroitic period, what high-quality item did the Kingdom of Kush gain a reputation for producing?

a. bronze
b. iron
c. pottery
d. cloth

16.
Where was the Phoenician city of Carthage located?

a. the Sahel
b. Egypt
c. the plains of the Atlas Mountains
d. the coast of present-day Tunisia

17.
How did the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt seek to legitimate their rule?

a. by enslaving all Egyptians
b. by adopting Egyptian religious practice and styling themselves as pharaohs
c. by employing Egyptians in high-level administrative positions
d. by learning to speak Egyptian

18.
What animal transformed trade across the Sahara?

a. horse
b. cattle
c. camel
d. sheep

19.
Why did early trans-Saharan traders move salt across the desert into sub-Saharan Africa?

a. Salt was used to mine gold.
b. Salt was heavily taxed by the Romans.
c. Salt was necessary and scarce in the region.
d. Salt was prized for its religious properties.

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6.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What do you think was the most important climatic feature in the evolution of African societies?
2.
What are the traditional gender roles followed by Baka society?
3.
What distinguished hunter-gatherer societies in Africa from settled societies?
4.
How did the Neolithic Revolution affect African societies?
5.
Why did earlier scholars believe that ironworking technologies were disseminated to sub-Saharan Africa, and what evidence leads most scholars today to accept that these societies independently developed ironworking?
6.
In what ways did the Bantu migrations affect African civilization?
7.
How did the decline of Egypt after the Middle Kingdom affect the Kingdom of Kush?
8.
What role did trade play in the relationship between Egypt and the Kingdom of Kush?
9.
What were some of the advantages for Kush of relocating to Meroe?
10.
What effect did the rising power of Rome in North Africa have on Maghreb?
11.
Why did the Ptolemies, who were Macedonian Greeks, style themselves as Egyptian pharaohs?
12.
What made early trans-Saharan trade possible?

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6.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
The geography and climate of Africa have greatly influenced the different societies that have emerged across the continent. This is because the climate and geography generally determine the available resources of an area. But is this always true? Can you think of an example in which an African society defied those geographic and climactic limitations?
2.
Given what you now know about the variety of climates and geographies of Africa, has your perception of the continent changed? If so, how?
3.
What were some of the ways environmental conditions in different parts of Africa influenced the emergence of agriculture? How does this account for the differences in crops and ways agricultural practices were disseminated or developed independently?
4.
Why do you think scholars were reluctant for many years to accept that sub-Saharan societies independently developed ironworking technology? What does this suggest about how people have traditionally evaluated African historical developments?
5.
In what ways did geography and climate affect the Bantu migration?
6.
How do you think scholars use linguistic evidence to trace the movement of Bantu speakers over thousands of years?
7.
Why did the Nubian pharaohs of Egypt during the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty embrace Egyptian culture, rather than attempt to impose Nubian culture on Egypt?
8.
Why do you suppose that the *kentake* (or queen mother) position was such an important role in Meroitic Kush?
9.
In what ways might North Africa have influenced the cultures of Europe and the Near and Middle East?
10.
Given the great risks involved in crossing the Sahara, why do you think some groups would have engaged in such endeavors?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: The Americas in Ancient Times

7.1: Introduction
7.2: Populating and Settling the Americas
7.3: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas
7.4: The Age of Empires in the Americas
7.5: Key Terms
7.6: Section Summary
7.7: Review Questions
7.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
7.9: Application and Reflection Questions

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7.1: Introduction



Figure 8.1 Machu Picchu. Nestled between two peaks high in the Andes Mountains, the Inca fortress of Machu Picchu was built in the fifteenth century CE and once looked out over an expansive empire. (credit: modification of work “Machu Picchu” by Roger Canals/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Chapter Outline

8.1 Populating and Settling the Americas
8.2 Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas
8.3 The Age of Empires in the Americas

The stunning ruins of Machu Picchu, situated in the Andes Mountains between two sharp peaks almost eight thousand feet above sea level, continue to attract visitors from around the world (Figure 8.1). Once a palace and royal retreat for the conquering Inca ruler Pachacuti Yupanqui, the complex was begun in the mid-fifteenth century CE and remained occupied until shortly after the Spanish arrived in the following century. Under Pachacuti Yupanqui, from their Andean home city of Cuzco, the Inca extended their control and built a large empire in Peru. Later rulers continued this expansion, bringing much of western South America under their rule. While the Inca Empire was impressive and politically, religiously, and technologically sophisticated, it was merely the last of many Andean civilizations and cultures stretching back thousands of years. Indeed, these South American civilizations were part of an even larger number of cultures, empires, and architectural traditions that spanned the entire Western Hemisphere and were built by the descendants of migrants who reached the Americas several thousand years ago.

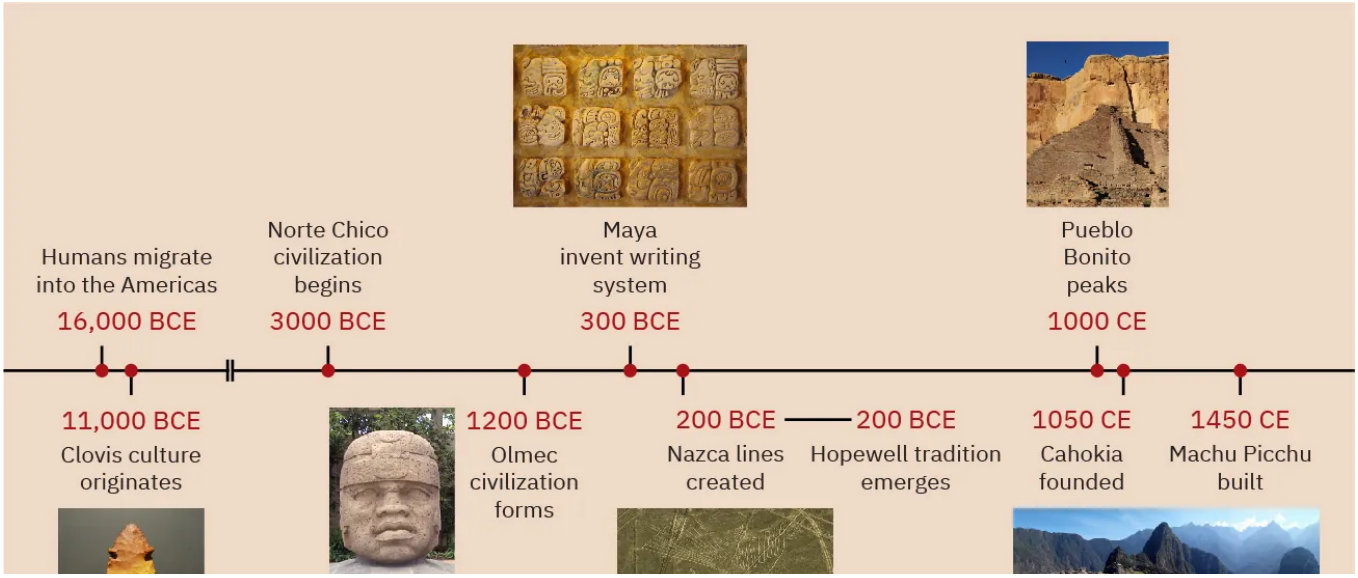


Figure 8.2 Timeline: The Americas in Ancient Times. (credit “11,000 BCE”: modification of work “Clovis point” by “Daderot”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “1200 BCE”: modification of work “An Olmec colossal head at the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology, in Veracruz, Mexico” by “Maunus”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “300 BCE”: modification of work “Maya stucco glyphs displayed in the museum at Palenque, Mexico” by “Kwamikagami”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “200 BCE”: modification of work “The Condor” by Roger Canals/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0; credit “1000 CE”: modification of work “Chaco Canyon - Taaqa 'man' at Pueblo Bonita” by “Kyleson1”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0; credit “1450 CE”: modification of work “Machu Picchu” by Roger Canals/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

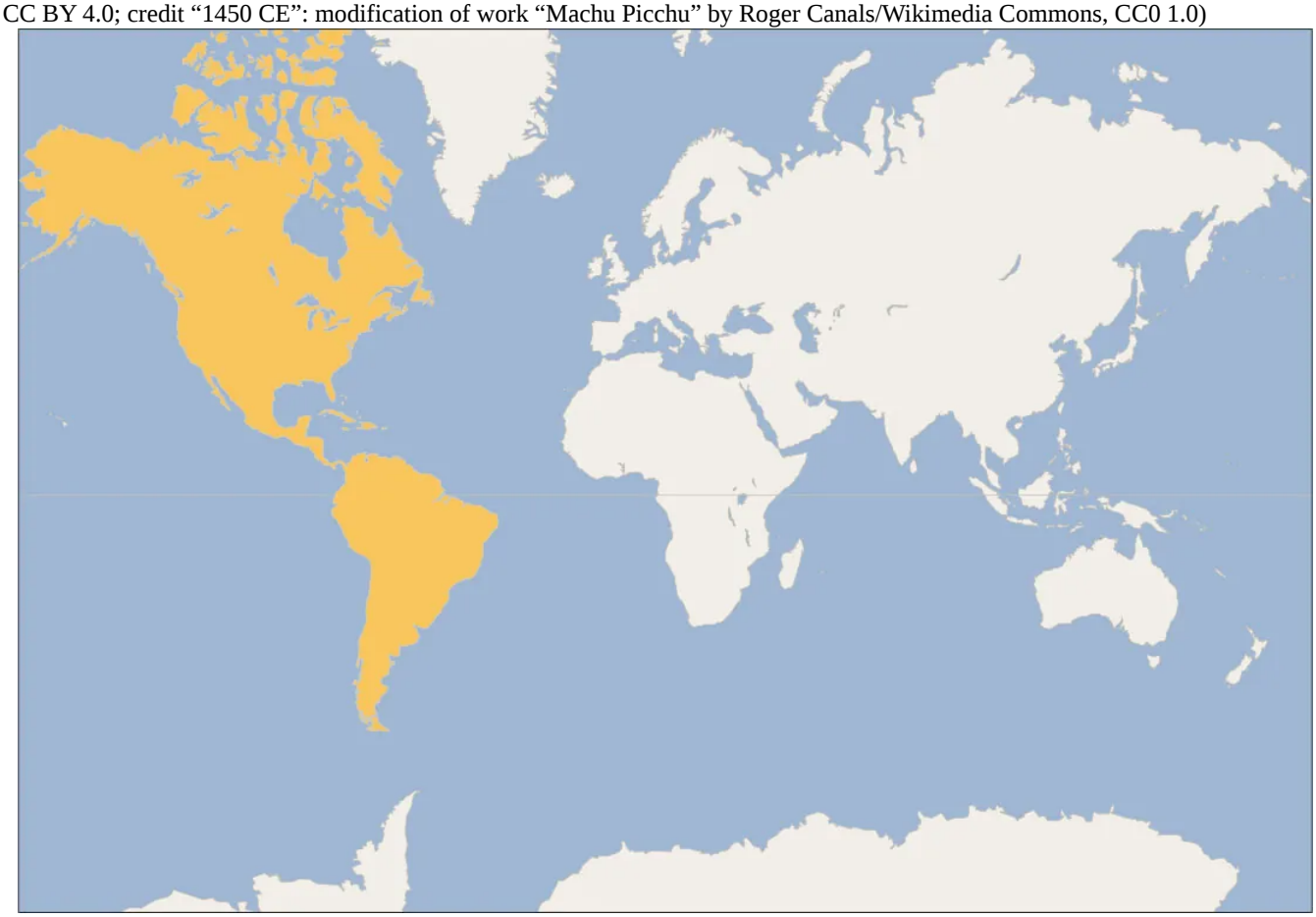


Figure 8.3 Locator Map: The Americas in Ancient Times. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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7.2: Populating and Settling the Americas

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify patterns of early migration to the Americas
- Describe the lifestyles of people living in Archaic America
- Explain how and when the Neolithic Revolution occurred in different regions of the Americas

Ancestral humans like *Homo erectus* migrated out of Africa almost two million years ago and made their way around Asia, the Near East, and Europe. But so far, no solid evidence has placed them in the Americas. It was only with the rise of *Homo sapiens* that the populating of the Americas began. Exactly when this occurred is not clear, but it likely started around eighteen thousand years ago at the earliest. Within a few thousand years, modern humans had expanded in small numbers around North America, Central America, and South America. There they developed their own agricultural traditions, independent of those that emerged in the Near East, China, and Africa. They also established a range of unique cultural traditions and later a number of sophisticated civilizations characterized by refined religious practices, monumental architecture, large urban populations, and in some cases, writing systems.

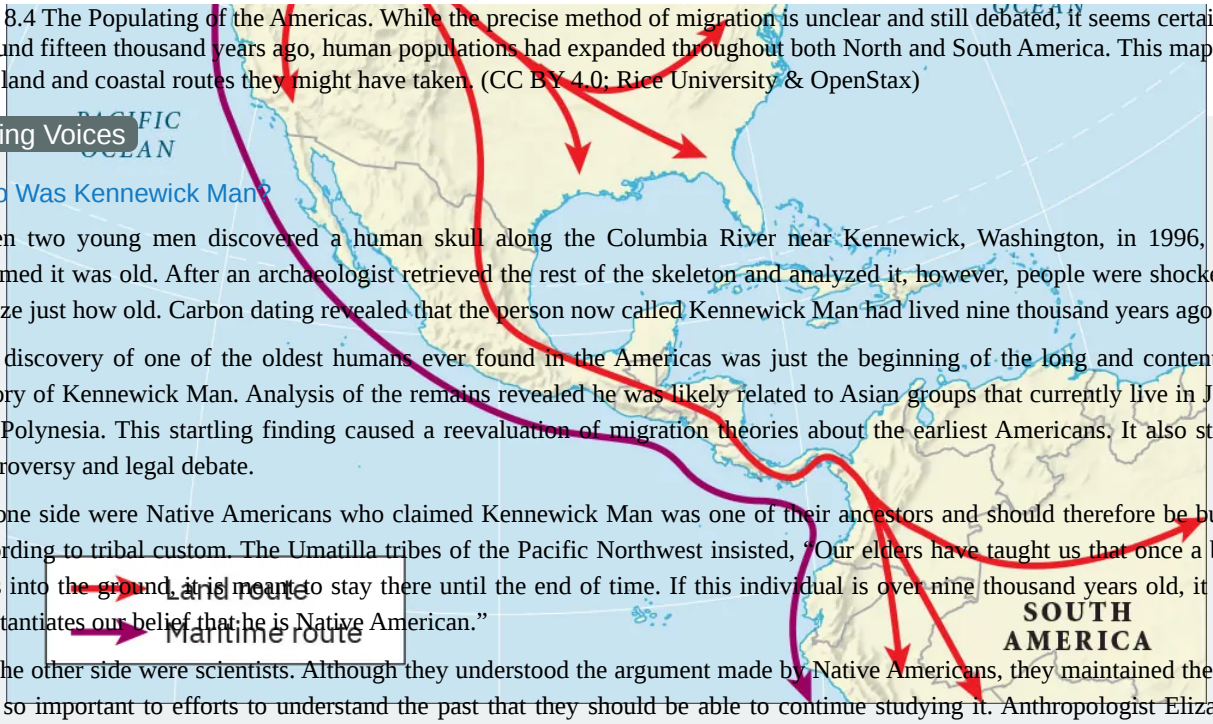
Populating the Americas

About eighteen thousand years ago, the last glaciation period was entering its peak stage, and sea levels globally were far lower than they are today. It was likely during this period that the first *Homo sapiens* reached the Americas, crossing the then-existing land bridge between modern Alaska and Russia known as Beringia. Beringia has since been consumed by rising waters and now lies under the Bering Strait. But then it was a low-lying land of sand dunes and spotty vegetation. It is possible that *Homo sapiens* had lived there for thousands of years before venturing into North America, but solid evidence for that theory has not yet been found.

Regardless of how long humans lived in Beringia or when they crossed, they began spreading farther south into the Americas as the glacial ice retreated. They made their way through a corridor between two melting ice sheets and spread out in waves into what is now the continental United States. Some made their way to the western coast. Others migrated into the northeast and southeast regions. Still others made their way through the center of the continent into modern Mexico, Central America, and South America. By around fifteen thousand years ago at the earliest, human populations had reached as far as the tip of South America and were living throughout the Western Hemisphere (Figure 8.4).



Figure 8.4 The Populating of the Americas. While the precise method of migration is unclear and still debated, it seems certain that by around fifteen thousand years ago, human populations had expanded throughout both North and South America. This map shows land and coastal routes they might have taken. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)



Dueling Voices

Who Was Kennewick Man?

When two young men discovered a human skull along the Columbia River near Kennewick, Washington, in 1996, they assumed it was old. After an archaeologist retrieved the rest of the skeleton and analyzed it, however, people were shocked to realize just how old. Carbon dating revealed that the person now called Kennewick Man had lived nine thousand years ago.

The discovery of one of the oldest humans ever found in the Americas was just the beginning of the long and contentious history of Kennewick Man. Analysis of the remains revealed he was likely related to Asian groups that currently live in Japan and Polynesia. This startling finding caused a reevaluation of migration theories about the earliest Americans. It also stirred controversy and legal debate.

On one side were Native Americans who claimed Kennewick Man was one of their ancestors and should therefore be buried according to tribal custom. The Umatilla tribes of the Pacific Northwest insisted, "Our elders have taught us that once a body goes into the ground, it is meant to stay there until the end of time. If this individual is over nine thousand years old, it only substantiates our belief that he is Native American."

On the other side were scientists. Although they understood the argument made by Native Americans, they maintained the find was so important to efforts to understand the past that they should be able to continue studying it. Anthropologist Elizabeth Weiss wrote in 2001, "Consider having dedicated a large part of one's life to unearthing the materials that are now being examined. Even casts and other important works—such as videotapes, photos, and excavation records—are in increasing danger of confiscation. Some scientists have expressed fear that their federal grants would be in jeopardy if they objected too openly to current policies. Under such circumstances, most scientists do not even begin 'high-risk' projects."

Despite scientists' claims, Native Americans stood firm and began a protracted legal battle over the remains. In 2016, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers resolved the issue in their favor with a DNA analysis that confirmed the remains demonstrated a sufficient genetic relationship with them. In 2017, the bones were buried according to tribal custom at an undisclosed location in Washington State.

- What do you think further analysis of Kennewick Man might have revealed about his origins?
- Do you support the decision to allow the Native American groups to rebury the remains? Why or why not?

There are aspects of the migration we may never fully understand but can be fairly certain happened. It is very likely, for example, that some populations moved down the west coast via a combination of land travel and coastal skirting by raft or canoe. Solid evidence has not yet been discovered, however, because at that time the coast extended a number of miles west of its current location. As sea levels rose following peak glaciation, the water covered these routes in the same way it covered Beringia. Yet we do have evidence for later coastal travel along similar routes. And these 10,000-year-old sites, discovered on high ground in coastal Alaska and Canada, have convinced many that similar and older evidence may now be beneath the sea.

The Clovis People

As long as thirteen thousand years ago, groups of hunter-gatherers had spread across North America south of the remaining ice sheets. Named after the site in Clovis, New Mexico, where the first evidence of their existence was discovered, the Clovis culture consisted of mobile bands of hunter-gatherers who camped at resource-rich locations in modest-sized populations. Since the earliest discovery in the 1920s, archaeologists have found many other sites traceable to Clovis culture in Texas, Virginia, South Carolina, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. Recent DNA analysis conducted on remains discovered in Central and South America suggest that the Clovis culture also extended far to the south.

The most striking artifacts the Clovis people left behind are the many finely worked, fluted stone points they made. They created these so-called Clovis points by chipping and shaping various types of high-quality stone into sharp-sided projectiles, which they attached to shafts that were probably made of wood (Figure 8.5). Once assembled, the tools could serve as spears or other types of

thrown hunting tools like darts. These weapons were part of a larger Clovis toolkit that included hand axes and implements made of bone. Items that were small and portable were a necessity for a people regularly on the move.



Figure 8.5 A Clovis Point. Clovis points discovered in North America have a distinctive appearance and were highly effective tools for hunting big game. This point found in modern Utah is between 11,000 and 13,000 years old. (credit: “Clovis point” by “Daderot”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

As they migrated, the Clovis people hunted mammoths, mastodons, giant bison, and many small animals. They likely also fished in coastal waters and in lakes and rivers. The places where they did settle for long periods typically had reliable access to fresh drinking water, animals for hunting and fishing, and rocks for making their signature points. Archaeologists have even discovered burial sites that appear to have been carefully designed and decorated with red ocher, a native earth containing iron oxide, suggesting a spiritual belief that required occasional ritual burial.

The world in which the Clovis people lived held a great variety of large animals like giant sloths, bears, tortoises, lions, wolves, beavers, armadillos, and various types of large bison. Then, about the same time people began migrating and hunting across North America, these giant species all went extinct. Some have argued that overhunting by the Clovis likely caused the extinction. An alternate hypothesis, however, suggests that rapid temperature rise at the end of the last ice age was the primary culprit. Both theories have weaknesses, and the debate continues. However, it seems at least plausible that both human intervention and climate change were factors.

The Clovis culture that spread across North America around thirteen thousand years ago vanished after only a few centuries. Its people settled in a number of different areas and produced new cultures as they responded to the environmental conditions in which they found themselves. These groups were then joined by other waves of migrants spreading across the Americas and settling in different areas. Between 9000 and 2000 BCE, during what is called the Archaic period, a great many different cultural traditions existed across North America and Mexico, Central America, and South America. They adapted to their many geographical settings: the Pacific Northwest, the Great Plains, the Eastern Woodlands, the Southwest, the jungles of southern Mexico and Central America, and the Andes region of South America.

Peopling the Pacific Northwest

The groups that settled along the resource-rich Pacific Northwest developed into complex hunter-gatherer societies keenly adapted to the abundant marine life in the region. They likely migrated into the area by following caribou, which they hunted. Once they settled in the densely forested region, they learned to survive on beaver, elk, seals, birds, sea lions, and salmon and a great many other fish species.

Salmon were an important resource. When they migrated upstream in the fall to spawn, they were so numerous they could be easily captured with traps, crude dams, or spears. They were then eaten immediately or dried to preserve the food for later. Halibut was another important fish species the peoples of the Pacific Northwest made into a staple of their diets.

The landscape also provided a great many resources for tools. From bone, the hunter-gatherer peoples designed harpoons useful for hunting large marine mammals like whales. They polished the rocks from the region into woodworking tools and used them to carve dugout canoes from the available trees. They also perfected a sophisticated woodcarving technique for producing art, created special bone and wood fishhooks, and used certain types of tree bark to create cloth and baskets.

Because of the great abundance of resources along the Pacific Northwest coast, the groups that settled there could accumulate wealth far more easily than many other hunter-gatherer societies. We know they developed complex societies in which wealth and social status were connected. Evidence from the few discovered burial sites dating to around 2000 BCE supports the suggestion that wealth contributed to social differentiation even then. In the burial sites of the very wealthy, for example, archaeologists have found carved tools made of antler and other objects made from shells. As time went on, the graves of the wealthy came to include even more objects indicating their higher social status. There is also evidence of high population density in some areas, made possible by the large supply of food resources and the ability to accumulate and store them.

Peopling the Great Plains

Within the expansive Great Plains region in the center of the North American continent, settlers hunted large bison herds that grazed on the short grasses growing there. Unlike the animals hunted by the Clovis people, the bison were able to adapt to the warming climate conditions and flourished in the plains. The groups that followed and lived off them practiced a seminomadic lifestyle requiring relatively few belongings; thus, their culture had far less social stratification than existed in the Pacific Northwest. Hunting bison was dangerous and required keeping a distance in order to not startle the animals or allow them to grow reflexively fearful of human presence. We know from archaeological sites in central Canada, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado that as long ago as 8000 BCE, hunters used a strategy of driving herds of bison over cliffs to their death. Once the animals had been killed or immobilized in this way, sometimes by the hundreds, the hunters could carefully process the carcasses for their meat, bones, and hides. Other strategies included cornering the bison herds in a way that allowed the hunters to approach them with spears.

In addition to bison, the plains peoples also hunted antelope, deer, and small animals like rabbits and birds. Hunting birds sometimes required the use of bird decoys designed with feathers to allow hunters to approach and make the kill. The hides of some animals, especially soft ones like rabbit, could be used for clothing when stitched together with plant materials. Edible plants included various types of seeds, berries, nuts, acorns, and tubers like yampa and biscuit-root, which could be unearthed with digging sticks. People carried and stored these foods in coiled baskets made of plants or bags made of leather.

Peopling the Eastern Woodlands

To the east of the Great Plains lie the wetter and lusher Eastern Woodlands, extending from the Mississippi River basin to the Atlantic coast. The groups that lived there found a great variety of plants and animals to feed on and exploit. The many rivers and lakes of the region provided fresh water that encouraged settlement along their shores. The same was the case with the oxbow lakes, U-shaped pools created as river courses stabilized in the warmer conditions. These locations also served as excellent hunting and fishing grounds for catfish, deer, birds, rabbits, and many others. Edible plants included nuts from oak, chestnut, and beech trees. Near coastal areas, there was access to saltwater marine life.

Not only was there less need for mobility here, so that settlements could be sustained, but populations also began to rise around 6500 BCE, and people constructed large earthworks in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. The oldest discovered, Watson Brake in northern Louisiana, dates from around 3900 BCE and includes several human-made earth mounds as high as twenty-five feet and set in a circular formation. Archaeologists believe the site was likely used by hunter-gatherers on a seasonal

basis. While no burial remains have been found there, large cemeteries from the period have been discovered in many other woodland locations including Illinois and Tennessee. Some sites include the remains of more than a hundred individuals, some with personal items like weapons and art. They are evidence of not only rising populations but also an increasingly sedentary lifestyle.

Peopling Mesoamerica

To the south and west of the Eastern Woodlands, the climate is much more arid and less green. This desert scrubland extends down the center of Mexico to the tip of the Central Mexican Plateau. South of there, in the region often described as Mesoamerica, the environment is warmer, greener, and wetter. The formerly large-game-hunting peoples settled there after around 8000 BCE as the game disappeared and the bison followed the retreating grassland north. Evidence of Archaic peoples in this area has been found in several coastal sites along the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, as well as in the Tehuacán Valley south of modern Mexico City. They lived largely in small groups and hunted and gathered over large areas. During the dry season, they relied mostly on wild game like lizards, snakes, and insects, and edible plants like the agave. During the rainy season, they ate avocados, nuts, various types of fruit, and small game, like rabbits.

Beginning around 8000 BCE, some groups of hunter-gatherers began periodically occupying a site known as El Riego Cave in the Tehuacán Valley. Excavations there have uncovered numerous stone tools, woven baskets and blankets, and even elaborate burial sites. These burials suggest the existence of a complex spiritual practice. Other evidence in the Tehuacán Valley indicates that by around 5000 BCE, the settlers' earlier reliance on wild game had given way to a more plant-based diet that included beans, squash, maize (corn), and bottle gourds. By 2600 BCE, the gathering of wild plants had waned considerably as groups adopted agricultural practices, cultivating maize, beans, and squash.

Peopling the Andes Mountains Region

The Andes Mountains run along the western side of South America, rising to more than twenty-two thousand feet in some areas and punctuated by arid deserts and dozens of rivers. It is unclear when the first humans reached South America. At the Monte Verde site in Chile, archaeologists excavating a peat bog recovered remnants of shelters, butchered animal remains, and even scraps of clothing made from hides. Testing dates these to about 12,000 BCE, well *before* the arrival of Clovis culture in the north. It is unclear exactly what this information means, and it leaves the story of how the Americas were populated incomplete. But whenever they came, the first hunter-gatherers who arrived appear to have spread quickly down the continent, likely because its unique geography encouraged north–south rather than east–west migration (Figure 8.6).



Figure 8.6 A Natural Migration Path. The Andes Mountains hug the west coast of South America, creating a narrow coastal passage that runs north–south. Scholars have hypothesized that this narrow passage enabled early American migrants to spread quickly down the length of the continent on its western side. (credit: modification of work “South America - Blue Marble orthographic” by Blue Marble by Reto Stockli, NASA/GSFC/Dave Pape/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The earliest hunter-gatherer groups reached as far as southern Chile and often camped near streams to hunt llamas, guanacos (similar to llamas), and deer. By 8000 BCE, some had begun regularly occupying certain sites. One such site is Guitarrero Cave, located at an altitude of 8,500 feet near the small town of Mancos in central Peru. There, archaeologists have recovered projectile points, modified bone and antler, and textiles. Those who lived in and around Guitarrero Cave likely survived by hunting animals and gathering beans, peppers, and a variety of tubers. In the narrow, low-lying areas along the Pacific coast, people relied on marine resources like fish and mollusks. The site called Quebrada Jaguay in coastal southern Peru may have been used by fishers as early as 10,000 BCE. There, archaeologists have discovered what are believed to be cord and fishing nets as well as the remains of fish and other exploited marine life. Obsidian found at the site, originating about one hundred miles away, is even more surprising; it suggests that long-distance trade may have been occurring in the region many thousands of years ago.

Beyond the Book

The Chinchorro Mummies

The Chinchorro settled in coastal Chile and southern Peru around 5800 BCE. They were largely fishers who left evidence in the form of fishing hooks and harpoons. However, their most striking cultural feature was their practice of mummifying the dead. Indeed, the oldest mummies known so far were those created by the Chinchorro, predating Egyptian mummies by at least two thousand years (Figure 8.7).



Figure 8.7 A Chinchorro Mummy. The earliest Chinchorro mummies, from about 5000 BCE, were painted black, though later mummies were painted red or left unpainted. (credit: modification of work “Cultura chinchorro año 3000 AC” by Pablo Trincado/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The organs of the dead were removed and replaced with reeds and clay to help dry the bodies and complete the mummification process. Once dry, the bodies were painted and adorned for burial. A clay mask was placed over the faces. The oldest Chinchorro mummy discovered dates from about 5000 BCE and was painted black before burial. Around 2500 BCE, the Chinchorro began painting their mummies red and using different methods for removing organs. They also appear to have aided drying by heating the bodies with hot coals. By around 2000 BCE, the process changed again, and the mummies were left unpainted.

The Chinchorro have not left records to explain why they created mummies, so scholars study more recent Andean mummification practices to try to understand. For example, we know from Spanish records that on certain festival days, the Inca, who ruled Peru thousands of years after the Chinchorro, decorated the mummified bodies of their old rulers and displayed them publicly, feeding them cups of corn beer. Scholars believe these ceremonies were intended to help the deceased transition to the afterlife. Might the Chinchorro mummies have served a similar purpose?

Some Chinchorro mummies had clay face masks with open mouths. It is possible these aided in feeding ceremonies, not unlike the later Inca rituals. Evidence also suggests the Chinchorro mummies were occasionally repainted and repaired, leading some to conclude they were a type of religious art form and possibly used to communicate with the afterworld or to celebrate certain gods or ancestors.

We may never fully understand the mummies’ significance for the Chinchorro. But it seems clear the process was somehow related to spiritual practices, possibly an indication of ancestor worship or even belief in an afterlife.

- How does the Chinchorro mummification practice reflect a connection between culture and environment?
- Why do you think the process for painting and preparing the bodies of the dead changed over time?

The Neolithic Revolution in the Americas

As noted earlier, Beringia was submerged under the Bering Strait about eleven thousand years ago, effectively cutting off the Western Hemisphere from the rest of the world. For this reason, technological and cultural developments in Asia, Africa, and Europe were not disseminated to the Americas for many thousands of years. Nor did similar developments in the Americas reach the Eastern Hemisphere. This meant the shift to agriculture in North and South America occurred entirely independently, in three distinct regions that developed agricultural traditions of their own. These were the Andean region, Mesoamerica, and the upper reaches of the Mississippi River valley in the Eastern Woodlands.

The earliest evidence for the shift to agriculture, or the Neolithic Revolution, in the Americas has been found in the Andean region (Table 8.1). There, the domestication of plants and animals developed piecemeal and gradually, and its precise origins are not entirely clear. In some parts of the region, the domestication of camelids such as llamas, guanacos, and alpacas for meat and later wool may have begun as early as 7400 BCE. Similarly, the domestication of the guinea pig for food may have begun as early as 6200 BCE, or as recently as 4400 BCE depending on the evidence used. As for edible plants, some discoveries place the earliest cultivation of squash and bottle gourds at around 8000 BCE. The dates scientists have discovered for domesticated plants like the potato are also remarkably early. Genetic testing of the potato indicates that this rugged tuber may have been domesticated from a wild variant between 8000 and 6000 BCE. Another Andean cultivated plant, quinoa, may have been grown as animal feed about 5000 BCE and later eaten by humans.

8000 BCE	Domestication of squash and bottle gourds
8000–6000 BCE	Domestication of the potato
7400 BCE	Domestication of camelids (llamas, guanacos, alpacas)
6200–4400 BCE	Domestication of the guinea pig
5000 BCE	Domestication of quinoa

Table 8.1 The Neolithic Revolution in the Andean Region. The earliest evidence for the domestication of plants and animals in the Americas comes from the Andean region.

Regardless of when or how the process began, by 3000 BCE, at least partially settled agricultural communities were becoming more common in the Andes region. The similarities among sites in central coastal Peru have led archaeologists to describe them as belonging to one larger culture, sometimes called the Norte Chico or the Caral civilization. A few sites were quite large, such as Aspero, El Paraiso, and Caral (Figure 8.8). Each included multiple mounds and was topped by architectural complexes arranged in a U-shaped pattern. Of the three, Caral is the largest, with a great number of mounds spread across a large area. The largest mound, or the main temple, measures ninety-two feet high and is almost five hundred feet long at its base. Building such a mound would have required a dedicated workforce, suggesting a highly organized society.



Figure 8.8 Norte Chico Sites. The ancient settlements at Aspero and Caral were near each other in coastal Peru, while El Paraiso was to their south. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Archaeological evidence indicates that the people who lived at Caral relied primarily on fish and both wild and domesticated crops, such as squash, beans, avocados, and potatoes. As for the social organization of the Norte Chico, we can only speculate, but based on an examination of the burial sites and the likely ritual significance of many of the ruins, there appear to have been social divisions and organized spiritual or religious practice (Figure 8.9). Given the large-scale architecture and the need for laborers, it is also almost certain there was some type of powerful hereditary leadership. And, apart from the structural similarities across the different sites, evidence suggests there were connections between them. For example, the smaller sites along the coast appear to have supplied the larger inland Caral site with necessary marine resources. There may then also have been some type of ruling system over all the various sites, rather than just a similar culture that united them. However, there is no solid evidence to date to support that conclusion.



Figure 8.9 The Caral Culture. The ruins of the ancient Caral temples in Peru still stand at the site of one of the earliest urban centers in the Americas, with a history going back five thousand years. (credit: modification of work “Piramide de la Huaca, Caral” by Jose C./Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Given the great distance and climate differences between the Andean region and Mesoamerica, the agricultural traditions developed in South America were not easily disseminated north into Mesoamerica in Neolithic times. However, it does appear that at least one important Mesoamerican domesticated crop did reach the Andes. This crop was maize, colloquially called corn in the United States. Maize was domesticated from a type of wild edible grass known as *teosinte* between 5000 and 3000 BCE. While debate continues about how exactly that process occurred, it is generally accepted that human intervention transformed the thick wild grass into the large, sturdy, cob-producing plants we know today. Once domesticated, maize became an important staple carbohydrate in Mesoamerica and led to the rise of large populations. The earliest domesticated maize emerged in either the Tehuacán Valley or the highlands of Oaxaca, from which it was disseminated around Mesoamerica and eventually far beyond. Evidence for Mesoamerican maize in the Andean region dates to about 1600 BCE. There it was commonly used to make a fermented alcoholic drink and popcorn, but it never became an important part of the diet in the way it did in Mesoamerica.

By around 2500 BCE, a shift toward cooler and wetter conditions in Mesoamerica, combined with the availability of domesticated maize, gave birth to a number of agricultural villages in the region. The residents of these villages typically continued hunting and gathering, but they soon recognized the great advantage of growing maize. Over time, the labor demands of doing so and the caloric value of maize led to a steady decline of gathering activities, resulting in exclusively sedentary agricultural communities. Populations grew, necessitating more farmland to raise even more maize. In this way, maize cultivation expanded across the core regions of Mesoamerica, including southern Mexico and parts of Guatemala. By 2000 BCE, sedentary agricultural settlements had become common across these areas. As occurred in regions around the world during the shift from hunting and gathering to sedentary agriculture, new social hierarchies developed as work became more specialized. These hierarchies were related to not only wealth accumulation but also the rise of leadership power.

At some point in the late third millennium BCE, maize was eventually disseminated to what is now the southwestern United States. There, groups began using a form of the plant that had been adapted to the drier environment. At this time, it was merely a supplement to other gathered plants, so peoples in this area remained mostly migratory for some time. Over many centuries, they experimented with varieties of maize. They found ways to grow it in high-elevation areas, and they discovered which areas produced the best results, such as floodplains where irrigation occurred naturally.

In the Eastern Woodlands, people had been experimenting for thousands of years with naturally occurring edible plants like goosefoot, sunflower, bottle gourds, and squash (Figure 8.10). The use of bottle gourds as containers was an ancient practice in the Eastern Woodlands, and the cultivation of bottle gourds may have been encouraged as long ago as 5000 BCE. Similarly, the domestication of sunflowers, useful for their oily and nutritious seeds, appears to have begun by about 2300 BCE. However, by about 2000 BCE, groups in this region began making concerted efforts to increase their food supply by altering the physical environment, clearing small plots of land to more carefully cultivate these wild plants. Through migration, some transported seeds for certain plants to other areas. Successful techniques for encouraging the growth of these plants were passed from generation to generation. In this way, agricultural cultivation emerged in the Eastern Woodlands independently.



Figure 8.10 Goosefoot. Goosefoot grew wild in North America and was one of the many edible plants gathered by people in the Eastern Woodlands. When consumed, these plants were an important source of vitamins A and C, iron, magnesium, and other minerals. (credit: "Strawberry Goosefoot (*Blitum virgatum*)" by Peter de Lange/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

By the time Eastern Woodlands peoples began cultivating their own native plants around 2000 BCE, they had also begun living in more clearly defined territories. Yet there was communication and trade between different areas. Certain types of stone, copper materials, and shells from the coastlines could pass from one small group to another and in the process move many hundreds of miles. Groups from around a localized region may also have participated in certain ceremonies together. Over time, the increasing availability of food and exposure to wealth in the form of traded materials led to social transformations like a reduction in the egalitarianism common among hunter-gatherers. Burial sites and the increasing number of earthen mounds built from the period demonstrate this.

Groups in the Eastern Woodlands remained small, likely no more than one hundred or so members in most places. There were a few exceptions, such as at the large Poverty Point site in northern Louisiana (Figure 8.11). There, beginning around 1000 BCE, several U-shaped concentric mounds were constructed to form an impressive and unusual ceremonial site. The exact purpose of the site and the social organization of the people who built it are not known, but it likely had some ritual significance, and those who lived in and around it employed both hunter-gatherer and agricultural strategies. It was an active site for about three hundred years before being abandoned for reasons unknown.

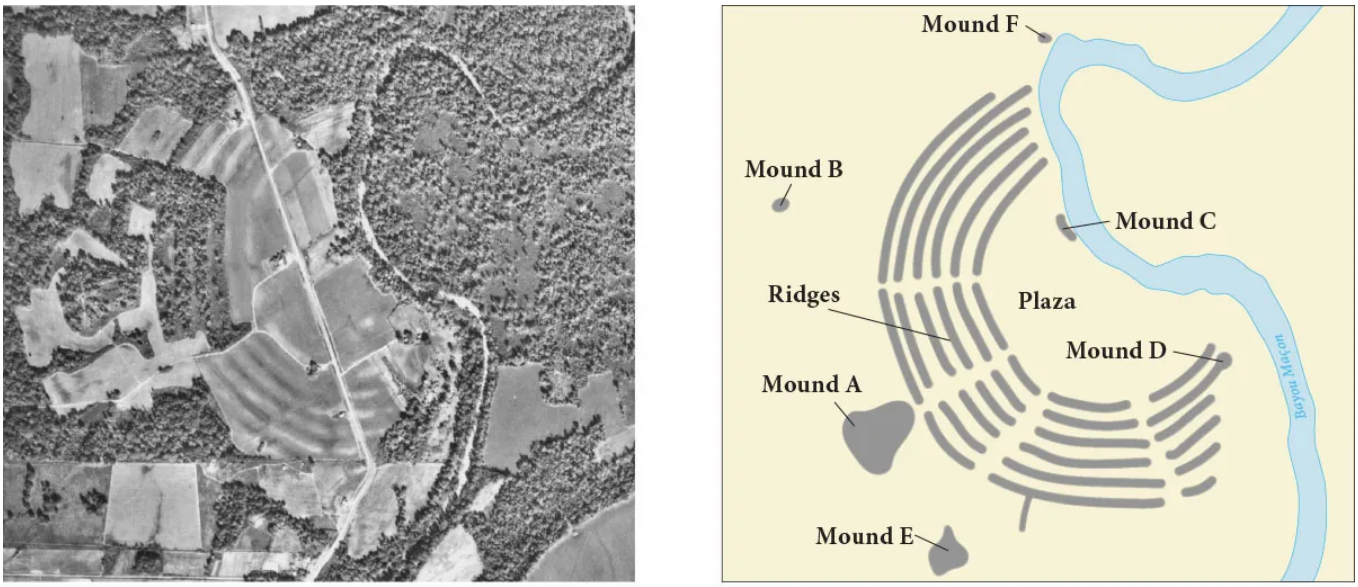


Figure 8.11 Poverty Point. (a) The aerial photograph shows what the Poverty Point site in Louisiana looks like today. (b) The schematic shows what it may have looked like at its height. (credit a: modification of work “Povery Point Site, Louisiana, Aerial Photograph” by USDA Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; attribution b: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

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7.3: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe how civilizations in the Americas adapted to their environments
- Discuss the contributions of the Olmec civilization to culture and religion in Mesoamerica
- Identify the key components of early cultures in North and South America

At the start of the third century BCE, after thousands of years of hunter-gatherer existence, the peoples living in the Americas began to form complex agricultural-based societies. Over the next few thousand years, the early settled communities gave way to large and architecturally impressive settlements from the Andean region to the Eastern Woodlands of North America. These led to local similarities in art, architecture, religion, and pottery design.

Complex Civilizations in Mesoamerica

By the year 1200 BCE, farming had become well established across southern Mexico, especially in the gulf lowland areas where there was sufficient water for irrigation. The many societies there were not exclusively agricultural; they continued to rely on hunting and gathering to supplement their diets. One of them, the Olmec culture, emerged around this time as Mesoamerica's first complex civilization with its own monumental architecture.

Olmec Culture

The start of the Olmec civilization, at a site known as San Lorenzo in the modern Mexican state of Veracruz, stretches back to about 1350 BCE and the construction of a large earthen platform rising some 164 feet above the flat landscape. Upon this platform, the Olmec built ceremonial and other structures, water reservoirs, a system of drains, numerous stone works of art, and a number of massive sculpted stone heads. One of the structures has become known as "the red palace" because of the red ocher pigment on the floor and walls. It was likely a residence for the elite and included large stone columns and aqueducts. The massive stone heads and other sculptures, some weighing as much as fifty tons, were carved from volcanic basalt that came from as far as ninety miles away and was likely brought by raft for part of the way and on rollers over land.

Because little of the San Lorenzo site remains, we can only speculate about the organization of the Olmec civilization, but it is clear that their civilization shaped those that followed. For example, the great earthen platform and monumental sculptures shaped liked step pyramids attest to a highly sophisticated culture, with a clearly defined elite that could control large labor forces. Relying on pottery fragments and population density estimates, scholars have concluded that most workers were probably free laborers working to accomplish larger goals. They likely lived well beyond the elevated center reserved for the elite, in villages surrounded by gardens and other agricultural zones where the Olmec grew maize, avocados, palm nuts, squash, tomatoes, beans, tropical fruits, and cacao for chocolate.

The stone heads themselves are remarkable (Figure 8.12). Seventeen have been found across all the Olmec sites; some stand eleven feet tall. All are generally similar in form and style, depicting men's faces with large lips and noses with flared nostrils, but they were likely intended to be realistic portraits of rulers of the sites where they were discovered. Upon their heads are helmets of various styles, some with coverings for the ears. Given the effort required to transport the stone and carve the heads, these works were likely intended to emphasize the power of the rulers, both to the Olmec people and to outsiders.



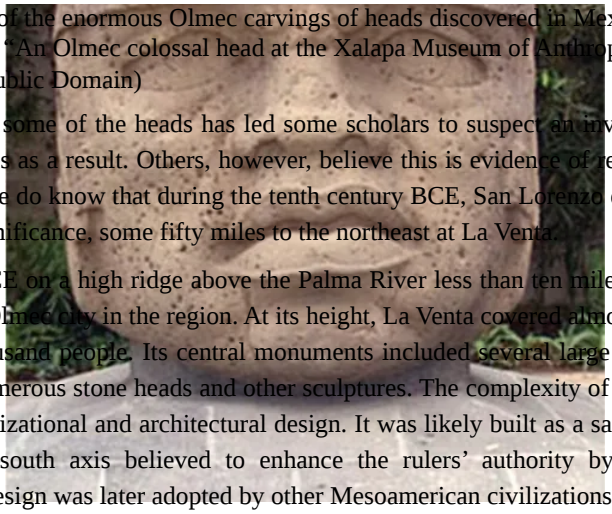


Figure 8.12 An Olmec Head. Some of the enormous Olmec carvings of heads discovered in Mexico are as tall as eleven feet and weigh as much as fifty tons. (credit: "An Olmec colossal head at the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology, in Veracruz, Mexico" by "Maunus"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Evidence of possible vandalism on some of the heads has led some scholars to suspect an invasion occurred in the tenth century BCE, with desecration of the images as a result. Others, however, believe this is evidence of reworking that was never completed. We may never know for sure, but we do know that during the tenth century BCE, San Lorenzo declined in importance. At the same time, another Olmec site rose in significance, some fifty miles to the northeast at La Venta.

La Venta was built around 1200 BCE on a high ridge above the Palma River less than ten miles from the Gulf of Mexico. By 900 BCE, it had become the dominant Olmec city in the region. At its height, La Venta covered almost five hundred acres and may have supported as many as eighteen thousand people. Its central monuments included several large earthen mounds, plazas, a possible sports arena, several tombs, and numerous stone heads and other sculptures. The complexity of this urban complex reflects a major development in Mesoamerican civilizational and architectural design. It was likely built as a sacred site, with its temples and other complexes organized on a north–south axis believed to enhance the rulers' authority by connecting them to supernatural environments. This style of urban design was later adopted by other Mesoamerican civilizations like the Maya.

Olmec art depicts numerous deities, such as a dragon god, a bird god, a fish god, and many fertility deities like a maize god and water gods. The Olmec also clearly recognized many types of supernatural mixed beings, like a feathered serpent and the were-jaguar, a cross between a jaguar and a human. These artistic images imply that the Olmec had a sophisticated pantheon of gods who controlled the universe and expected certain rituals be performed, perhaps by Olmec leaders themselves, who may have functioned as shamans empowered to communicate with the spirit world. The rituals were performed in the temples and plazas of the sacred cities like La Venta and San Lorenzo, as well as in sacred natural sites like caves and mountaintops.

Other rituals were connected to a type of ball game played in a special court with balls made from the abundant natural rubber of the region. Sports contests often existed to bring communities together, to allow men to show prowess and strength in times of peace, and to entertain. It is also likely that in times of heightened spiritual need, such contests could take on greater meaning and might have been choreographed to play out supernatural narratives and perhaps connect people to the gods. Like some later civilizations, the Olmec also saw bloodletting as a link to the spirit world. Blood sports may have been used to create pathways to understanding the will of their gods.

Link to Learning

The ritual ball game of the Olmec became a cultural feature of Mesoamerica over the centuries, and various forms of it were played by the Maya, the Aztec, and many others. Read more about the history of the Mesoamerican ball game and see pictures of related artifacts from different Mesoamerican cultures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art website.

The Olmec were clearly in contact with other groups around southern Mexico and Central America. There is evidence of a robust trade in pottery and valued materials like obsidian, magnetite, and shells, likely carried out by merchants traveling across the larger region. Over time, this trade exposed other Mesoamerican cultures to Olmec ideas about religion, art, architecture, and governance. Some scholars thus conclude that Olmec civilization was a "mother culture" for later large and sophisticated Mesoamerican states. Cultural similarities exist among these, such as ritual ball games, deities, and calendar systems. Olmec-style artifacts have also been found at sites as far away as what are now western Mexico and El Salvador. Like much related to the Olmec, however, the extent of their influence is a question we may never answer with certainty. By the time this civilization disappeared around 400 BCE, a number of other Mesoamerican cultures were emerging.

The Zapotec civilization appeared in the valleys of Oaxaca in western Mexico beginning around 500 BCE, with the construction of the regional capital known today as Monte Albán (Figure 8.13). Set on a flattened mountaintop overlooking the larger region, Monte Albán likely had a population of about five thousand by around 400 BCE and as many as twenty-five thousand by around 700 CE. As it grew over the centuries, so too did its stone temples and other complexes. The city exerted influence on the hundreds of much smaller communities scattered across the Oaxaca Valley. The region was highly suitable to maize cultivation, thus allowing for larger populations and monumental architecture. From the defensive walls created around their settlements, it seems the Zapotec lived in a world where warfare was especially common. Monte Albán itself was likely selected for defensive reasons.



Figure 8.13 Monte Albán. Perched on a flattened mountaintop and serving as the Zapotec capital between 500 BCE and 800 CE, Monte Albán in today's Oaxaca, Mexico, was an easily defensible city. (credit: "Roman architecture ruins" by Andrew McMillan/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The structures built at Monte Albán after 300 CE reflect the influence of another major Mesoamerican civilization about thirty miles northeast of Mexico City. The massive city of Teotihuacán dominated trade in obsidian, salt, cotton, cacao, and marine shells across southern Mexico and greatly influenced cultures like that of the Zapotec. The origins of the Teotihuacán settlement date to about 400 BCE, but major building at the site did not begin until centuries later. By 300, the growing city had a population of about 100,000, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time (Figure 8.14). It exercised enormous cultural and military influence across large portions of Mesoamerica until it declined in the sixth and seventh centuries CE.



Figure 8.14 Teotihuacán. The enormous size of the ruins of Teotihuacán, northeast of Mexico City, is enduring evidence of the power of this city in ancient times. This photograph was taken from the top of the Pyramid of the Moon (c. 250 CE) looking down the Avenue of the Dead and toward the Pyramid of the Sun (c. 100 CE) on the far left side. (credit: "View of the Avenue of the Dead and the Pyramid of the Sun, from Pyramid of the Moon (Pyramide de la Luna)" by"Jackhynes"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Teotihuacanos built numerous stone temples and other structures organized around a north–south passageway known as the Avenue of the Dead. The largest temples are known as the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. Both are multitiered stone structures, 197 and 141 feet tall, respectively. The site also includes a large royal residence known as the Citadel, which includes the elaborate Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent. Elite military leaders and others lived in large apartment compounds decorated with colorful artwork depicting priests, gods, or warriors. The remaining population was spread across the roughly ten thousand square miles that surrounded the city and produced trade goods as well as agricultural products.

The size of Teotihuacán denotes its wealth and regional influence at its height. This wealth came from trading in crafts, agricultural products, obsidian tools, cloth, ceramics, and artwork. The many preserved frescos and murals show the city's rulers dressed in elaborate clothing, including iridescent quetzal bird feathers from as far away as Guatemala, testifying to Teotihuacán's long reach. To influence areas so far away, the city wielded power through its control of trade and use of military force and diplomacy. Sculptures at Monte Albán show Teotihuacano diplomats meeting with the Zapotec elite, reflecting mostly peaceful contact between the two civilizations. Evidence from Maya sites also demonstrates that the Teotihuacanos commonly intervened in Maya affairs deep in Central America, sometimes militarily. They may even have orchestrated a coup in the powerful Maya city of Tikal in 378.

Maya Culture

While Maya civilization was clearly influenced by the Teotihuacanos beginning in the fourth century CE, evidence of urban development and rapid population growth in the Maya heartland of Central America dates to before 600 BCE. Village life may go back much further, but in any case, by 600 BCE, the lowlands of Central America were full of small villages, each showing

evidence of sophisticated pottery, architecture, irrigation techniques, and religious traditions. By 250 BCE, a handful of powerful Maya city-states had emerged. The major cities of this Early Classic period (250–600 CE) include Tikal, Calakmul, El Mirador, and a few others.

El Mirador was a dominant city before 150 CE, with a population of about 100,000 at its height. But Tikal and Calakmul were equally impressive. All had numerous large pyramid-like structures creating an impressive skyline across the spaces cleared of jungle. Most of the major cities were built next to large, shallow lakes, since access to water for drinking and irrigation was important in the lowlands, where rainfall was often insufficient. The tropical soil in the area is also insufficiently fertile, and the Maya developed a style of slash-and-burn agriculture to raise maize, squash, beans, and cacao for the growing urban populations in these cities.

Link to Learning

Tour the ruins of Tikal by exploring this immersive video.

The Maya were certainly influenced by Olmec civilization, though likely not directly. For example, some examples of Maya art include Olmec-derived features like the were-jaguar. The Maya also played a ritual ball game based on the earlier Olmec variety. Another possible Olmec influence was the Maya calendar. This consisted of two different parts—the 260-day Sacred Round calendar and the 365-day Vague Year calendar—that functioned together to create a 52-year cycle for measuring time and tying the dates for ceremonies to important mythological events performed by the gods.

The Past Meets the Present

Did the Maya Predict the End of the World?

The premise of a 2009 science fiction movie was that the Maya calendar predicted the end of the world would occur in the year 2012. While the film (called *2012*) was a commercial success, the idea that the Maya predicted when the world would end has been largely discredited.

The Maya had a sophisticated calendar system evolved from earlier Mesoamerican versions, possibly the Olmec. Because it used two different calendar rounds working together, it revealed important ritual days and cycles over long periods of time (Figure 8.15). For example, one full cycle covered a space of fifty-two solar years, often called a bundle. But to explore longer chunks of time, the Maya relied on what scholars call the Long Count Calendar. This had cycles that included the *winal* (20 days), the *tun* (360 days), the *k'atun* (7,200 days), and the *bak'tun* (144,000 days). The Great Cycle occurred every thirteen *bak'tun*, or about every 5,125 years. And this is where the idea of the significance of 2012 comes from.

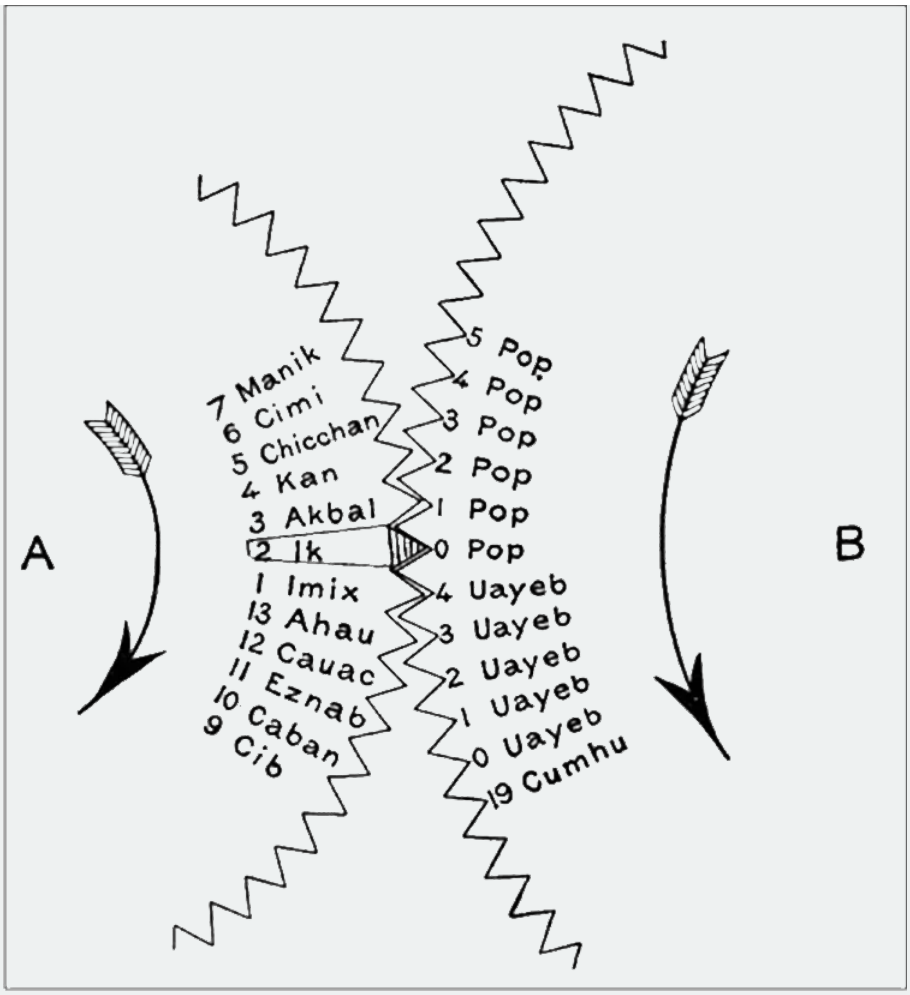


Figure 8.15 The Maya Calendar. The two Maya calendar rounds were intended to function together in order to reveal important dates years in advance. (credit: modification of work “Diagram showing engagement of tonalamatl wheel of 260 days and haab wheel of 365 positions by An Introduction to the Study of the Maya Hieroglyphs” by Sylvanus Griswold Morley/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

According to scholars’ calculations, the Maya Great Cycle would have begun in 2012 CE. But did that really mean the Maya thought this was the end of the world? Most historians and archaeologists say the answer is a resounding “no.” Rather, that year would simply have started a new cycle, though the Maya would have seen great importance in the event and celebrated it with major festivities. It appears that only Hollywood and some imaginative modern writers have read an Earth-ending catastrophe into this date.

- What does the cyclical nature of the Maya calendar system suggest about their rituals and cosmology?
- Why do you think the concept of an apocalypse occurring in 2012 was so attractive to modern people?

The era of Maya greatness begins with the Classic period, starting around 250 CE and lasting until about 900. During this time, urbanization in the Maya world expanded greatly, with approximately forty different city-states emerging in different areas. Some of the most powerful were older sites like Tikal and Calakmul, along with newer locations like Palenque, Copan, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras (Figure 8.16). Each had its own rulers, referred to as “divine lords.” These powerful chieftains exercised their authority over the city-state through their control over religious rituals and ceremonies, the construction of temples, and especially wars they waged with other Maya city-states. Such wars were common for weakening rivals and keeping neighbors in line, and they may even have served important ritual purposes. They also allowed for the exacting of tribute from subdued enemies in the form of animal products, salt, textiles, artwork, and agricultural goods like cacao and maize. Tribute could be paid through labor as well, when defeated enemies supplied workers for the victorious city-state. Only rarely did rulers seek to control conquered city-states, however. These generally remained independent, though they all shared many cultural attributes.

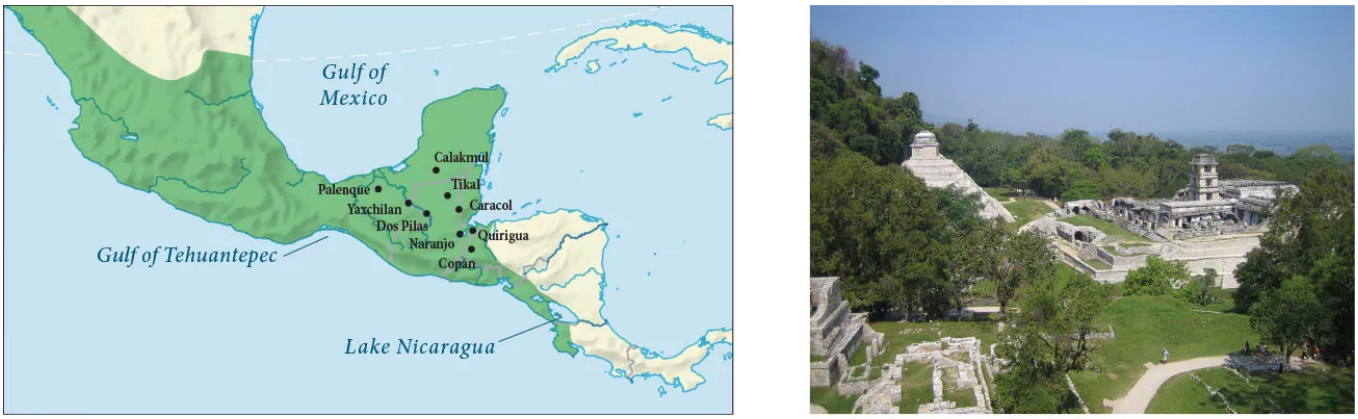


Figure 8.16 The Maya World. (a) At its height, the Maya civilization included as many as forty city-states. (b) Today the ruins of Palenque and other Maya sites appear ghost-white. But during their heyday in the seventh century, their temples were painted in bright colors. (attribution a: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license; credit b: modification of work "Palenque Palace" by "Candiderm"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At the heart of Maya religious practices was the veneration of family ancestors, who were considered bridges between heaven and earth. Homes had shrines for performing ritual bloodletting and prayers directed to the ancestors, and deceased family members were typically interred beneath the floor. Indeed, the large stone temples themselves were in some ways grander versions of these family shrines, usually with large tombs within them, and deceased kings were effectively ancestors for the entire city-state. Ritual practices were tied to the complicated Maya calendar, and gods could act in certain ways depending on the time of year and the location of certain heavenly bodies. Shamans and priests guided rituals like bloodletting, which allowed for communication with the ancestors by releasing a sacred essence in the blood called *chu'ulel*. The same principle applied to the human sacrifice of war captives and especially captured rival leaders.

While we can only speculate about how the Olmec played their ritual ball game, we know more about the Maya and later versions (Figure 8.17). The intention was to reenact aspects of Maya mythology, and the game held a significant place in religious practice. Two teams of four wore ritual protective padding and passed the ball to each other without using hands or feet on long I-shaped courts flanked by sloping walls. The object appeared to be to move the ball through a stone ring without letting it hit the ground. As the use of padding indicates, the game could be quite dangerous; the ball was solid rubber and could weigh more than seven pounds. But the true danger came at the end, when losing team leaders or sometimes the entire losing team could expect to be sacrificed to fulfill the game's ritual purpose.



Figure 8.17 A Maya Ball Court. Maya ball court designs varied from city to city, but like this one in front of a pyramid in Peten, Guatemala, all had the same I-shaped layout. (credit: “Tikal Ballcourt“ by Gary Todd/Flickr, Public Domain)

One of the reasons we know so much about the Maya is that, unlike some other Mesoamerican civilizations, they created a writing system that scholars have been able to decode and read (Figure 8.18). This system was phonetically based, with complex characters, and was far more developed than any other writing system discovered in Mesoamerica. It allowed the Maya to record their own history in stone monuments, including invaluable political histories, descriptions of rituals, propagandistic records of battles, and genealogies.



Figure 8.18 The Maya Writing System. The phonetically based Maya script baffled researchers for years and was decoded only after decades of careful work. These stucco characters are from Palenque and were likely created between the fifth and eighth centuries BCE. (credit: “Maya stucco glyphs displayed in the museum at Palenque, Mexico” by “Kwamikagami”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Classical Maya civilization entered a period of decline in the ninth century CE and then deteriorated rapidly. Over a period of about a century, alliances broke down, conflicts became more common, the production of luxury goods slowed to a stop, and cities went from thriving urban centers to depopulated shells. The reason for this collapse has been a topic of debate among historians and archaeologists for many years, and much remains uncertain. Among the proposed causes are epidemic diseases, invasions, natural disasters, internal revolutions, and environmental degradation. Several of these may have been influential; it is unlikely there was a single cause.

For example, studies over the last few decades have pointed to the environmental problems created by demographic growth. This growth led to large-scale deforestation, which in turn produced soil erosion. Large populations that required high agricultural yields made Mayan civilization more vulnerable to variations in climate or a string of bad harvests caused by crop disease. Such problems would have put enormous pressure on elites and commoners alike and contributed to disorder, war, and perhaps internal revolts. However it happened, by 900 CE the Classic period of Maya civilization had come to an end. But this was not the end of the Maya. In the Yucatán Peninsula, well north of the old centers of power, Maya civilization would experience a rebirth that extended into the sixteenth century and the arrival of the Spanish.

Early Cultures and Civilizations in South America

South of Mesoamerica and north of the Andes lies a dense tropical jungle that long prevented any regular communication or cultural transmission between the two areas. As a result, the early cultures and civilizations in South America developed in different ways and responded to different environmental factors. Neolithic settlements like Norte Chico in today’s Peru had already emerged by 3000 BCE. However, in the centuries following this, others proliferated in the Northern Highlands as well. These include sites

known today as Huaricoto, Galgada, and Kotosh, which were likely religious centers for offering sacrifices. There was also Sechin Alto, built along the desert coast after 2000 BCE. Then, around 1400 BCE, groups in the Southern Highlands area around Lake Titicaca (on the border between Peru and Bolivia) began growing in size after adopting agricultural practices. The construction of a large sunken court in this area around 1000 BCE indicates they had their own sophisticated ceremonial rituals.

Around 900 BCE, the Andes region experienced a transformation when a single society, often called the Chavín culture, expanded across the entire area, opening what archaeologists call the Early Horizon, or Formative, period. The Chavín culture is known for its distinctive pottery style, which spread throughout the entire region and depicted numerous people, deities, and animals in a flowing and balanced manner (Figure 8.19).



Figure 8.19 Chavín Pottery. The Chavín culture produced a distinctive pottery style. This ceramic piece (c. 1000–800 BCE) shows a stylized caiman, an alligator-like reptile species that inhabits parts of Mexico and South America. (credit: "Bottle with caiman" by The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Read or listen to a short expert description of the Chavín bottle with caiman presented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which holds this item in its collection.

In addition, you can explore a number of other artifacts from the period at the Met website.

The name Chavín comes from Chavín de Huántar, possibly the culture's most important religious center. This site is more than ten thousand feet high in the Andes Mountains, to the east of the older Norte Chico settlements. Its dominant architectural feature was its large temple complex, which faced the rising sun and included a maze of tunnels snaking through. Deep within the tunnels was a large sculpture of possibly this culture's chief deity, called *El Lanzón* ("great lance") because of its long lance-like shape. The image of *El Lanzón* mixes both human and animal features, with flared wide nostrils, bared teeth, long fangs on either side of the mouth, and claws protruding from fingertips and toes. The temple was also decorated with many other sculptures of animals, human heads, and deities bearing the features of both, all probably intended to awe residents and visitors alike.

The inhabitants of Chavín de Huántar numbered about twenty-five hundred by 200 BCE as it slipped into decline. The site's importance lay in its role as a religious or ceremonial site, not as a population center. But by around 400 BCE, the Chavín religion and culture had spread far and wide across the Andes region. Whether these influences were transmitted by trade or warfare is unclear. Eventually, however, they replaced other architectural and artistic styles and burial practices. Innovations in textile production and metalworking in gold, silver, and copper also proliferated around the region. Craftspeople in towns and villages produced textiles and metal objects, and traders moved them from place to place along improved routes and with the aid of llamas as pack animals (Figure 8.20).



Figure 8.20 Chavín Culture and Its Influence. Between about 900 and 200 BCE, the Chavín culture exerted a strong influence over much of what is today coastal and Andean Peru. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Beginning around 200 BCE, the influence of Chavín cultural styles and religious symbols began to wane. This came at a time of increased regional warfare among many groups, evidenced by the increasing use of defensive features like walls around settlements. The broader Chavín-influenced region then fragmented into a number of regional cultures that grew to full-fledged civilizations like the Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku (Figure 8.21).



Figure 8.21 Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku Cultures. The Moche and Nazca civilizations both emerged around 200 BCE in different parts of what had formerly been Chavín areas of influence. The Tiwanaku civilization also traces its roots back to about 200 BCE, but its major building period started around 100 CE. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Moche civilization emerged in northern Peru and made major settlements with large pyramid-style architecture at Sipán, Moche, and Cerro Blanco. Its people were agriculturalists with a keen knowledge of irrigation technology, which they used to grow squash, beans, maize, and peppers. They were also a highly militaristic society; their art depicts warriors in hand-to-hand combat, scenes of torture, and other forms of physical violence (Figure 8.22). The Moche formed a politically organized state with a sophisticated administration system. Their cities and burial practices reflect a hierarchical organization, with powerful divine kings and families of nobles ruling from atop large pyramids. Below these two tiers was a class of many bureaucrats who helped manage

the state. Near the bottom of the social order were the large numbers of workers, agricultural and otherwise, who lived in the many agricultural villages controlled by the elite.



Figure 8.22 The Moche at War. The Moche commanded a highly militaristic state that used war as well as ceremonial violence to subjugate surrounding populations. This colorful reproduction of a scene originally painted on a piece of Moche pottery (300–700 CE) shows a ceremony in which a Moche lord hands a cup to a high priest (top) as bound prisoners endure bloodletting at the hands of their captors (bottom). (credit: “Mural de la cultura Moche” by SCALA/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Far to the south of the Moche, along the dry coast of southern Peru, were the Nazca, whose culture also emerged around 200 BCE. While the terrain there is parched, with rainfall virtually unknown in some areas, the rivers that carry water from the mountains provided the Nazca with sufficient water for irrigation. Unlike the Moche in their large cities, the Nazca people lived mostly in small villages. However, they maintained important ceremonial sites like Cahuachi, where villagers made pilgrimages and witnessed elaborate fertility and other rituals.

Politically, the Nazca may have adopted a type of confederation made up of a number of important families. Apart from many human-altered hills, called *huacas*, they also left behind hundreds of geoglyphs, large artistic representations imprinted in the dry desert ground. These are sometimes referred to as the Nazca Lines, and they can be either geometric patterns or images of animals like birds, fish, lizards, and cats (Figure 8.23). Some are as large as twelve hundred feet long and were created by clearing stones away from the desert floor to reveal the different-colored ground beneath.

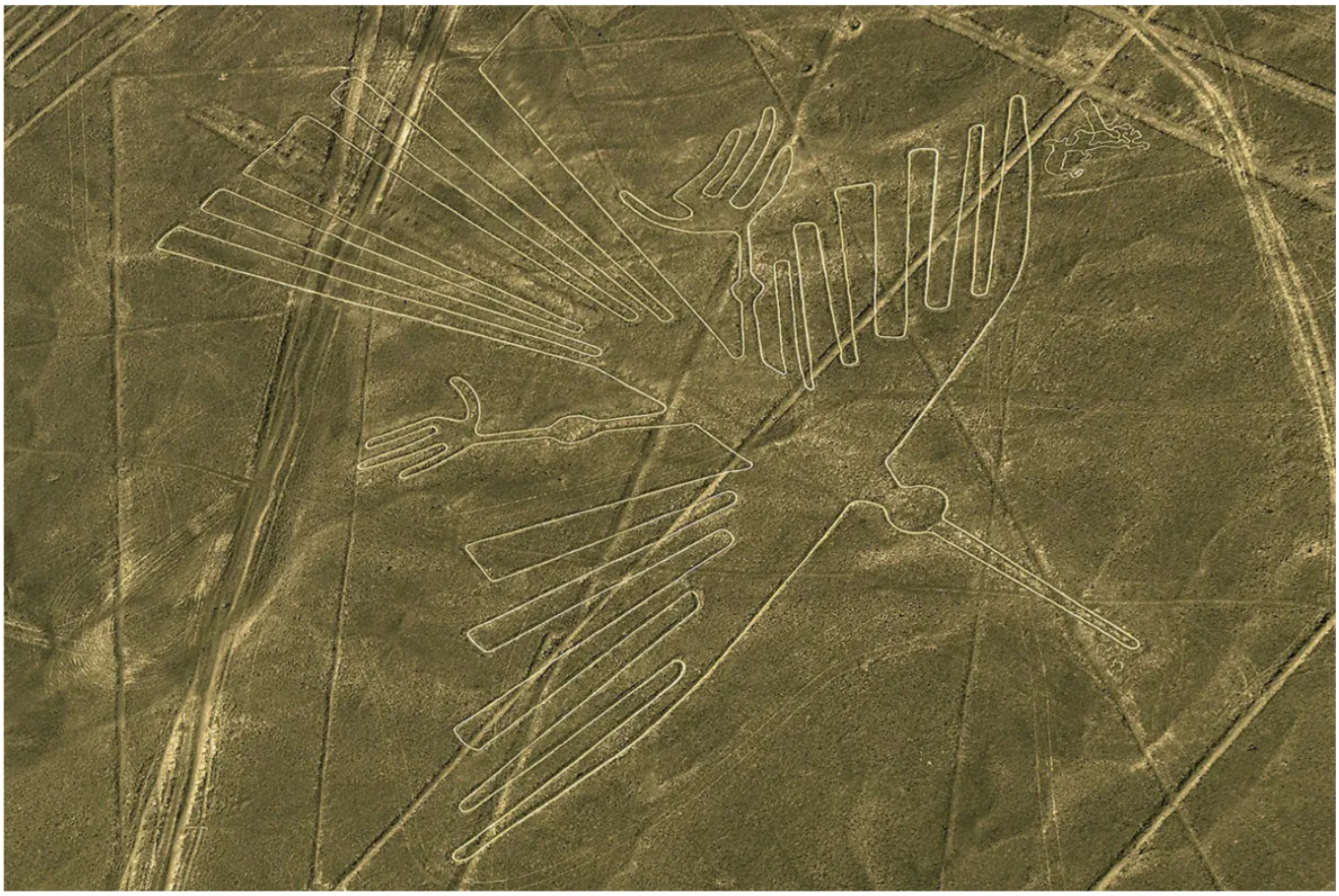


Figure 8.23 Nazca Lines. Between 200 BCE and 600 CE, the Nazca in modern southern Peru created massive images of animals and other shapes like this bird by moving rocks to reveal the different-colored desert floor beneath. (credit: “The Condor” by Roger Canals/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Link to Learning

The Nazca Lines in Peru have baffled scholars for many years. Watch this video about the Nazca Lines to learn more about how some are trying to understand these giant geoglyphs today.

Whereas the Nazca lived in the arid coastal desert, the Tiwanaku civilization thrived high in the mountains near Lake Titicaca. Like the Moche and Nazca societies, this culture emerged in the wake of the collapse of Chavín culture around 200 BCE. Beginning around 100 CE, it entered a period of sustained building at its key city of Tiwanaku. There, residents built two large stone structures topped by additional buildings and carved stone artwork. A signature feature of the structures at Tiwanaku is the many “trophy heads” that poke out from among the stone blocks (Figure 8.24). Noting the different facial features on each head, some scholars have concluded that they represent important ancestors of the Tiwanaku elite or possibly the gods of various conquered groups.



Figure 8.24 Tiwanaku “Trophy Heads.” So-called trophy heads decorate the face of this wall built between the third and sixth centuries CE at Tiwanaku, near Lake Titicaca between Bolivia and Peru. (credit: modification of work “Tiwanaku23” by Alexson Scheppa Peisino (AlexSP)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At its height, the city supported perhaps as many as forty thousand people and oversaw at least four smaller cities in the surrounding area. It may even have been the center of a type of imperial system, with colonies on both the Pacific coast and the eastern side of the Andes. To support Tiwanaku and the other related cities, the people irrigated massive fields with a network of canals to grow potatoes. They also raised domesticated llamas and used them as pack animals for long-distance trade.

Tiwanaku survived until about 1000 CE and may have declined as the water level in Lake Titicaca rose to flood its farmland. The other civilizations of this period—the Moche and the Nazca—had disappeared long before, between 500 and 600 CE, for reasons that likely included environmental transformations. Other Andean civilizations emerged in their wake, including the Wari of the highlands of southeastern Peru and the Chimor of coastal Peru. These later groups built upon the earlier cultures’ innovations in agriculture, art, manufacturing, and trade. While Wari declined around 800 CE, Chimor survived into the fifteenth century. It was only in the 1400s that Chimor was conquered by a new and expanding imperial system, the Inca.

North America in the Formative Period

The earliest complex societies in North America began to emerge in the Ohio River valley around 1000 BCE, at the start of the Formative period, when mound-building cultures with large populations in the Eastern Woodlands became more common.

Mound-Building Cultures in the Eastern Woodlands

The mound-building culture of the Ohio River valley area is often referred to as the Adena, after a mound excavated in 1901 in Ross County, Ohio. This and the hundreds of others discovered in the area were burial sites. They started small, with the burial of one or two important people, but grew over time as more were buried and more earth was used to cover them. Some of the mounds had a large circular ditch surrounding them and logs lining the interior. Evidence of postholes indicates that structures once stood there as well, suggesting the locations may have been meeting or ceremonial spots. The bodies of the dead themselves were often

decorated with red ocher and other pigments. Grave objects included jewelry, weapons, stone tools, marine shells, and pipes for smoking kinnikinnick (a mixture of leaves and bark) and perhaps tobacco (Figure 8.25).



Figure 8.25 Owl Pipe of the Adena Culture. Carefully carved pipes like this one dating from 900–1300 CE could be buried with their owners in the mounds built by the ancient Adena culture in the Ohio River valley. (credit: "Owl effigy pipe" by "Wmpearl"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Communities of mound builders in the valley remained small at first, sometimes erecting no more than a couple of structures. The mounds themselves were also relatively small when compared with those of later cultures like the Hopewell tradition, a civilization that emerged around 200 BCE and eventually spread across the Eastern Woodlands through a common network of trade routes. Named for a large earthwork complex occupying 130 acres in today's Ohio, the Hopewell tradition emerged around 200 BCE and is one of the most impressive of many of this period in the Woodlands. The site encloses thirty-eight different mounds within a large earthen D-shaped rectangle. The largest are three conjoined mounds; before centuries of erosion occurred, together they measured about five hundred feet wide and thirty feet high. Large platforms once supported wooden structures and were likely used for ritual purposes.

Another Hopewell site located near Newark, Ohio, is equally impressive, with earthen enclosures, mounds, and an observation circle all organized to align with the movement of the moon and likely used to predict lunar eclipses and other seasonal events. Building such mounds with the available technology would have been a labor-intensive task and indicates the culture responsible was highly organized.

The mound complexes were used for ceremonial purposes and do not appear to have been the site of urban settlements. Instead, most people of the Hopewell culture lived in small dispersed communities consisting of only a few extended families. They employed both hunter-gatherer strategies and the cultivation of domesticated plants like sunflowers and bottle gourds. Neighboring groups likely came together to participate in hunting, gathering, and religious events at their ceremonial sites. Religious traditions included the veneration of ancestors, such as those buried in the mounds.

Different communities from the wider area buried their dead leaders in the same mounds, likely as a way to establish symbolic connections across kin groups. Evidence from sites like the one at Newark suggests that ceremonies for burial and veneration were

probably connected to seasonal changes and important astronomical observations. The items deposited in the mounds included a number of artistic depictions of animals like beavers, bears, dogs, cats, and even supernatural mixtures of these. These likely had symbolic importance for the individual kin groups and were connected to both their religious practices and specific ancestral ceremonies.

Politically, the settlements of the Hopewell tradition were decentralized and mostly egalitarian. The leadership structure of individual kin groups may have revolved around shamans or shamanistic practices, but there were no powerful rulers. There were, however, some divisions of labor based on specialization, including healers, clan leaders, and those who possessed certain spiritual qualities necessary for interpreting astronomical signs, preparing burials, and preserving important religious traditions. Ceremonial objects made of copper, bone, stone, and wood and shaped into bird claws and totem animals aided shamanistic figures in their duties and were often buried with them. Items within the mounds also provide evidence of extensive long-distance trading. Those discovered in the Ohio River valley include copper from Lake Superior, quartz from Arkansas, mica from the Appalachian region, marine shells from the Gulf coast, and obsidian from as far away as the Rocky Mountains. Trade in these objects was carried out by individuals moving along rivers or the networks of village paths.

Beyond the Book

Turtle Island

The earthen mounds of the Eastern Woodlands region had a number of symbolic meanings and purposes. They served as burial sites, provided connections to ancestors, and were settings for religious rituals. But what do ancient stories suggest about these mounds? Because the Native Americans who built them did not leave behind written records, their legends are one tool modern scholars can use to understand their symbolic importance.

Consider one of the ancient origin stories common to many Indigenous groups of the Eastern Woodlands. Preserved orally in numerous versions, it tells of the construction of the world by the accumulation of earth upon the shell of a large turtle, which grew over time and supported life. Some versions of the story begin with a great flood, after which animals work diligently to bring up earth from below the water to place on the turtle's back. Other versions refer to a woman with supernatural powers who falls or travels from the heavens and creates the world on a turtle's back (Figure 8.26). Across all the versions, the symbolic importance of the turtle, representing life, is paramount.



Figure 8.26 *Sky Woman* . In some versions of the Turtle Island story, a woman descends from the heavens to create the world on the back of a turtle. This 1936 oil painting called *Sky Woman* by the twentieth-century Seneca artist Ernest Smith illustrates such a moment. (credit: "'Sky Woman", by Ernest Smith. 1936" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While we cannot know for sure, the Woodlands mounds may have been connected to this ancient origin story. They certainly would have provided safety from river flooding in low-lying areas. During such times, the connection between the mound and the turtle floating in the water would have been difficult to miss.

- What purpose do you think origin stories like these served for the ancient people of the Eastern Woodlands?
- Do you think using preserved origin stories is a good way to understand ancient peoples and customs? Why or why not?

The Hopewell tradition settlements began to decline in the fourth century CE, evidenced by a waning of mound building and trade. The precise reason is not clear, but larger kin group alliances may have broken down as a result of underlying religious issues. Beginning around 600, groups in the Midwest built a number of so-called effigy mounds. These are earthen mounds formed in the image of animals like wolves, bears, snakes, and birds. Like many earlier mounds, the effigy mounds were also burial sites, but they usually contained only a few individuals. In comparison to the earlier Hopewell mounds, they were generally constructed with less labor and in a shorter amount of time, possibly by just a few dozen people working for a few days.

Early Cultures of the American Southwest

Far to the west of the mound-building cultures, a very different cultural tradition formed in the arid landscape of the Southwest. Here, people began experimenting with maize varieties as early as the third millennium BCE. By that time, some groups in the region had begun planting maize in small plots along riverbanks and using it to supplement their hunter-gatherer existence. Exactly how maize reached the American Southwest from southern Mexico is not clear, but there must have been some sporadic contact between cultivators in the south and hunter-gatherer adopters farther north. However, for many centuries after maize was introduced into the Southwest, its cultivation remained limited to one small part of a lifestyle firmly rooted in hunting and gathering. It is possible that the arid conditions of the region necessitated greater mobility and thus made the advantages of maize cultivation less obvious.

Some of the earliest evidence of maize cultivation in the area dates from about 2250 BCE and comes from what is now northwestern New Mexico. By around 1200 BCE, groups in the Las Capas area, by the Santa Cruz River near modern Tucson, Arizona, had developed a sophisticated irrigation system for cultivating maize. The people at Las Capas built a network of canals that directed water from the river into their fields. Around this agricultural base, they constructed oval-shaped homes and pits for roasting the maize they grew. Over time, the homes became more elaborate and were organized in rings around courtyards. But even here the cultivation of maize remained only a small part of a largely hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which included gathering goosefoot and piñons as well as hunting rabbits, bison, and deer.

By around 500 BCE, the cultivation of beans was adding to the growing diversity of foods consumed in the Southwest. This change helped to encourage more dependence on maize since, nutritionally speaking, these two foods are complementary—beans are a source of lysine, a necessary amino acid that maize lacks. Growing beans with maize also increases the nitrogen in the soil and preserves its fertility for longer periods. However, even after the introduction of beans, settled and solidly agricultural communities in the Southwest did not begin to emerge until around 200 CE. Once they did, the region entered a transformational period that resulted in the development of the Anasazi or Ancestral Pueblo societies.

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7.4: The Age of Empires in the Americas

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the expansion of pre-Columbian civilizations like the Aztec and Inca
- Identify key features of the Aztec and Inca civilizations
- Identify key features of the Anasazi and Mississippian traditions in North America

The arrival of the Spanish at the end of the fifteenth century inaugurated a new age in the Americas, but in Mexico and Peru, the Spanish entered areas already under the control of large and sophisticated empires. The Inca in the Andes and the Aztecs in Mesoamerica were the cultural inheritors of thousands of years of civilizational development that included the heritage of the Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku in the Andes and the Olmec, Maya, and Teotihuacanos in Mesoamerica. Likewise, the Mississippian tradition chiefdoms of the Eastern Woodlands, where the early Spanish explorers also trod, were the product of ancient cultural and civilization developments going back to the mound-building traditions of Adena, Hopewell, and even earlier cultures.

The Aztec Empire

The early origins of the Aztecs are cloudy, partly because this culture did not have a fully developed writing system for chronicling its history. Instead, the Aztecs relied on artistic records and oral traditions passed from generation to generation. They also used codices, book-like records drawn on bark paper that combined both images and pictograms. Based on information from these sources, historians have been able to place Aztec origins within the context of the collapse of the Toltec civilization.

Link to Learning

Aztec codices are similar to modern books, but instead of words they use images and icons to relay oral traditions. An example is the Codex Mendoza that was created around the year 1541. By scrolling through its pages, you will see both Aztec pictograms and Spanish translations.

The Toltec were an earlier Mesoamerican culture that filled the power vacuum created by the decline of Teotihuacán. From their capital at Tula, the Toltec dominated central Mexico between the tenth and twelfth centuries CE. When their civilization collapsed internally or was possibly conquered, a number of nomadic and warlike groups descended into the area, one of which appears to have been the Aztecs. A new period of cultural transformation and violent wars followed. The Aztecs clearly excelled in these military conflicts, likely acting as mercenaries. Ultimately, they were permitted to settle on a collection of islands within a large but shallow ancient lake called Lake Texcoco, one of five contiguous lakes that once spread across the Valley of Mexico.

Beyond the Book

The Aztec Origin Story

Much of our information about the Aztecs was recorded by the Spanish after they arrived in the sixteenth century. This is problematic for historians because Spanish religious leaders and conquistadores destroyed Indigenous records, particularly those that seemed to have religious significance. Since the Europeans viewed the Indigenous people through their own worldview and transformed Mesoamerica politically and culturally, their written accounts are often an imperfect means for understanding this people. Only by carefully studying the records we have, including Spanish accounts and Aztec codices, have scholars been able to piece together the story the Aztecs told themselves and their subject peoples about their origins.

The word *Aztec* is derived from their mythical original home, Aztlan. According to the Aztecs' own origin story, they migrated from Aztlan centuries before their rise to greatness in the Valley of Mexico. This long period of wandering in search of a new home included a number of important events, such as battles, encounters with sorcerers, significant tribal divisions, and the birth of important gods like Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec war god. The story culminates in a dramatic clash on the shore of Lake Texcoco. There the Aztec migrants faced an alliance of rebels who sought their destruction. They survived only because Huitzilopochtli intervened by sending his priests to kill the leader of the enemy alliance and rip out his heart. Huitzilopochtli then instructed the Aztec priests to throw the heart far into the lake. It landed on the island of Tenochtitlán and sprouted a

cactus, on which an eagle holding a snake landed. This was where Huitzilopochtli said the Aztecs should settle and build their great city (Figure 8.27).

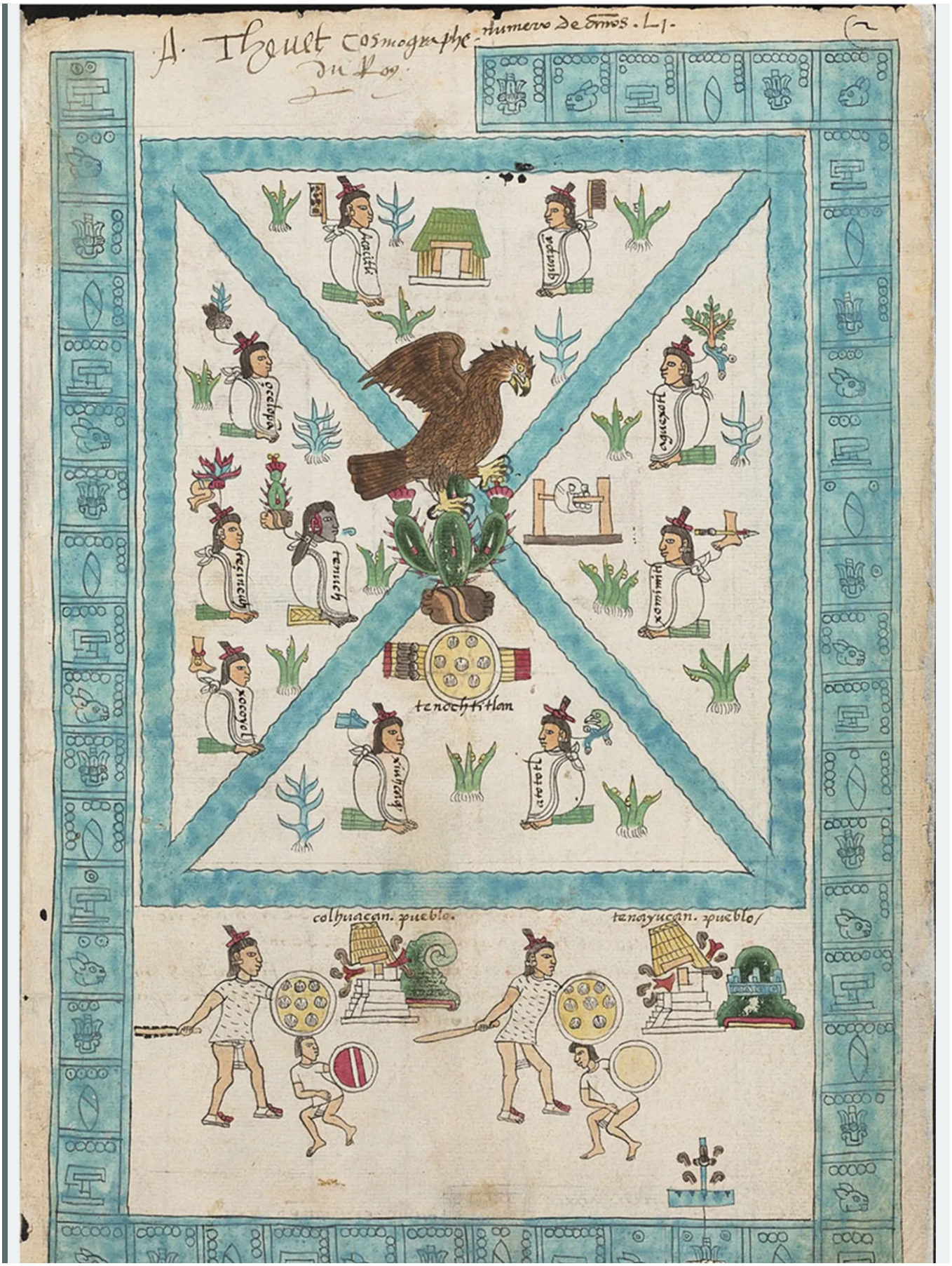

A. Thevet cosmographe du Roy.
tenochtitlan
colhuacan. pueblo.
tenayucan. pueblo.

Figure 8.27 The Aztec Origin Story. This colorful page of the sixteenth-century Aztec Codex Mendoza, written using traditional Aztec pictograms, shows the mythical battle with rebels on the shore of Lake Texcoco in the lower panel, and the eagle perched on the cactus above. (credit: "Codex Mendoza depicting the coat of arms of Mexico" by Bodleian Libraries/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While archaeological evidence contradicts some of this legend, origin stories do have special cultural and political significance. Not only did the Aztecs' migration story reinforce the important idea that they had emerged from obscurity to dominate the world, but different leaders also curated the history regularly to demonstrate that their reign was the culmination of earlier events. In this way, the story could change over time to support different rulers, general Aztec dominance, and specific cultural practices.

- Why might the Aztecs have wanted to emphasize that they came from a distant land?
- What other practical purposes might such an origin story serve?

The Aztecs began constructing their home city of Tenochtitlán among the islands within Lake Texcoco around 1325. During the following century, they survived by trading goods they could produce as well as continuing to serve as mercenaries for the surrounding powers. In this way, they accumulated wealth and supplied themselves with stone, which they used to transform their small island settlement into a large and architecturally sophisticated city. After acquiring some influence in the region, they formed an alliance with two neighboring city-states, Texcoco and Tlacopan. Then, in 1428, this Triple Alliance launched a surprise attack on the powerful city-state of Atzcapotzalco and made itself the dominant regional power. Over the next several decades, the Triple Alliance, with the Aztecs at its head, expanded its control of central Mexico to include Oaxaca in the west, parts of modern Guatemala in the south, and the areas bordering the Gulf of Mexico. By 1502, the newly crowned emperor of the Aztecs, Moctezuma II, was ruling an expansive empire from his capital city of Tenochtitlán (Figure 8.28).



Figure 8.28 The Triple Alliance. By 1502, the Aztec-led Triple Alliance held sway over a large portion of central Mexico (shown in green). (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

At its height in the early 1500s, Tenochtitlán had a population of at least 200,000 people. It was a massive island city with large causeways that connected it to the shores of the lake. Some of the city's land had been made by human intervention, which included creating artificial agricultural islands called *chinampas* around the city that were crisscrossed by canals for irrigation and transportation. These chinampas produced food for the city's occupants. Toward the center of the island where the land was more firm were the homes of the city's occupants, made mostly of adobe with flat roofs and built around small courtyards. At the center of the island were large temples, a ball court, administration buildings, homes for the elite, and the palaces of the rulers. The most impressive of the temples was the Templo Mayor, which was expanded numerous times during its long history. By the early 1500s, it was a dual stepped pyramid standing about ninety feet tall (Figure 8.29). One side was dedicated to the city's patron Tlaloc, the god of rain. The other side was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. Priests climbed a long staircase to the temple to perform important state rituals.



Figure 8.29 Tenochtitlán. At their height in the sixteenth century, the temples at Tenochtitlán were beautifully painted, as this modern model shows. (credit: "Model of the Templo Mayor (main temple) of Tenochtitlan" by "schizoform"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

One of the most important ceremonies performed at the Templo Mayor and other temples in Tenochtitlán was the ritual of human sacrifice. Like many Aztec traditions, this rite was widely practiced in Mesoamerica and had roots going back to the Olmec culture and likely earlier. Human sacrifices occurred on important days identified on the Aztec calendar and during the commemoration of new temples or the expansion of existing ones. Contemporary descriptions note that long lines of sacrificial victims were led up the steps to the temple platform. There they were laid on a sacrificial stone, where their chests were opened with a sharp flint or obsidian knife and their hearts removed by the executioner (Figure 8.30). The bodies were then tossed down the steps of the temple.

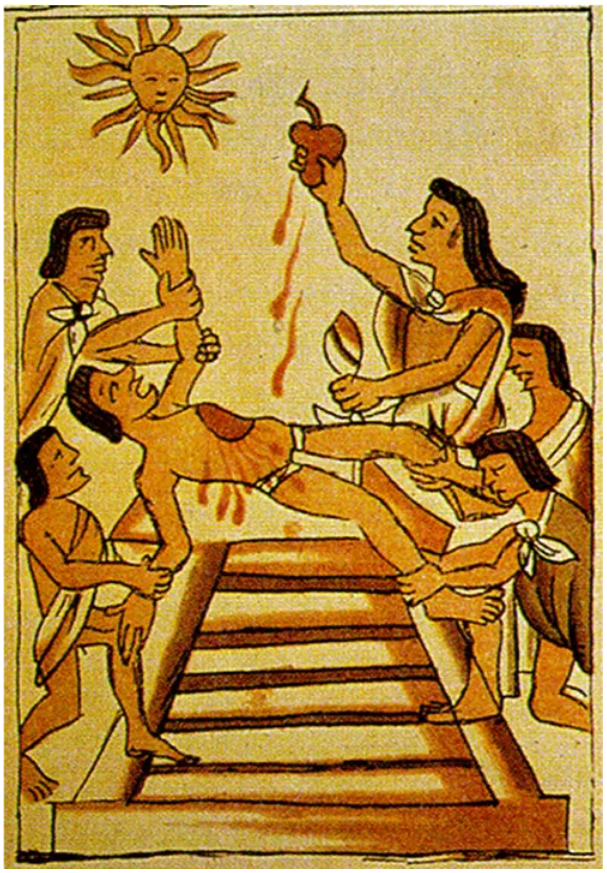


Figure 8.30 An Aztec Ritual. Like many pre-Columbian civilizations, the Aztecs considered human sacrifice an important part of their religious traditions. This image is from a sixteenth-century codex. (credit: “Aztec Human Sacrifice 10” by latinamericanstudies.org modification of "Image 242 of General History of the Things of New Spain by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Florentine Codex. Book II: The Ceremonies" by Library of Congress/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

These rituals were closely tied to Aztec cosmology and the people’s understanding of their role in the universe. The gods were believed to participate in the practice of sacrifice and to have used it to create the world and perpetuate its existence (Table 8.2). They often needed the assistance of human beings, who were created to serve and feed them through human sacrifice and other means. The sacrifices were thought to ensure that the sun stayed in the sky, the harvests continued to be bountiful, illnesses were kept at bay, and the military power of the Aztecs remained supreme.

Centeotl	The Aztec god of maize
Huitzilopochtli	The Aztec god of war
Quetzalcoatl	The “feathered serpent” and Aztec god of wind, dawn, merchants, and knowledge
Tlaloc	The Aztec god of rain
Coatlicue	The Aztec goddess of fertility and rebirth
Xiuhtecuhtli	The Aztec god of fire and creator of life

Table 8.2 The Aztec Gods

Human sacrifice was also an important means of preserving and expanding the empire and keeping conquered territories in line, since sacrificial victims were often those captured in battle. Thus, the goal in warfare was often to seize the enemy alive. Aztec war had important ritual purposes too. In some instances, it could be highly theatrical and consisted of paired individuals fighting each other, rather than large armies. Young boys began training to serve in the Aztec military from an early age. They drilled regularly

with javelins for throwing, leather-covered shields, and clubs fitted with obsidian blades. Until they were old enough and experienced enough to become warriors themselves, they worked in the service of veteran warriors (Figure 8.31).



Figure 8.31 An Aztec Warrior. Aztec warriors, like this one shown in a detail from the Codex Mendoza (c. 1542), trained from childhood to fight in wars for the empire. (credit: "Tlacochcalcatl" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Aztec Empire also exacted tribute payments from its conquered territories. At its height, the empire consisted of thirty-eight provinces, each expected to submit specific tribute to the imperial capitals. Occasionally, regions that resisted incorporation into the empire were given harsh terms. More often, the type of tribute demanded was related to the location of the tribute state and the goods it typically produced. For example, the Gulf coast area was known for natural rubber production and was assessed a tribute payment of sixteen thousand rubber balls for use in the Aztec ball game. Locations much closer to the capitals commonly provided goods like food that were expensive to transport over long distances. Those much farther away might be expected to provide luxury goods the Aztec elite gave as gifts to important warriors. Typical tribute items included cloth, tools like knives and other weapons, craft goods of all types, and of course, food. Tribute items could also include laborers to work on larger imperial projects. The Aztec tribute system functioned much like a crude system of economic exchange. Goods of all types flowed into the centers of power and the hands of elites. But they also made their way to commoners, who benefited from the diversity of the items the system made available.

As a highly militarized society, Aztec culture prized perceived male virtues like bravery, strength, and fighting ability. Warriors were expected to sacrifice themselves to perpetuate the glory of the state. When they were successful in battle, they were adorned

with rich cloth and celebrated by the masses. Aztec women operated within a more circumscribed world. They could not serve in the military or attain high positions within the state, yet they did not necessarily occupy a lower status than men. Rather, Aztec state culture emphasized the complementarity of women and men, with men expected to fill roles outside the home like farming and fighting and women responsible for domestic chores like cooking and weaving.

Aztec women thus often spent long hours grinding corn into meal and weaving clothing for the family. Their work could sometimes take them outside the home, such as to the markets where some gained considerable wealth as traders and served in leadership roles. As midwives and healers, women ensured that healthy children were born and that the sick were treated with medicines backed by centuries of knowledge about the medicinal properties of certain plants.

Aztec society was made up of a number of social tiers. At the bottom was a large number of enslaved people and commoners with no land. Above these were the commoners with land. Before the imperial expansion, landed commoners had some limited political power. However, within the imperial system they were relegated to providing food and service for the military. Above them were the many specialized craftspeople, merchants, and scribes. And above all commoners were the nobles, who used conspicuous displays of wealth to elevate themselves. They served in the most important military positions, on the courts, and in the priesthood.

The members of the Council of Four also came from the noble class. The council's primary task was to select the Aztec emperor, or *Huey Tlatoani*, from the ranks of the nobility. The emperor occupied a position far above everyone else in Aztec society. His coronation included elaborate rituals, processions, speeches, and performances, all meant to imbue him with enormous power. Even high-ranking nobles were obliged to lie face down in his presence.

The Aztec rulers had not always been so powerful or elevated so far above the masses. Their great authority and the ceremony of their office increased with the expansion of the empire. By the coronation of Moctezuma II in 1502, the office of emperor had reached its height, as had the empire. The expansion of the preceding decades had slowed, and demands for tribute and captives for ritual sacrifice were taking their toll and stirring resentment in many corners of the empire. It was into this context that the first Spanish explorers came. They were able to exploit the weaknesses in the empire and eventually bring about a new Spanish-centered order built on top of the old Aztec state.

The Inca Empire

At around the same time the Aztec Empire was expanding across Mesoamerica, an equally impressive new civilization was on the rise in the Andes region of South America. Known today as the Inca, its cultural and technological roots extend back to the earlier Andean cultures of the Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku. The heart of what became the Inca Empire was the city of Cuzco, located more than eleven thousand feet above sea level in the central Andes and northwest of the shores of Lake Titicaca. But centuries before it became an imperial city, it was a relatively modest agricultural community where the predecessors of the Inca farmed potatoes and maize and raised llamas and guanacos.

According to one Andean tradition, the origin story of the Inca began with a great flood that displaced four brothers and their wives and sent them on a mission to find fertile land where they could settle. During the journey, one of the brothers acquired incredible and supernatural strength. Consumed with jealousy, the other brothers sealed him in a cave and left him to die. They continued on, somewhat remorseful, but on the outskirts of Cuzco, two were mysteriously turned to stone. This left only one brother, Ayar Manco, who reached Cuzco, dipped his golden cane into the ground, and founded the city (Figure 8.32).



Figure 8.32 Ayar Manco. This eighteenth-century depiction of Ayar Manco, by Inca tradition the founder of the city of Cuzco, names him its first king and shows him with his golden staff. (credit: “Manco Capac, First Inca, 1 of 14 Portraits of Inca Kings” by Dick S. Ramsay Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Marie Bernice Bitzer Fund, Frank L. Babbott Fund, The Roebling Society, The American Art Council, Anonymous, Maureen and Marshall Cogan, Karen B. Cohen, Georgia and Michael deHavenon, Harry Kahn, Alastair B. Martin, Ted and Connie Roosevelt, Frieda and Milton F. Rosenthal, Sol Schreiber in memory of Ann Schreiber, Joanne Witty and Eugene Keilin, Thomas L. Pulling, Roy J. Zuckerberg, Kitty and Herbert Glantz, Ellen and Leonard L. Milberg, Paul and Thérèse Bernbach, Emma and J. A. Lewis, Florence R. Kingdon/Brooklyn Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The fantastical story of the Ayar brothers, with its descriptions of magic and supernatural events, is clearly partly fictional, and it is not the only origin myth about the Inca. However, it may preserve a kernel of truth about the early group that founded Cuzco, perhaps after some type of migration prompted by changes in climate. We may never fully know, but based on historical and archaeological evidence, we do know the people of Cuzco emerged as agricultural villagers by around 1000. Through both peaceful and violent means, they assumed a dominant position in the larger surrounding region. Over time, their numbers grew, and they became one of a number of small military powers in the Andean region, centered on the growing city of Cuzco. As master stonemasons, the Inca were capable of carefully carving stones so they fit tightly together (Figure 8.33). At its height in the early sixteenth century, Cuzco was an impressive stone city built high in the Andes.



Figure 8.33 Inca Stonework at Sacsayhuamán. While many of the Inca-built parts of Cuzco were destroyed in later centuries, the sixteenth-century site of Sacsayhuamán nearby preserves its ancient walls of stones, so skillfully hewn as to fit together tightly without mortar. (credit: “Peru - Cusco Sacred Valley & Incan Ruins 005 – Sacsaywamán” by McKay Savage/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The leap to imperial expansion is explained by another Inca legend, this time telling of a military challenge from a rival group known as the Chanka and involving real historical figures. When the Chanka arrived at Cuzco, King Wiraqocha fled the city with his heir, leaving only a small group of nobles aligned with another son, Yupanki, to stand their ground. The defenders’ act of courage inspired the creator god of the Inca to intervene by transforming the surrounding stones into warriors who helped Yupanki defeat the Chanka. In the aftermath of the victory, the story goes on, Yupanki assumed the additional title of Pachacuti, meaning “cataclysm.” But the victory also led to an internal dispute between Pachacuti Yupanki and the reigning king, his father. This was ultimately resolved in Pachacuti Yupanki’s favor, and he assumed control of Cuzco and the Inca, whereupon he began a series of wars of expansion that gave birth to the Inca Empire.

While this story was partly contrived, there is no doubt that Inca expansion did occur, and Pachacuti appears to have been a real leader. The empire’s growth began in earnest around 1430 during his reign, and as king he oversaw the conquest of much of modern Peru. His successors, Thumpa and Wayna Qhapaq, further expanded the empire by adding territory far to the south in today’s Chile and Argentina, to the east in the edges of the Amazon basin, and to the north in Ecuador and Colombia. These wars were costly in lives and material, but they were also important for sharpening the skills of the Inca military.

Inca warriors wore helmets and cloth armor, carried shields, and were equipped with weapons like clubs, spears, slings, and axes (Figure 8.34). Typically, they could use their great numbers to overwhelm and awe the enemy into capitulation. If that failed, they rushed into the fray, often with little discipline but with great courageous resolve. Apart from the sheer power of numbers, the Inca military excelled in its ability to move swiftly along the empire’s complicated highland road systems to surprise the enemy and put down any emerging rebellions.

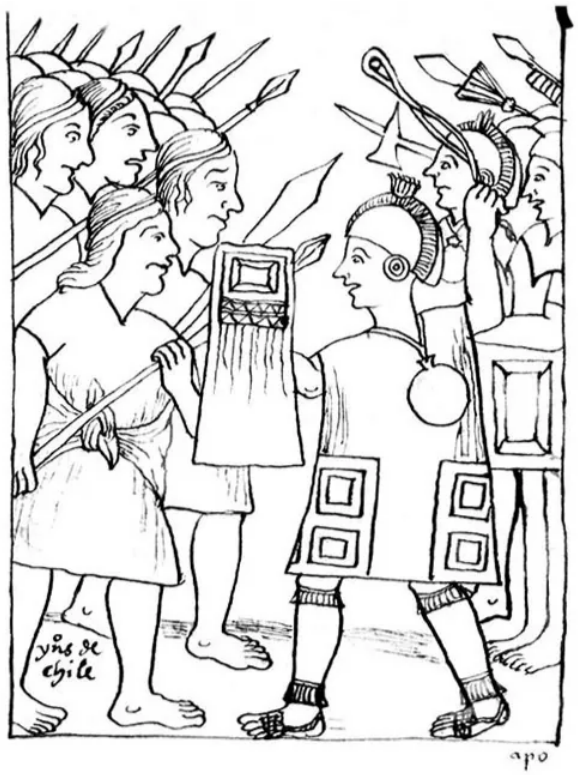


Figure 8.34 Inca Soldiers. The Inca armies could use their vast numbers to intimidate rivals into capitulation. In this seventeenth-century image by Huamán Poma de Ayala, a Peruvian chronicler of the Spanish conquest, the Inca soldiers in their feathered helmets are on the right, and their enemy faces them on the left. (credit: "Huamán Poma de Ayala's picture of the confrontation between the Mapuches (left) and the Incas (right)" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The empire created through conquest was divided into four administrative regions controlled by close relatives of the emperor (Figure 8.35). Each region was then broken down into a number of provinces, organized generally along ethnic lines and ruled by an imperial governor selected from the Inca nobility. A great variety of crops were produced across the empire including potatoes, coca, cotton, and maize. Surpluses were held in large storehouses to feed the armies and provide sustenance in times of famine. The subjects of the empire were also expected to provide labor for the construction of roads, bridges, palaces, and religious structures and to serve as messengers, transport food to storehouses, or serve in the military. Certain members of each household submitted their labor tax while others stayed home to manage the family's affairs.



Figure 8.35 The Inca Empire. At its height in the early sixteenth century, the Inca Empire controlled an enormous area that reached from modern Columbia down into modern Chile and Argentina. It was divided into four administrative regions: Chinchansuyu, Antisuyu, Cuntinsuyu, and Collasuyu. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

In Their Own Words

Inca Quipus: Writing with String

Unlike the Maya, the Inca did not have a writing system that could be inked into a codex or carved in stone. But they did have an ingenious recordkeeping and communication system that relied on a portable device called a *quipu* (“kee-poo”), made of a great number of knotted strings (Figure 8.36).

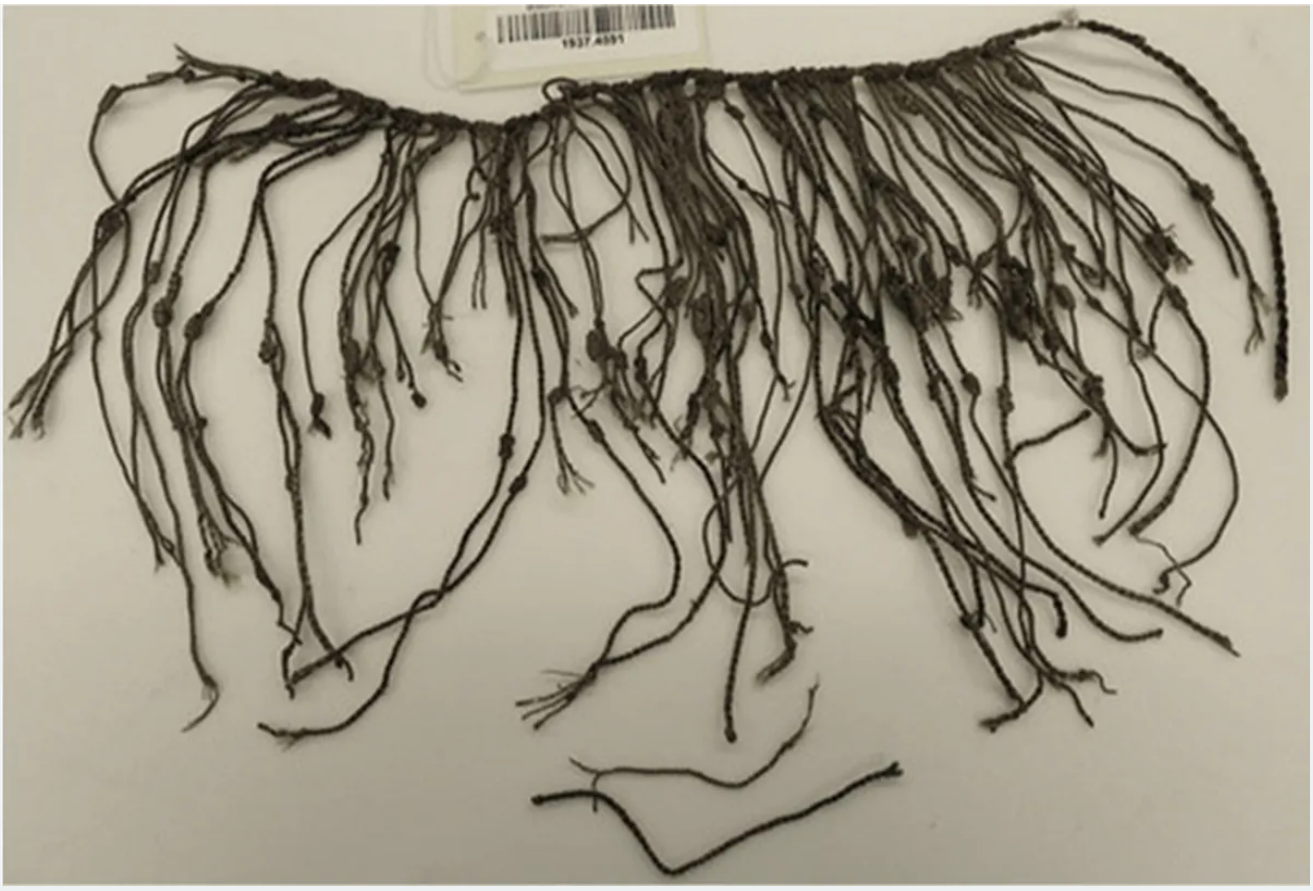


Figure 8.36 An Inca Quipu. The quipu of knotted string was a complex but portable Inca recording device. This fragment was made between 1400 and 1600. (credit: “Quipu fragment” by Yale University Art Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While many were destroyed by the Inca and later the Spanish, and much knowledge necessary to decipher them has been lost, surviving quipus have been carefully studied. They could record quantitative information like census and tax data, land allocations, the movements of armies, and astronomical observations. They also held qualitative information like ideas and possibly even poems. Different-colored strings and different types of knots that could be tied, untied, and retied made many thousands of combinations possible.

The Spanish were reluctant at first to believe that quipus accurately preserved information. The sixteenth-century explorer Pedro de Cieza de Léon reported:

> *When I was at Marcavillca, in the province of Xauxa, I asked the lord Guacarapora to explain it in such a way as that my mind might be satisfied, and that I might be assured that it was true and accurate. He ordered his servants to bring the quipus, and as this lord was a native, and a man of good understanding, he proceeded to make the thing clear to me. He told me to observe that all that he, for his part, had delivered to the Spaniards from the time that the governor Don Francisco Pizarro arrived in the valley, was duly noted down without any fault or omission. Thus I saw the accounts for the gold, the silver, the clothes, the corn, sheep, and other things; so that in truth I was quite astonished.*
>
> *—Pedro de Cieza de Léon, The Second Part of the Chronicle of Peru, translated by Clements R. Markham*

According to Garcilasco de la Vega, born in the sixteenth century to Spanish and Inca parents, quipus could even record poems:

> *They were composed in accordance with a fable they had, as follows: they say that the Creator placed a maiden, the daughter of a king, in the sky with a pitcher full of water which she spills when the earth needs it, and that one of her brothers breaks it occasionally, and the blow causes thunder and lightning. . . . The fable and verses, Padre Blas Valera says he found in the knots and beads of some ancient annals in threads of different colors.*
>
> *—Garcilasco de la Vega, Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru, translated by Harold V. Livermore*

- Why might the Spanish have destroyed many quipus?
- How would you go about translating a quipu? What methods might you employ?

Apart from military violence and an organized imperial administration system, the Inca used religious symbolism to hold their empire together. A complex ritual calendar was overseen by religious experts whom the king and nobles regularly consulted before making political or military decisions. The Inca used human sacrifice in some rituals, but apparently not as readily as the Aztec of Mesoamerica. Among their most important deities was the sky god, who could manifest in a number of different forms such as the creator god Wiraqocha, the thunder god Illapa, and the sun god Inti. Inti was of particular importance because Inca rulers claimed direct descent from him. They constructed temples to Inti around the empire, encouraged his worship, and incorporated representations of conquered peoples into Inti's key temple in Cuzco. In this way, the Inca cemented stronger ties between their rulers and the large and diverse empire they had created.

Link to Learning

In the fifteenth century, the Inca built a large palace complex high in the mountains above Cuzco that is now called Machu Picchu. You can tour the impressive ruins of Machu Picchu at this link.

One of the empire's most important features, and one that held its expansive territory together, were the many roads and bridges that laced through its vast domains. Unlike the Aztec Empire, which expanded across a far more topographically consistent landscape, the Inca Empire included large mountain ranges, canyons, deserts, and narrow coastal valleys. Travel and communication were difficult in this extreme landscape and necessitated a technologically sophisticated road and bridge system. While elements of the network predated the Inca, it was under Inca rule that the larger network was expanded and greatly improved. At the height of the empire, the system may have included as many as twenty-five thousand miles of roads. These roads were as diverse as the landscape itself, including straight passages across flat land, winding paths and staircases around and up mountains, and numerous canyon-spanning bridges made of rope, stone, and wood (Figure 8.37). On them the Inca armies traveled, and goods produced in the provinces made their way to the imperial storehouses.



Figure 8.37 An Inca Road. The mountainous terrain of the Inca Empire necessitated roads like this one to connect the many important cities and regions.(credit: “Stone steps and mountains on the Inca Trail” by “Mx._Granger”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Like the Aztec Empire, the Inca Empire had just reached its height on the eve of the Spanish arrival in the early 1530s. Diseases brought by Europeans had already weakened it by then, even leading to the untimely death of Emperor Wayna Qhapaq in 1528. Just a few years later, the Spanish conqueror Francisco Pizarro reached Ecuador with his small army. There he found new Inca subjects eager to ally themselves with a possible enemy of the empire, while the Inca themselves were in the midst of a minor civil war over who would ascend the newly vacated throne. By 1532, the Spanish had entered the conflict and emerged masters of the empire, upon which they constructed their own system.

Complex Societies in North America

After many centuries of cultivating maize to supplement their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, around 500 BCE, groups in the American Southwest began to establish permanent villages supported by farming. Over the next few centuries, settled villages with permanent homes supplied with large storage pits for maize proliferated across the region. The agricultural peoples of these villages are often subdivided into three major cultural groups: the Mogollon tradition in the south, the Hohokam tradition in the west, and the Anasazi or Ancestral Pueblo tradition in the north (Figure 8.38). They were in contact with each other and shared a number of similarities. Their early settlements consisted of a number of oval and circular pit houses, partly underground and built of wooden poles covered in dried mud. These could be ventilated by rooftop openings accessible by internal ladders. Such homes were especially well suited to the sun-drenched environment and provided a cool escape from the hot outside temperatures. They also efficiently preserved heat during winter, when conditions could get exceedingly cold.



Figure 8.38 Traditions of the American Southwest. Three large and distinct cultural traditions emerged in the Southwest beginning around 500 CE: the Mogollon, the Hohokam, and the Anasazi. (credit: modification of work “Regions of ancient regional tribes in the southwestern United States and Northwestern Mexico” by “Ricraider”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

Settlements varied in size from a handful of homes to as many as sixty. The design of the dwellings and the complexity of the settlements varied as well, with both generally increasing over time. By around 700, for example, large ceremonial meeting-house structures called *kivas* had become common in the central and northern areas. These were likely the local centers of religious ceremonies and civic life. In the centuries after 700, the settlements evolved into larger collections of multiroom structures built of dried adobe clay and stone. By 900, similar permanent settlements dotted the larger southwestern landscape, including in modern New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Texas, and the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

Some of the most impressive settlements that remain include Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico, Cliff Palace in Colorado, and Casas Grandes in Chihuahua. Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon began to expand into the large masonry settlement visible in its ruins today around 800, when its residents abandoned their pit houses for the larger pueblo-style rooms. Pueblo architecture used stone or wooden frames covered in adobe clay. The houses and other buildings made in this way tended to have flat roofs that could be used as terraces.

At Pueblo Bonito, the houses were organized in a U-shape around the old pits from the pit houses, which were then used as kivas. This settlement reached its peak around 1000, which may have meant a modest population of about one hundred people, though its

six hundred pueblo rooms could have housed as many as one thousand. In addition to being an important agricultural settlement, Pueblo Bonito was a major ceremonial center and likely attracted groups from the surrounding area for significant events. Some residents were clearly of particular importance, as indicated by the 130 burial sites and associated objects discovered there.

In addition to Pueblo Bonito, at least seventy other communities of varying sizes were scattered across the larger Chaco Canyon area. The total population of these settlements may have included as many as 5,500 people. Connections between them are suggested by shared pottery and architectural styles, and by the network of roads that pass through some settlements while radiating outward from the canyon like spokes on a wheel.

A long period of drought after 1130 led the residents of Chaco Canyon and Pueblo Bonito to abandon their settlements for other areas that promised sustenance. By about 1200, the old settlements were empty. Some eighty miles to the north in Mesa Verde, conditions were wetter and natural resources more plentiful, and groups there built a number of impressive cliffside dwellings. Construction of one of the largest settlements, today called Cliff Palace, began around 1190. Archaeologists believe this settlement was made as a defensive measure when competition for scarce resources was becoming more intense. Similar cliffside settlements were built in other places in the region for the same reason. Cliff Palace had twenty-three kivas and 220 rooms made of sandstone, mortar, and wood. They extend up the side of the cliff, some towering twenty-six feet tall (Figure 8.39). Like Pueblo Bonito, Cliff Palace also likely had a population of about one hundred people. And for just over a century, the settlement prospered, until expanding drought conditions forced the residents to abandon it and the many other Mesa Verde settlements around 1300.

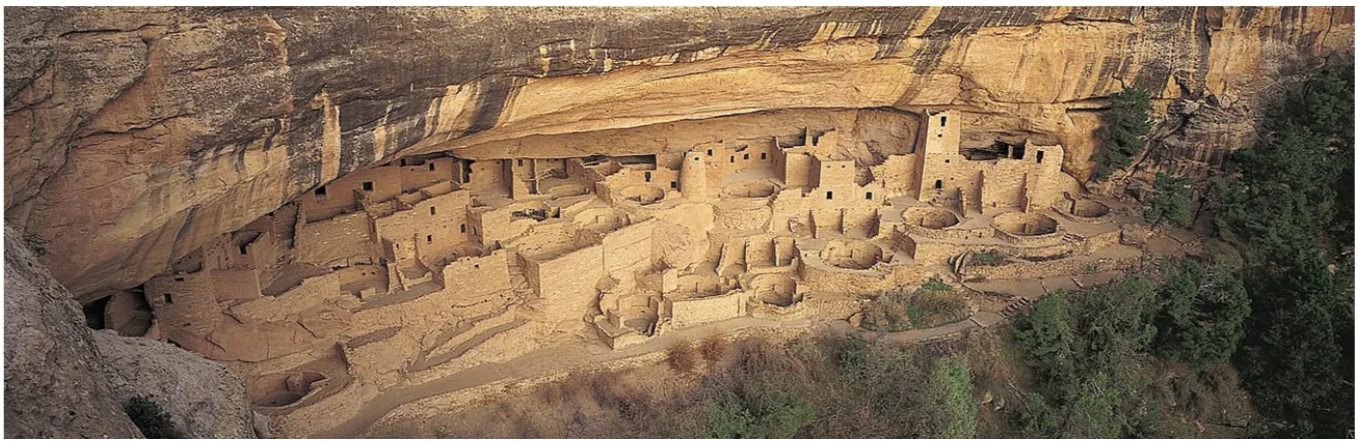


Figure 8.39 The Cliff Palace. Construction of the impressive cliffside dwellings at the Cliff Palace site in modern southwest Colorado began about 1190. Residents used wooden ladders to reach their elevated homes. (credit: “Trail of the Ancients - Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde National Park” by U.S. National Archives and Records Administration/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Far to the south of Mesa Verde were the settlements of the Mogollon tradition. One of the more impressive is known today as Casas Grandes or Paquimé (Figure 8.40). Set in a flat arid portion of northern Chihuahua, Mexico, near the modern U.S. border, Casas Grandes emerged as an important agricultural settlement in the fourteenth century. Far more agriculturally productive than its northern Anasazi neighbors, Casas Grandes may have had a population of almost 2,300 people at its height. These people lived in adobe structures clustered close together and surrounded by a large enclosure wall.



Figure 8.40 Casas Grandes. The ruins of Casas Grandes stand as a testament to the productivity of this once-large city. Its population—more than two thousand at its height in the fourteenth century—was far larger than that at settlements like Pueblo

Bonito or Cliff Palace. (credit: “Wide view of Paquime” by Luis Serrano/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Because of its adobe design, Casas Grandes bears a superficial resemblance to some Anasazi communities. But the site actually has more in common with the Mesoamerican civilizations far to its south. For example, there are no kivas at Casas Grandes, but there are ruins of a large I-shaped Mesoamerican-style ball court. Among the valuable trading goods produced at Casas Grandes were colorful macaw feathers commonly used in Anasazi rituals. These indicate that trading networks existed between Casas Grandes and the Anasazi to their north. By the start of the fifteenth century, however, Casas Grandes was entering a period of decline; by the end of the century, it had been abandoned.

Around the same time that settled agricultural communities were becoming common in the Southwest, the Eastern Woodlands region was going through its own cultural transformations. On the former site of the Adena and Hopewell traditions, a new mound-building culture called the Mississippian tradition began to emerge around 700. This large and sophisticated culture constructed some of the biggest and most impressive of all the ceremonial mounds in the region.

The Mississippian tradition was apparently sparked by the adoption of maize agriculture from much farther south. Maize may have arrived in the Eastern Woodlands as early as 800 and was adopted by groups already accustomed to farming edible plants like sunflowers and bottle gourds. By 1000, its cultivation had become common throughout the region, even among groups that had not used agricultural techniques before. Bean cultivation was also spreading around the Eastern Woodlands, and at about the same time, people in the area began to use the bow and arrow, especially for hunting small animals like birds.

Combined, these changes brought about a major cultural shift in the Eastern Woodlands marked by the appearance of large settled agricultural communities and the spread of common cultural, architectural, and technological practices. A number of settlements arose throughout the Mississippi River valley and as far away as Georgia and Florida. Most were small chiefdoms built around one or just a few earthen mounds. Occasionally, smaller settlements were grouped into larger chiefdoms, and in a few important places, the settlements were exceptionally large, with populations in the thousands. Archaeological discoveries reveal that these settlements communicated and traded with each other, maintaining large trading networks that linked their many urban centers. Artifacts have been found many hundreds of miles from the site of their manufacture, and common architectural and artistic details suggest that cultural ideas too were disseminated far and wide.

The Mississippian site at Cahokia near modern St. Louis is possibly the most elaborate and important researched thus far. Earlier settlements nearby were smaller and date to about 600. But around 1050, the large urban center of Cahokia began to emerge, reaching its peak about 1250 before experiencing a gradual decline. At its height, Cahokia and its surrounding settlements covered nearly four square miles, had a population as large as sixteen thousand people, and included well over one hundred different mounds. At the center was a network of large mounds organized around a 100-foot-tall temple mound, built in stages with a wooden structure at its summit and a large staircase leading up from the surrounding plaza (Figure 8.41). Wood and thatch houses of various sizes radiated out from the central plaza and into the surrounding maize fields. Around the central complex of mounds and the homes of the elite was a large defensive wall, with watchtowers spaced at intervals around it.



Figure 8.41 Monks Mound at Cahokia. The terraced remains of Monks Mound at Cahokia, completed around 1100, stand today as the largest human-made earthen mound in North America. It rises almost one hundred feet above the surrounding landscape. (credit: “Monk’s mound panorama” by Tim Vickers/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Other mounds at Cahokia served as burial mounds and platforms for ritual performances. Some of the rituals included human sacrifice, not unlike those common in Mesoamerica. One of the excavated mounds at the site contained the remains of several

dozen sacrificial victims. At the base of this mound, archaeologists found the remains of two men, one buried face down, one face up. The man facing up had been placed on a bed of more than twenty thousand shells arranged in the shape of a large bird, suggesting that he was a particularly important person. Among the items buried with this "birdman" were hundreds of arrowheads, copper pieces, and a number of stones, elements of a ritual ball game called *chunkey* that may have had the same significance for the Mississippians as the rubber ball game had for Mesoamerican civilizations (Figure 8.42).



Figure 8.42 The Game of Chunkey. In this painting by the widely traveled nineteenth-century artist George Catlin, Native Americans living in North Dakota are shown playing the game of chunkey. The roots of this game, played with sticks and a rolling disk, go back to the time of Cahokia and perhaps much earlier. (credit: "Tchung-kee, a Mandan Game Played with a Ring and Pole" by George Catlin/Smithsonian American Art Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The "birdman's" identity is not clear, but whether a leader, a shaman, or even an important warrior, he was a member of Cahokia's elite. Cahokia and other large Mississippian settlements had a distinct nobility with access to luxury goods and a surplus of food produced by a large population of commoners who did agricultural work. Sites like Cahokia likely derived their power from their ability to exact tribute from surrounding groups, and from their control of long-distance trade routes that brought exotic items such as marine shells, rare stones, copper goods, and the feathers of colorful birds from distant lands.

Link to Learning

Learn more about the history and archaeological discoveries of Cahokia at the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society website. You can also explore an interactive map of Cahokia at this link.

Despite Cahokia's obvious power, the settlement was relatively short-lived. By 1250, it had entered a period of decline, and ultimately it was abandoned. This did not mark the end of the Mississippian tradition itself, however. Sites like Moundville in Alabama, Etowah in Georgia, and many others bloomed in the wake of Cahokia's demise. However, by about 1375, these large chiefdoms had begun to collapse as well. As the larger Mississippian tradition declined, so too did the long-distance trade routes. The people who had once lived at the large settlements became more dispersed across the Eastern Woodlands, leading to the emergence of a number of new groups. By the time the first Spanish explorers arrived in 1539, Cahokia was long gone. But from

the records the Spanish kept, we know there were still a number of smaller chiefdoms scattered across the Eastern Woodlands. These were clearly different from the earlier Mississippian chiefdoms, but they still displayed many of the cultural traditions that had arisen centuries before.

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7.5: Key Terms

Beringia

a section of low-lying land between modern Alaska and Russia, now underwater, that once served as a land bridge between continents

Clovis culture

a culture consisting of mobile bands of hunter-gatherers who camped at resource-rich locations in modest populations across North America

Hopewell tradition

a widely dispersed mound-building tradition that emerged in the Eastern Woodlands around 200 BCE, linked by a network of trade routes

Mississippian tradition

a widely dispersed mound-building tradition that created a number of urban settlements linked by trading networks in the southeastern United States around 700

Nazca Lines

a group of geoglyphs made on the desert floor in southern Peru representing both geometric patterns and images of animals

Norte Chico

the culture of partially settled agricultural communities in the Andes region; also known as the Caral civilization

Pueblo architecture

a building style of the early American Southwest that relied on stone or wooden frames covered in adobe clay

Triple Alliance

an alliance formed in 1428 between the Aztecs and two neighboring city-states, Texcoco and Tlacopan

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7.6: Section Summary

8.1 Populating and Settling the Americas

During the last glacial period, modern humans crossed Beringia and entered the Americas for the first time, migrating across North, Central, and South America. They relied on hunting large game and may have contributed to the extinction of some animals. Later they became more settled in a number of regions, adapting their hunter-gatherer strategies to their environments and the available resources.

About nine thousand years ago, groups like those in the Andes region began experimenting with animal domestication. Later they began to cultivate edible plants like squash, bottle gourds, and later the potato. In Mesoamerica, the shift to maize-based agriculture began at some point between 5000 and 3000 BCE. By around 2500 BCE, the use of domesticated maize had become more common and enabled the settlement of agricultural villages that combined the strategies of hunting and gathering with maize cultivation. Over time, the advantages of maize agriculture became more obvious, and exclusively sedentary agricultural communities emerged. In the Eastern Woodlands, a different agricultural tradition emerged independently by 2000 BCE. In each area, plant domestication allowed Neolithic settlements to begin, from which larger cultures and civilizations later grew.

8.2 Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas

The Olmec civilization formed around 1200 BCE and developed sophisticated religious traditions, a calendar system, and a ritual ball game. The Olmec influenced Mesoamerican cultures that followed, including the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, the Teotihuacanos of the Valley of Mexico, and the Maya of southern Mexico and Guatemala. By 300 BCE, Teotihuacán was among the largest cities in the world and controlled a vast trading network. By that time, a handful of powerful Maya city-states like Tikal, Calakmul, and El Mirador had grown to large urban centers and were using their own sophisticated writing and calendar system.

In the Andes region of South America, Chavín culture began expanding around 900 BCE, spreading its distinctive artistic and religious traditions. In the wake of the Chavín collapse in 200 BCE, new states like the Moche, the Nazca, and the Tiwanaku emerged and thrived in the Andes.

In North America, the complex societies of the Adena tradition emerged in the Ohio River valley around 1000 BCE and built a number of earthen burial mounds. This tradition was followed by other mound-building cultures like the Hopewell tradition. Very different traditions developed in the Southwest, where maize agriculture was incorporated into a largely hunter-gatherer existence as early as the third millennium BCE. But in this dry environment, settled and entirely agricultural communities did not begin to emerge until around 200 CE.

8.3 The Age of Empires in the Americas

In Mesoamerica in the fifteenth century, the Aztec Empire expanded to control central Mexico from its island city of Tenochtitlán. In addition to building large temples, ball courts, and palaces, the Aztec practiced human sacrifice as an important religious ritual. In the Andean region, the Inca Empire expanded to control a large swath of western South America from its capital at Cuzco, eleven thousand feet above sea level. The empire was created by trained warriors, employed a tribute system, and was held together by a vast network of roads through its largely mountainous terrain.

Intensive agriculture of maize in the Southwest and Eastern Woodlands led to enormous changes in both regions. By around 900, a number of settlements had grown in the Southwest, such as Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon, the cliffside dwellings at Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde, and the larger Casas Grandes settlement in northern Mexico. In the Eastern Woodlands, the adoption of maize agriculture around 800 led to the rise of the Mississippian tradition and large agricultural communities across the Mississippi River valley. Most were small chiefdoms, but a few like Cahokia were exceptionally large, with populations in the thousands.

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7.7: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
Why has evidence of earlier coastal migrations down the west coast of North America not been discovered?

a. There is resistance to these theories.
b. The likely sites are now covered by water.
c. The migrants probably did not follow the coast.
d. The legal fight over Kennewick Man prevented it.

2.
What activity best characterizes the Clovis people?

a. They were settled agriculturalists.
b. They lived on the salmon abundant in the areas where they lived.
c. They were mobile big-game hunters.
d. They were prolific mound builders.

3.
Where did maize agriculture initially begin?

a. Mesoamerica
b. Eastern Woodlands
c. Pacific Northwest
d. Andean region

4.
What edible plant was domesticated in the Eastern Woodlands?

a. sunflower
b. maize
c. potato
d. quinoa

5.
For what ancient method of hunting bison have archaeologists uncovered evidence in places like Texas and Montana?

a. using large reed traps
b. shooting bison with bows and arrows
c. driving bison over cliffs
d. chasing bison with horses

6.
What species was an important source of protein for the people of the Pacific Northwest?

a. llamas
b. salmon
c. guanacos
d. guinea pigs

7.
What does it mean to call Olmec civilization a “mother culture?”

a. Its expansion led to the creation of other similar cultures.
b. It expanded from San Lorenzo to La Venta.
c. It encouraged the production of stone heads in northern Mexico.
d. It founded important Maya city-states.

8.
What was the political organization of the larger Maya world?

a. It was a large empire.

b. It was a confederation with one elite city.
c. It was a collection of independent city-states.
d. It was made up of two large multicity kingdoms.

9.
What South American culture gave birth to the Early Horizon period?

a. Chavín
b. Tiwanaku
c. Moche
d. Nazca

10.
How did the Hopewell tradition people transform the environment to suit their needs?

a. They built large stone temples.
b. They farmed maize in river deltas.
c. They created animal depictions in the desert.
d. They created earthen mounds.

11.
What two Mesoamerican civilizations were contemporaries?

a. Olmec and Zapotec
b. Teotihuacano and Zapotec
c. Olmec and Teotihuacano
d. Maya and Olmec

12.
What Mesoamerican civilization created a complex writing system for recording its history and genealogies?

a. Olmec
b. Teotihuacáno
c. Maya
d. Zapotec

13.
What conclusions have scholars drawn from the art left behind by the Moche?

a. They were a highly militaristic people.
b. They were a nonagricultural people.
c. They engaged in peaceful religious expansion.
d. They maintained a strong relationship with the Maya.

14.
Where did the Aztec establish their city?

a. Lake Texcoco
b. Oaxaca
c. Gulf lowlands
d. Aztlan

15.
In what role did Aztec women serve?

a. soldiers
b. farmers
c. healers
d. diplomats

16.
According to Inca legend, what event brought Yupanki to power in Cuzco?

a. He placed his golden staff in the ground.

b. He defeated the Chanka offensive.
c. He turned his brothers to stone.
d. He constructed a temple to Inti.

17.
What was a major reason for the cultural shift in the Mississippian tradition?

a. the adoption of maize agriculture
b. the start of earthen mound building
c. the construction of cliffside dwellings
d. the use of human sacrifice

18.
What serves as strong evidence that the builders of Casas Grandes were culturally influenced by Mesoamerican civilizations farther south?

a. the presence of kivas
b. the presence of an I-shaped ball court
c. the presence of macaw feathers
d. the presence of adobe structures

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7.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What were the societal consequences of abundant and available resources in the Pacific Northwest for the hunter-gatherers who lived there?
2.
What recent discoveries have challenged earlier views about how migrations to the Americas occurred?
3.
What evidence supports the conclusion that Teotihuacán wielded great influence in the larger Mesoamerican world during its height?
4.
How did Maya civilization adapt to the environmental conditions of its surroundings?
5.
What was the significance of human sacrifice for the Aztec?
6.
What practical purpose did the construction of Inti temples have for the administration of the Inca Empire?

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7.9: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
Why do you think maize agriculture became very common in Mesoamerica but was of only minor importance in South America?
2.
If evidence of 15,000-year-old rafts and canoes was found along the Pacific coast, how might this change our understanding of early migration in the Americas?
3.
Do you think the Olmec culture was a “mother culture” for the later Mesoamerican civilizations? Why or why not?
4.
If you were a visitor to an Olmec or Maya city, what would you experience from the start of your stay to the end?
5.
What do you think life was like for the Anasazi living in the cliffside dwellings? What might a member of the community experience during a typical day?
6.
How might you have responded to acts of human sacrifice if you lived in the Aztec Empire? Why?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Empires of Faith

8.1: Introduction
8.2: The Eastward Shift
8.3: The Byzantine Empire and Persia
8.4: The Kingdoms of Aksum and Himyar
8.5: The Margins of Empire
8.6: Key Terms
8.7: Section Summary
8.8: Review Questions
8.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
8.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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8.1: Introduction

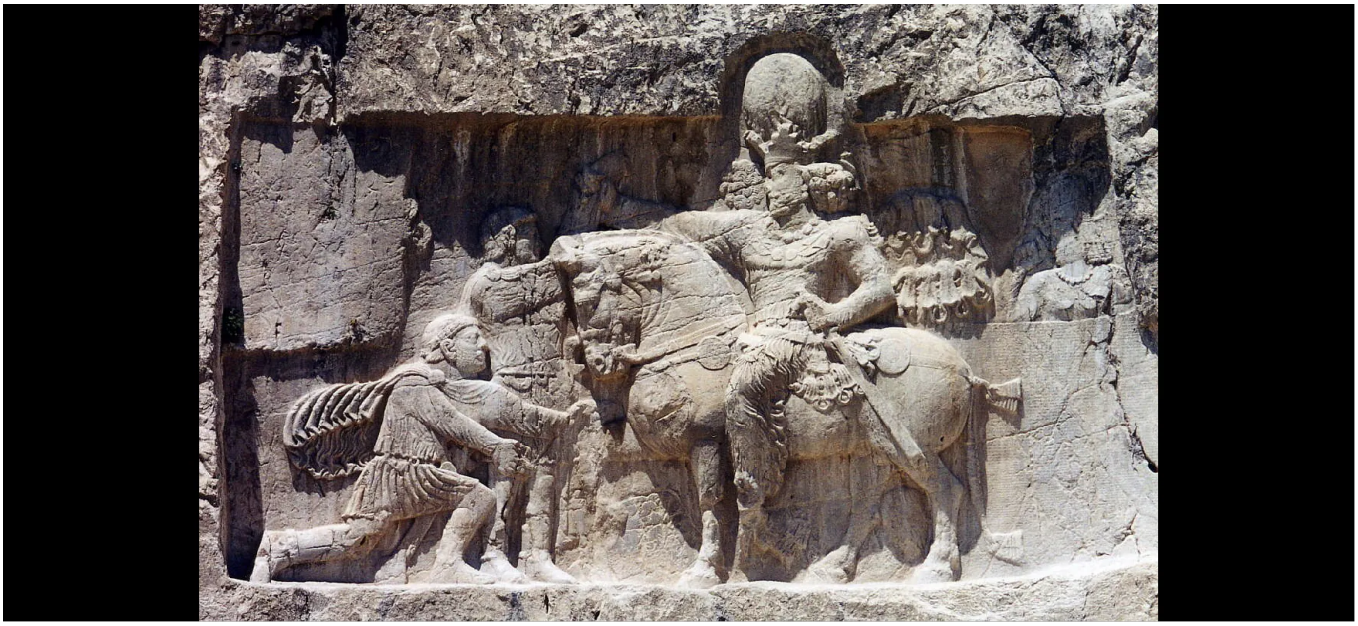


Figure 10.1 Sasanians in Victory. This rock relief carving from Naqsh-e Rostam (in modern Iran) depicts the Sasanian victory over the Romans at the Battle of Edessa in 260 CE. On the right, King Shapur I looks down from his horse at the kneeling Valerian, the first Roman emperor ever taken captive in battle. (credit: modification of work “Naqsh i Rustam. Shapour” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

Chapter Outline

10.1 The Eastward Shift
10.2 The Byzantine Empire and Persia
10.3 The Kingdoms of Aksum and Himyar
10.4 The Margins of Empire

The later Roman Empire was a time of profound cultural, political, and religious transformations. Various crises in the Roman government, as well as the rise of Christianity, propelled these changes. In the third century CE, the emperor Valerian’s capture by the Sasanians was an indication of how easily the Roman Empire’s prominence could fluctuate and fissure (Figure 10.1). Stretching from the island of Britannia (Britain) in the Roman West to Syria in the Roman East, the empire continually struggled in its relationships with foreign groups on its eastern and western frontiers. The threatening presence of the Sasanians and other marginal states in the Mediterranean, including various Germanic kingdoms in the west and Palmyra in the east, reflected a new state of affairs.

The empire shifted its focus eastward, a trend signaled most prominently by its reorientation around its new capital in Constantinople (today’s Istanbul). The Romans then saw their power and sphere of influence shift as well. With a growing Christian population and shrinking borders, the entity that now became the Byzantine Empire persisted in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet it had to grapple with the migration of different groups through its territory as well as the disintegration of the western empire into small independent states. In addition, smaller states such as Aksum in sub-Saharan Africa and the Kushan Empire in central Asia came onto the scene during this period, establishing their own thriving societies away from the Mediterranean while being interconnected as neighbors and trade partners. The interrelationships among this multitude of states reflect the complicated circumstances of the Late Antique world.







Aksum and

Sasanian victory

Diocletian



Figure 10.2 Timeline: Empires of Faith (credit "200 BCE": modification of work "Buddha" by Purchase, Denise and Andrew Saul Gift, in honor of Maxwell K. Hearn, 2014/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit "260 CE": modification of work "Naqsh-i Rustam. Shapour" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5; credit "284 CE": modification of work "Zenobia" by Classical Numismatic Group Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "284 CE": modification of work "Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs" by Jean-Pol Grandmont/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0; credit "330 CE": modification of work "Lithography of the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 1857" by Dmitry Makeev/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "410 CE": modification of work "The Sack of Rome in 410 by the Barbarians" by *Das Königreich der Vandalen*/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Figure 10.3 Locator Map: Empires of Faith. (credit: modification of work "World map blank shorelines" by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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8.2: The Eastward Shift

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how and why the political focus of the Roman Empire shifted eastward during Late Antiquity
- Discuss how the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire altered Mediterranean society
- Explain the collapse of Roman authority in the West, including the role of Germanic migrations and invasions

From the third through the seventh centuries CE, the culture of the Roman Empire transformed itself profoundly and in fundamental ways. The rise of Christianity marked a seminal moment, and from the time of the emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the government advocated monotheism, the worship of one God to the exclusion of others. With a Christian government and a new capital at Constantinople in the eastern Mediterranean, the Byzantine Empire grew from the old Roman state. At the same time, the fracturing of the Roman Empire's government led to various new regional alliances and rivalries. Germanic kingdoms flourished in the West, while the Byzantines attempted to maintain order among the burgeoning Christian population within their borders.

The Roman Empire's eastward shift epitomized the major cultural changes occurring during this period. Because of these shifts, Late Antiquity has been characterized as a transitional period between the ancient and medieval worlds that occurred from roughly 150 to 750 CE. On the one hand, Late Antique culture remained influenced by the classical past, with the maintenance of certain ancient institutional values. While still calling themselves "Romans," the Byzantines simultaneously attempted to maintain Christian orthodoxy. On the other hand, the appearance of new religious identities and the breakdown of the Roman state led to conflicts among different regional and cultural groups. The empire's borders were in constant flux, and its territory slowly diminished as numerous powers vied for regional dominance.

Constantinople and the Roman East

The third century was a period of upheaval and change for the Roman government, often referred to as the Crisis of the Third Century. From 235 to 284, a span of only forty-nine years, the empire was ruled by upward of twenty-six different claimants to the imperial throne. New emperors were often declared and supported by Roman soldiers. As a result, civil wars—as well as wars on the eastern frontier—were nearly constant. Economic problems became more apparent after the devaluation of currency, in which coins issued by the government became increasingly less valuable, led to a rapid rise in the price of goods. The high turnover of leadership led to periods of reform and attempts to bring stability to the government and economy, but progress toward securing the empire was limited.

In 284, however, Diocletian, a military official from Illyria in the Balkans, was declared emperor by his troops. His reforms, unlike those of his predecessors, had a lasting impact on the empire and its eventual eastward shift. Diocletian divided his rule with a co-emperor, who like him bore the title *augustus*, and with two junior emperors given the title *caesar*. This shared rule between the four emperors was called a tetrarchy. While there was no formal geographic division of leadership, each emperor or tetrarch had his own sphere of influence. Each also had a regional capital city located near the empire's borders from which he governed and organized military defense. There were familial and legal ties among the tetrarchs, who utilized imagery to send a message of strength (Figure 10.4). Diocletian also aimed to fix the empire's economy, issuing several edicts to curb inflation and promote trade within the empire. For example, in 301, he issued the Edict on Maximum Prices, which had two goals. First, to curb inflation, the edict placed an upper limit on the price at which certain goods could be sold. Second, to combat currency devaluation, it set specific values for coinage issued by the government.





Figure 10.4 The Four Tetrarchs. This sculptural portrait of the Roman tetrarchs from St. Mark's Basilica in Venice shows the cooperation the four co-rulers hoped to achieve. The figures, carved in about 300 CE, are for the most part indistinguishable, and their rigid features contrast with the idealism of the classical style that had been prevalent in early Roman society. (credit: "Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs" by Jean-Pol Grandmont/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

It is unclear if when Diocletian established his tetrarchy, he expected to eventually abdicate as a means of making the succession of future emperors more uniform. In any case, after he and his co-emperor Maximian formally left office in 305, the remaining two tetrarchs took their place alongside two new junior emperors. Civil wars soon engulfed the empire as infighting among the emperors resulted in the advancement of Constantine, son of the emperor Constantius Chlorus. Upon his father's death, Constantine claimed the imperial throne in 306. Making his way from the city of York in Britannia, he first gained control of the western provinces before arriving in Italy in 312. In the city of Rome, he defeated Maxentius, his final rival to the throne, at the Battle of Milvian Bridge.

During his reign, Constantine attributed his victory over Maxentius to the Christian God. According to the emperor's official biographer Eusebius, Constantine had seen an image of the labarum, the Greek symbols of "Chi" and "Rho" that make up the first letters of "Christ," in the sky that commanded him, "By this sign, conquer." Whether this was a message specifically designed to appeal to the empire's Christian populace is disputed, but Constantine showed clear Christian sympathies. From early in his reign, however, he sent out a carefully balanced message aimed to please Christians and traditional polytheists alike. For example, the design and inscription of the Arch of Constantine in Rome express a new synthesis of Roman tradition with Christianity that balanced the emperor's competing interests. The arch contains images from existing Roman monuments, while the inscription regarding a divine being is deliberately ambiguous (Figure 10.5).



Figure 10.5 The Arch of Constantine. The Arch of Constantine in Rome was dedicated in 315 CE. Its incorporation of material from earlier monuments shows Constantine's desire to place himself at the pinnacle of Roman history, while the deliberately ambiguous inscription caters to a religiously diverse audience by attributing the emperor's victory to "divine inspiration" and not to a specific deity. (credit: modification of work ""DSC_0787; Arco di Constantino Rome Italy February 2013" by Bengt Nyman/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

To further celebrate his rule, Constantine refounded the city of Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul) as Constantinople in 330 CE, and it eventually became the new imperial capital. The city's location on the empire's eastern frontier was advantageous for its proximity to trade routes and to the sites of many Roman military campaigns (Figure 10.6).



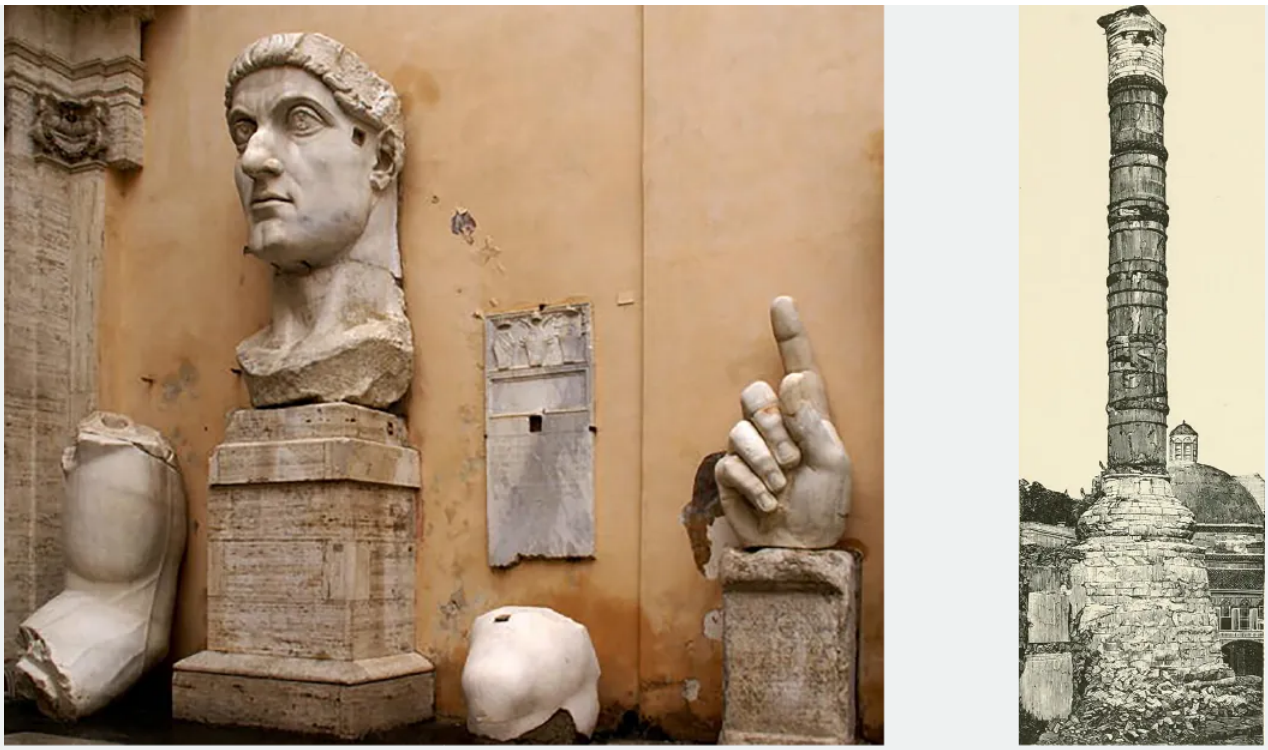
Figure 10.6 The Roman Empire Moves East. Constantinople's location shifted the empire's geographic focus eastward. The city was near the sites of frequent Roman military campaigns in the lower Danube and significantly closer than Rome to the frontiers along the Euphrates (in modern Iraq). It was also a hub of trade and travel because it was connected to western Europe, the Near East, and the Balkans. (credit: modification of work "Political Europe" by CIA/The World Factbook, Public Domain; credit inset: modification of work "Constantinople. Stambool" by *Maps of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Beyond the Book

Constantinople: The "New Rome"?

Though not initially intended to replace Rome, Constantinople ("city of Constantine") was formally dedicated as a city in 330 CE, and the emperor Constantine was celebrated with various monuments. On the day of the dedication, Constantine erected a porphyry column with a statue of himself as Apollo on top. He collected other pieces of art from across the empire to decorate the newly christened city, including the Serpent Column from Delphi, an Augustan victory monument from Nicopolis, and an Egyptian obelisk. These represented Constantine's attempt to mark the city as both the continuation and culmination of Roman history to that point, giving legitimacy to Constantinople and to his reign.

The Colossus of Constantine was a massive statue that once occupied the west apse of the Basilica of Maxentius in Rome. Constantine may have wanted it to portray him as having an otherworldly or divine quality, apparent in its sheer size—the head alone is more than eight feet high—but also in its enlarged eyes that look toward heaven. The rigid facial features show the changing style of portraiture at the time (Figure 10.7a).



(a) (b)

Figure 10.7 The Colossus of Constantine and The Column of Constantine. (a) The remaining pieces of the enormous statue of Constantine are on view in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. (b) Although the enormous statue of Constantine that once topped this column was destroyed in a fall centuries ago, the two together probably surpassed 160 feet in height. (credit a: modification of work “Fragments of the fourth-century colossal acrolithic statue of the Emperor Constantine” by Michael Squire/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0; credit b: modification of work “Image from page 276” by *A History of All Nations from the Earliest Times; Being a Universal Historical Library* by John Henry Wright/Flickr, Public Domain)

The Column of Constantine originally served as the base for a large statue of the emperor in Constantinople. Erected after he became sole emperor in 324, the statue, now lost, may have shown him dressed as his favored god Sol Invictus (the “Unconquered Sun”). Constantine seemed to hold that his devotion to this god was compatible with his preference for Christianity (Figure 10.7b).

The Serpent Column was dedicated to Apollo in the fifth century BCE by the Greeks in Delphi, then considered the center of the world. Its removal to Constantinople may have been intended to reclaim that status for the emperor’s city and to show again his affinity for the sun god (often equated with Apollo). The column’s original purpose as a monument to the Greeks’ victory over the Persians allowed Constantine to hint at his own victories in the recent civil wars (Figure 10.8).



(a)



(b)

Figure 10.8 The Serpent Column. A drawing from the sixteenth century (a) shows the Serpent Column as it looked in antiquity. The photo (b) shows the column as it stands today in Istanbul. (credit a: modification of work "Freshfield Album, Serpent Column (fol 6)" by Trinity College Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Snake column Hippodrome Constantinople 2007 by "Gryffindor"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- What message did each monument send about Constantine's reign?
- How was Christianity incorporated into Constantine's monuments in Constantinople?

Constantine ruled until his death in 337, and his legacy was cemented during the reigns of his sons who succeeded him. They waged military campaigns to maintain the frontiers of the empire, promoted Christianity, and enacted laws against pagan practice. Only Julian, a nephew of Constantine, attempted a brief resurgence of paganism in the Roman government during his rule, from 361 to 363. He enacted a series of reforms, wrote a number of philosophical works, and carried out a military campaign against the Sasanians. But after reaching the Persian capital of Ctesiphon, Julian's army was effectively in retreat when the emperor suffered a mortal wound from a spear. Any vision for a renewed polytheist empire ended with his death. Thus, Constantine had effectively ushered in a new era of Christian governance. Rulers for the rest of the empire's history were explicitly Christian, acting as de facto heads of the church and controlling church policy.

The Rule of Roman Christianity

The Christian Church attracted a large influx of new members during the reign of Constantine. The Edict of Milan, issued in 313, allowed citizens to worship any deity they wished, but it was mainly intended to embrace Christians living in the empire who were

now given back their confiscated property and legal rights. Christianity was not made the official religion, but the edict effectively ended any state-sanctioned persecution of its adherents within the empire's borders. The religion's new privileged status brought about profound changes for its institutions and their relationship to the imperial government.

Emperors generally did not interfere in the self-regulation of the church, except for religious belief. They exercised this control chiefly by organizing ecumenical councils, meetings of bishops to discuss religious doctrine. (The word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, meaning the entire inhabited world.) Ecumenical councils brought together bishops from the Roman East and West and issued decisions designed to be adopted universally. They were venues for hammering out matters of Christian orthodoxy, addressing questions of Jesus's divinity, and eliminating emerging heretical movements within the church.

In 325, for example, Constantine convened the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea, to settle the question of Jesus's divine nature and his relationship to God. The bishops were most concerned with addressing the Arians, followers of the priest Arius, who held that Jesus was created out of nothing but had a beginning. The bishops at the council worried that this thinking detracted from Jesus's divinity and after much debate decided against the Arians. They adopted the Nicene Creed, a statement of dogma that declared Jesus was "begotten, not made" and was "consubstantial" with God, expressly embracing his divinity. These types of religious debates remained at the center of the numerous ecumenical councils thereafter, and emperors sometimes used them to exercise control over church-related matters. But while the emperors self-styled themselves as priestly rulers, the bishops sometimes contested this role, and emperors then had to compete with them for religious authority.

The steady bureaucratization of the empire made its governance more complicated because it meant that power could only be usurped at various levels of government. One way in which emperors attempted to balance local, regional, and imperial power was by formally codifying laws. For example, in 429, the emperor Theodosius II established a commission to compile what became known as the Theodosian Code, a single publication containing all laws issued after 312 CE from across the empire. This code was the first attempt to create a unified system of government for the empire since the days of the Republic. It further solidified Christianity in Roman society because it featured laws that adhered to Christian beliefs and practice. It also brought about a transformation of social morals and placed power in the hands of the church to police morality, a practice that had not been seen in antiquity.

The Theodosian Code represented a trend of emperors attempting to address religious issues through laws and edicts. Constantine, for instance, seems to have banned animal sacrifice, a major feature of traditional Roman religion, though it was already in decline by this time. In several imperial edicts, notably the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 that made Nicene Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, Theodosius I attempted to suppress religious controversy outside the church, treating pagans and heretics (those holding unorthodox beliefs) as threats to the imperial state. The First Council of Constantinople, convened in 381, reestablished the Nicene Creed and addressed the topic of the Holy Spirit, suggesting that the problem of Arius's sympathizers had not completely disappeared. Jewish people were also viewed skeptically during this time but were not a major concern to imperial authorities. Finally, responding to an appeal from the Christian population of Athens, the emperor Justinian closed that city's philosophical schools in 529. The dismantling of pagan temples, removal of statues of pagan divinities, and discontinuation of traditional practice and priesthoods throughout the empire were a common pattern of authority during this time (Figure 10.9).



Figure 10.9 A Winged Victory. Made by the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova in the early nineteenth century, this bronze figure of a winged Victory atop a globe may resemble a statue that once stood outside the Roman Senate house. As a representation of pagan worship, that statue was removed twice by Christian emperors, in 357 and 382 CE, a decision that was controversial among many pagan senators at the time. (credit: modification of work “Winged Victory by Antonio Canova” by “Daderot”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

The relationships between pagans and Christians were unquestionably strained. Elite pagans could still pursue a career and hold public office, as did the noted intellectuals Libanius and Symmachus. These public figures viewed their Christian counterparts, such as the theologian Gregory of Nazianzus, as holding the same general philosophical assumptions as themselves, so they could debate religion together. Yet episodes of violence also occurred in the cities of the empire where bishops wielded both religious and political power. The murder of the influential pagan scholar and teacher Hypatia in Alexandria in 415 demonstrates how a bishop could wield extralegal authority. Bishop Cyril viewed Hypatia, who had a large friendship network of Christians and pagans, as a political threat, and he was able to convince the Christian populace to attack and kill her. This secured his own position as a substantial political and religious authority in the city.

Link to Learning

Learn more about the pagan teacher and scholar Hypatia of Alexandria in this video. Hypatia’s teaching of mathematics and philosophy was viewed as a threat to the Christian order in the city, which ultimately led to her demise.

The Fall of the Roman West

Theodosius I was the last emperor who reigned over a united empire. After his death in 395, power passed to his two sons; Arcadius ruled the eastern half of the empire from Constantinople, while Honorius controlled the western half from Ravenna in northern Italy. The geography of each region dictated its fate. With a shorter stretch of the Danube River to guard against foreign invaders, the East was able to thrive by paying off these groups with its wealth and discouraging them from entering their territory. The West suffered various setbacks along its more extensive and chaotic frontier that brought both political and social disruption. There were simply more foreign groups to contend with, and the traditional barrier of the Rhine and Danube Rivers was long and

continuously crossed by Germanic groups during this period. The West was also less urbanized than the East, resulting in less social cohesion in parts of this region. This allowed different, outsider cultures to infiltrate and transform it (Figure 10.10).



Figure 10.10 Germanic Kingdoms. The increasing influx of Germanic peoples into the western empire brought about a fracturing of Roman power as a series of independent kingdoms took control of the Italian peninsula, Gaul (modern-day France and Belgium), the Iberian Peninsula, and North Africa. This map from cartographer William R. Shepherd's *Historical Atlas* (1923) shows the Germanic kingdoms as they were in 526 CE. (credit: "Germanic kingdoms 526CE " by Historical Atlas by William R. Shepherd/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As the western empire came into increasing contact with these outsider groups, the state dealt with them in various ways. It deemed many Germanic groups *foederati*, meaning they were bound by a treaty that allowed them semiautonomy in exchange for their military service on behalf of the Roman Empire. Mercenaries thus came from the various tribes and foreign states allied with the empire, serving alongside Romans in an increasingly diverse military. After completing their military service, foreign soldiers were given the opportunity to participate in Roman civic life, to live in Roman territory, and to integrate into Roman society. Some Germans were also able to settle in Roman territory, leading to periods of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, while others were not so fortunate because they were captured in conflict and forced into Roman households as enslaved people. As Germans were brought into the Roman cultural fold through various means, rivalries among ambitious and newly integrated outsiders often disrupted Roman society.

In the early 400s, Germanic groups made their way into Gaul and Italy, negotiating and fighting with the Romans. Originating in central Europe around modern-day Poland, the Vandals crossed the Rhine in 406, settling in Gaul before being pushed into Spain and finally forming a kingdom in North Africa. A notable Roman military commander of Vandal origin was Stilicho, who was

appointed guardian of the young emperor Honorius. Stilicho had aims to control the western empire himself, having married into the imperial family and attained some popularity due to his military victories.

Stilicho fell out of favor, however, because of his mismanagement of another outsider group, the Visigoths, one of several Gothic groups from eastern Europe. The Visigoths had come into increasing contact with the Romans after crossing the Danube River in the fourth century, ultimately defeating Rome at the Battle of Adrianople in 378. By the early 400s, the Visigoth leader Alaric had negotiated various agreements with the Roman government to settle his people in Roman territory. Stilicho urged the Roman Senate to honor the agreements and pay Alaric to pacify him, which the Senate did despite preferring a military solution against the Visigoths. As the situation disintegrated, Stilicho was blamed for the unfavorable outcome, and his increasingly strained relationship with the Senate eventually resulted in his execution. Alaric then invaded Italy, attacking Rome over the course of three days in 410. Remembered as a seminal moment in the empire's decline, this "sacking" of the city of Rome itself produced little physical damage but plundered a good deal of the city's wealth and further damaged the prestige of the grand old city. After Alaric's death soon thereafter, the Visigoths ultimately settled in Gaul as *foederati* of the Roman Empire.

Many of the migrations of Germanic peoples during this period were a result of the influx of the Huns. A nomadic group originating in the Eurasian Steppe, the Huns made their way west from central Asia toward Europe around 450. As they reached the edge of Europe, they conquered and occupied the frontiers of the Roman Empire, placing pressure on groups already there to move into the continent's interior. These migrations eventually pushed Germanic groups and others into Roman territory. The Huns were led by their ruler Atilla, who gained a reputation among the Romans for being ruthless as he plundered much of Europe. Atilla oversaw a vast empire, conquering and integrating various peoples as the Huns moved westward. Reaching as far as Gaul, the Hun Empire ultimately collapsed due to Atilla's death in 454.

Other migratory groups during this period settled in Gaul, including the Franks. A one-time ally of the Roman Empire, the Frankish kingdom eventually expelled the Romans and ruled the region in some form until the ninth century. Roman troops were likewise pushed out of Britain for the final time by the invasion of Germanic peoples who included the Angles and the Saxons. Coming from modern-day southern Denmark and northern Germany, they occupied southern Britain in the late fifth century. Originally two distinct groups, they are more commonly known as Anglo-Saxons, a name applied to them in the eighth century to distinguish them from similarly named Germanic groups on the European continent.

Dueling Voices

The End of Rome

Since the publication of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776, historians of Rome have debated what the fall of Rome actually means. An English historian during the Enlightenment, Gibbon presented it as a period of moral decline marked by barbarian invasions and an intolerant Christianity. Newer scholarship takes into account the primary sources from this period. More recent scholars ask what exactly "fell." For example, many third- and fourth-century crises and reforms began much earlier, and the survival of paganism shows that Christianity's rise was not inevitable.

> *The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and, instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long.*
>
> *—Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1776*

> *To study such a period one must be constantly aware of the tension between change and continuity in the exceptionally ancient and well-rooted world round the Mediterranean. On the one hand, this is notoriously the time when certain ancient institutions, whose absence would have seemed quite unimaginable to a man of about*

> *[250 CE], irrevocably disappeared. . . . On the other hand, we are increasingly aware of the astounding new beginnings associated with this period: we go to it to discover why Europe became Christian and why the Near East became Muslim. . . . Looking at the Late Antique world, we are caught between the regretful contemplation of ancient ruins and the excited acclamation of new growth. What we often lack is a sense of what it was like to live in that world.*
>
> *—Peter Brow, The World of Late Antiquity, 1971*

> *At the very same time as some sought new modes for understanding the classical elements of late antique culture, another revolution was taking place, . . . whose method was to seize as objects of study elements that were 'new' in Late Antiquity. . . . much of what has been identified as 'new' falls within the domain of religion, and within that sphere attention has focused on those Christian beliefs and practices that had some claim to novelty in this era: asceticism, monasticism, pilgrimage, and episcopacy foremost among them. But few things are new under the sun, and I worry that scholars, whether from ignorance or naïveté, or in pursuit of some contemporary agenda, too often have credited the ideologically motivated claims to novelty put forward by Christian polemicists at the time.*
>
> *—Clifford Ando, "Decline, Fall, and Transformation," Journal of Late Antiquity, 2008*

- How do the scholars quoted here differ in their approaches to the study of Late Antiquity?
- Would they agree on what makes this period unique or the best way to study it? Why or why not?

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8.3: The Byzantine Empire and Persia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the evolution of the Byzantine Empire in Late Antiquity
- Describe Sasanian culture and society in Late Antiquity
- Analyze the relationship between the Roman Empire and Sasanian Persia in Late Antiquity

The period of Late Antiquity witnessed the height of two great competing empires. The Roman Empire morphed into the Byzantine Empire, possessing a culture that looked to both its Roman past and its Christian present. This duality was exemplified in the reign of the emperor Justinian, who sought to reconquer the old empire. Meanwhile, in the East, the Sasanian Empire emerged with its own vibrant culture and vied with the Byzantines for supremacy. This situation set the stage for the emergence in the following period of smaller but still disruptive states.

Late Antique Rome

Historians have carved out roughly 150 to 750 CE as the period of Late Antiquity and view it as a time of vibrant transformation in the Mediterranean, rather than simply Rome's decline and fall. The cultural focus on the eastern Mediterranean, the rise of Christianity, and new forms of Roman governance indicate some ways in which people from this period thought of themselves as being different from what was seen in the ancient world.

Yet the Roman state continued to function, at least in the East, and many still saw themselves as a part of the classical Mediterranean order. The later Roman Empire was in many ways an extension of the earlier period, replicating and repeating similar trends in governance, culture, and even religion. This interplay between continuity with the ancient world and stark differences from it makes Late Antiquity a unique historical period.

In the late 400s and early 500s, the culture of the empire was changing profoundly as Christianity grew in influence. The centralization of imperial power was coupled with intense growth of the empire's bureaucratic system, in which the wealthy classes were able to control government at the expense of the poor. The Roman senatorial class in particular had changed. While in earlier centuries the Senate had played an important administrative role for the entire state, it now acted largely as a type of aristocratic "city council" for the city of Rome itself, making few meaningful decisions beyond city management and with many members choosing not even to attend. Urban growth continued in some places, despite various setbacks due to war on the eastern frontier, while public spaces in some cities fell into disrepair. In contrast, the Christian Church thrived as a social and economic force in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean, and the construction of monasteries and churches overseen by bishops continued.

Art and architecture produced during this period underwent a similar transformation. Much of the new construction across the empire consisted of the building of churches, many erected with material salvaged from dismantled pagan temples. Churches generally followed the plan of a Roman basilica, with a central nave (aisle) and an apse (small chapel) at one end of the building. Art was also produced in the Christian mode, with icons that depicted holy people or places. Paintings, mosaics, and in later periods stained-glass windows functioned as aids to worship and also as a means of teaching the mostly illiterate people about the Bible stories central to their faith. Mosaics, a hallmark of Roman art, became more elaborate during this period, and artists were able to play with light and color in their designs (Figure 10.11). In much the same way, the classical past influenced Late Antique literature as writers continued to produce histories and works in genres that had enjoyed prominence in earlier times. But literature from this period also represented the Christian present because it was dominated by conversations about theology.



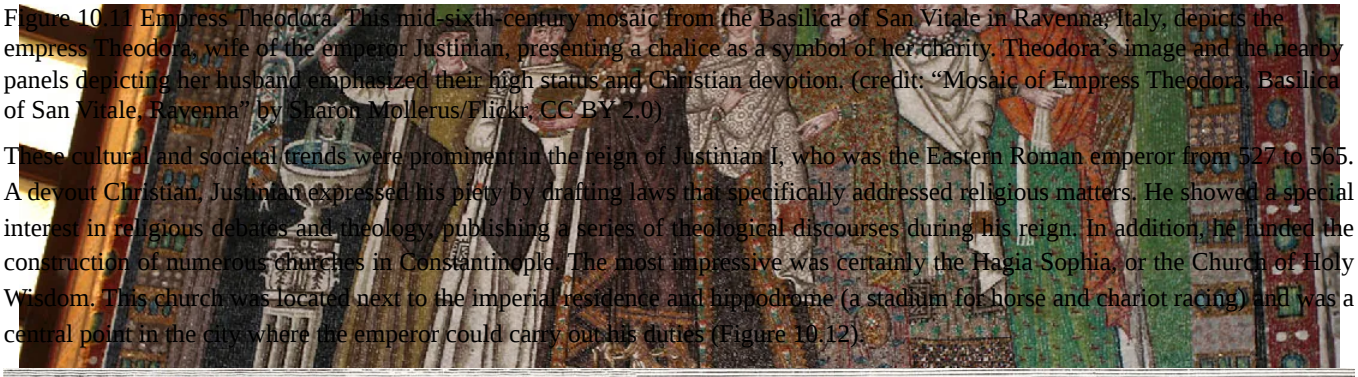


Figure 10.11 Empress Theodora. This mid-sixth-century mosaic from the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, depicts the empress Theodora, wife of the emperor Justinian, presenting a chalice as a symbol of her charity. Theodora's image and the nearby panels depicting her husband emphasized their high status and Christian devotion. (credit: "Mosaic of Empress Theodora, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna" by Sharon Mollerus/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

These cultural and societal trends were prominent in the reign of Justinian I, who was the Eastern Roman emperor from 527 to 565. A devout Christian, Justinian expressed his piety by drafting laws that specifically addressed religious matters. He showed a special interest in religious debates and theology, publishing a series of theological discourses during his reign. In addition, he funded the construction of numerous churches in Constantinople. The most impressive was certainly the Hagia Sophia, or the Church of Holy Wisdom. This church was located next to the imperial residence and hippodrome (a stadium for horse and chariot racing) and was a central point in the city where the emperor could carry out his duties (Figure 10.12).



Figure 10.12 Hagia Sophia. Built on the layout of a cross, the Hagia Sophia or Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople is massive in size; its main dome is 105 feet in diameter. This lithograph of the exterior was made in 1857; mosaics decorated the rich interior. (credit: modification of work "Lithography of the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 1857" by Dmitry Makeev/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Justinian also focused on maintaining the empire's connection to its past. Among the legal reforms he instituted to preserve its laws, the Code of Justinian aimed to compile the laws issued since the early second century. Unlike the Theodosian Code, however, the Code of Justinian regulated imperial edicts by addressing any inconsistencies among them. Though laws were increasingly being issued in Greek by this time, the Code of Justinian also preserved past laws in their original Latin. Thus, while Greek was the dominant language spoken in the empire, Latin continued as the language of legislation and formed part of upper-class education. It also functioned as a means to link the empire to its past. Though the language slowly fell out of use, fluency in Latin was still a status symbol among the wealthy, educated class. In addition to his compilation of edicts, Justinian carried out other legal projects that brought together the written opinions of jurists, legal professionals in the Roman Empire.

Justinian's ambitions also extended to reconquering the West. Though by this time the Byzantine Empire was focused on the eastern Mediterranean, regaining Italy, the earlier seat of the empire, held strong appeal. Following the successful capture of

Carthage in Vandal-controlled North Africa, the emperor planned to invade Italy, by that time controlled by the Ostrogoths. He sent his trusted general Belisarius to Italy, and despite having a relatively small force, Belisarius occupied Rome in 536. He made headway in recapturing the cities of Italy, including Milan and Ravenna, and he continued his campaign until 540 when he was recalled to the east to command the troops against the Persians. Justinian completed the conquest of Italy in the 550s, also making inroads against the Visigoths in southern Spain (Figure 10.13).



Figure 10.13 The Reconquests of Justinian. Justinian's plan to reconquer the western empire (the areas in green) proved effective with a relatively small force, but it ultimately strained his realm, which had to deal with growing problems with the Persians in the East. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

In Their Own Words

Procopius and the Portrayal of Theodora

Procopius was a prominent scholar in the sixth-century Byzantine Empire whose writings are our key source for many events of the time. He published works such as *The Wars* and *The Buildings* that praised Justinian, but his scandalous work the *Anecdota* ("Secret History") claims to expose Justinian and Theodora as conniving, deceitful rulers. Likely unpublished during the author's lifetime because of its shocking content, *Anecdota* describes the pair as victims of demonic possession, and Theodora as a woman of humble but disgraceful background who used dishonest (and inappropriate) means to become empress. The content is clearly embellished, but its critical viewpoint allows readers to understand how the author may have become disillusioned with Justinian's reign.

> *But as soon as she [Theodore] came of age and was at last mature, she joined the women of the stage and straightway became a courtesan, of the sort whom men of ancient times used to call 'infantry.' For she was neither a flute-player nor a harpist, nay, she had not even acquired skill in the dance, but she sold her youthful beauty to those who chanced to come along, plying her trade with practically her whole body . . . . And as she wantoned with her lovers, she always kept bantering them, and by toying with new devices in intercourse, she always succeeded in winning the hearts of the licentious to her; for she did not even expect that the approach should be made by the man she was with, but on the contrary she herself, with wanton jests and with clownish posturing with her hips, would tempt all who came along, especially if they were beardless youths. . . .*

> *Then at length Justinian set about arranging a betrothal with Theodora. But since it was impossible for a man who had attained to senatorial rank to contract marriage with a courtesan, a thing forbidden from the beginning by the most ancient laws, he compelled the Emperor [Justinian's uncle the emperor Justin I] to amend the laws by a new law, and from then on he lived with Theodora as his married wife, and he thereby opened the way to betrothal with courtesans for all other men; and as a tyrant he straightway assumed the imperial office, concealing by a fictitious pretext the violence of the act.*
>
> *—Procopius, Anecdota, translated by H.B. Dewing*

- How does Procopius depict Theodora's past as scandalous?
- How does this depiction implicate Justinian as an unfit ruler?

From Parthian to Sasanian Persia

Following Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persians in the fourth century BCE and the breakup of his empire, the Seleucid dynasty governed much of his eastern kingdom. In the third century BCE, a local tribe along the east coast of the Caspian Sea came into conflict with the Seleucids, gaining more power in the region over the next two centuries. The Parthians, as they came to be called, were ruled by a king but had a decentralized government, relying on a network of semiautonomous rulers called *satrapies* to govern the administrative districts of the empire. They managed an extensive trade network, maintaining the roads built during the Seleucid period and establishing water routes by way of the Caspian Sea. With their skilled cavalry, the Parthians won multiple military conflicts with the Roman Empire. Yet by the second century CE, the Romans had conquered much of the Parthian territory including the fertile lands of Mesopotamia, won by the emperor Trajan.

This turmoil spurred the Parthians to found a new empire in 224. Ardashir was the first king of the Sasanians, a name derived from the ruler's family name, Sasan. Throughout their history, the Sasanians were in perpetual conflict with the Romans as well as other groups as they attempted to maintain the borders of their empire. Notable events included Shapur I's capture of the Roman emperor Valerian in 260 and, in the fourth century, Shapur II's fortification of the western and eastern borders against encroachment, especially by nomadic groups like the Huns. By the fifth century, priests had largely taken over the administration of the empire after a series of weak kings.

Dubbed the "King of Kings," the Sasanian ruler maintained a centralized state in which local officials reported directly to him. The Sasanians ruled the area of the former classical Persian Empire, including the modern-day country of Iran. The empire extended beyond this region, however, stretching from the modern-day country of Georgia in the west to the Indus River in the east (Figure 10.14). It contained both heavily urbanized centers and various nomadic tribes, especially on the Iranian plateau. The Sasanians were able to leverage their location between the Roman Empire and China to facilitate trade. Their empire's trade network extended far beyond its borders, and it was the Silk Roads that gave the Sasanians the greatest advantage because these land routes linked the empire with numerous regional trading partners.



Figure 10.14 Sasanian Persia. The Sasanian Empire stretched from modern-day Armenia and Georgia in the west to the Indus River in the east. At its greatest extent in the seventh century, it encroached into once-Byzantine territory through a series of conflicts. (credit: modification of work “Map of the Sassanid Empire just before the Arab conquest of Iran” by “DieBuche”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Because of its massive size, the empire was linguistically and culturally diverse. While the west was characterized by interactions with the Byzantines, in the east evidence from inscriptions suggests a diversity of languages and cultures. For example, the use of Greek continued as a remnant of Alexander the Great’s empire, and Bactrian was an Iranian language from what is now Afghanistan. In cities throughout the empire, a hierarchical class structure prevailed, with the educated priestly class on top, followed by those who served in the military, agriculturalists, artisans, and finally enslaved people.

As in the Roman and Byzantine worlds, women’s legal status was very low, and many laws controlled their behavior. However, women could inherit property from their family and conduct low-level business. Punishments were a way to control Sasanian society and were often tied to sins as defined by the state religion. Incestuous relationships and even marriages were known, particularly among the religious elite, although descriptions of incest as commonplace may be an attempt by successors to belittle the Sasanians in later centuries. There were no opportunities for women to become involved in Sasanian politics, with the single exception of Queen Boran’s brief rise just before the collapse of the Sasanian state in the seventh century. The daughter of the previous ruler Khosrow II, she was hailed as ruler despite being a woman because of her connection to Khosrow rather than because of her capability or her status as a woman. While she attempted to build a positive relationship with the Byzantines and to stabilize the Sasanian state, she was ultimately unsuccessful in her efforts before being murdered by her own people, a demonstration of the instability that followed the Sasanian loss in the war.

Ardashir, the first king, instituted Zoroastrianism, the religion of the ancient Persians, as the state religion, encouraging loyalty to the government and to the royal family through religious practice. Zoroastrianism is a universal faith with both monotheistic and dualistic elements, and with rituals and beliefs based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster, who lived sometime in the first millennium BCE. Adherents to the faith focus their daily lives on carrying out good deeds, holding good thoughts, and practicing rituals of purification in preparation for their judgment and resurrection after death. Zoroastrian iconography is based on images of

fire and water in devotion to the creator god Ahura Mazda. The faith also supposes a perpetual struggle between the dual elements of good and evil. According to Zoroastrian teachings, this struggle will ultimately end in the assured triumph of the good.

The Sasanian kings were intimately involved in the religious affairs of the empire, instituting religious policy and maintaining fire temples across the empire. Yet the population also included Jews and Christians, who could be maligned for their lack of devotion to the state religion. The Sasanian government viewed residents of the western empire as difficult to manage in terms of religion; they may have been seen as particularly susceptible to Byzantine influence because Byzantine rulers claimed dominion over all Christians, including those outside their empire's borders.

Link to Learning

Learn more about Sasanian art and culture in this presentation.

The Last Great Empires of Antiquity

In the sixth and seventh centuries, the Byzantines and Sasanians lived through their longest period of sustained conflict. Though there were intervals of peace, and even of alliance, military conflict largely characterized the relationship between the two powers. Khosrow I was a particularly adept military leader, thwarting several incursions of nomadic peoples into the Sasanian Empire. He also negotiated peace with the Byzantines in 532. This peace did not last, however, and Khosrow moved westward into Byzantine territory while Justinian was preoccupied with reconquering Italy. During this long war from 541 to 557, the Sasanians won various portions of Byzantine-controlled lands, including Armenia and Syria. The truce signed in 557 ended in 565 with the death of Justinian and the renewal of hostilities.

Khosrow II was the last Sasanian king to conduct a lengthy war with the Byzantines. He originally had a friendly relationship with them, having recovered his throne from a rival with the aid of the Byzantine emperor Maurice. When Maurice was murdered, however, Khosrow used this event as a pretext to invade Byzantine territory in 602. The Sasanians once again occupied Armenia and Syria but now extended their sway further, into Palestine and Egypt, and even reached Libya by 619. The Byzantines retaliated successfully, recovering all their lost territory, and as a result Khosrow II was deposed in 628.

Despite these hostilities, the Sasanians and the Byzantines shared some court rituals and participated in cultural exchange. Each was present in the other's court, and they communicated nearly constantly via embassies, even in times of conflict. The rituals around the court included exchanging gifts and observing processions and games. Both cultures also adopted similar methods of symbolic communication: They used their capital cities (Constantinople and Ctesiphon) as centers of power, relied on a link to their empire's past glory, and created art to communicate legitimacy. They each recognized the other's legitimacy as a rival state, even as they vied for universal power.

In this period of seemingly perpetual war between the two empires, both also used smaller states as proxies in conflicts. The Armenians, despite religious rivalries as Christians, often requested the assistance of the Sasanians, and the Byzantines were able to play different nomadic groups against one another. Gradually, however, the two great empires saw their geographic might dwindle. The states on their peripheries had an important role to play.

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8.4: The Kingdoms of Aksum and Himyar

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss how Aksum and Himyar participated in cultural and economic exchange with other societies
- Explain how issues of religion influenced Aksumite and Himyarite culture
- Describe the religious changes that occurred around the Afro-Eurasian world during Late Antiquity

Beyond the borders of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, several smaller states flourished. They established cultural contacts with the large empires, but they were also able to participate in long-distance trade with Asia. Two kingdoms, Aksum in northeastern Africa and Himyar in southern Arabia, had distinct religious identities that informed their governments and cultures. During much of Late Antiquity, faith played a crucial role in shaping people's identities, and the religions of these two kingdoms—Christianity in Aksum and Judaism in Himyar—were no exception.

The Kingdom of Aksum

Aksum flourished in sub-Saharan Africa as a counterpoint to the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires. Located in modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, Aksum was able to take advantage of its location adjacent to the Red Sea, expanding across it into southern Arabia for a time. Similarities in architecture and polytheistic practices suggest that the Aksumites may have originally descended from the Sabaean people of southern Arabia. In any case, Aksumites were present in East Africa from at least the first century BCE. At its height, from the third to the sixth century CE, Aksum was a powerful economic force, trading luxury goods with Egypt, Arabia, and the eastern Mediterranean (Figure 10.15).

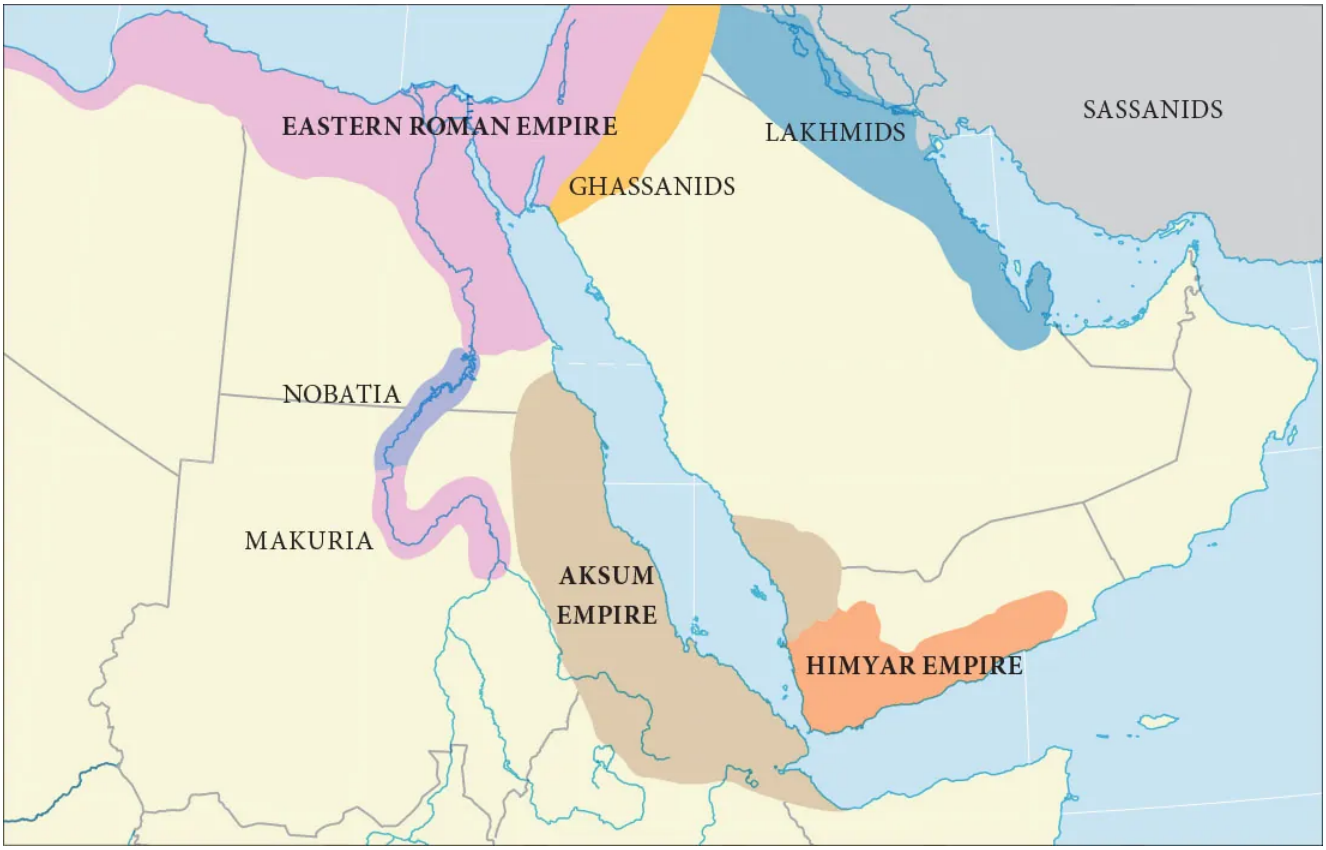


Figure 10.15 The Aksum and Himyar Empires. Aksum occupied the region of modern Ethiopia, while Himyar was located on the other side of the Red Sea in modern-day Yemen. The locations of the two empires allowed them to dominate trade in the region. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Sassanid Empire just before the Arab conquest of Iran" by "DieBuche"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Aksumite society was hierarchical, with the king and nobility at the top. The lower classes at the bottom worked as artisans and farmers, though little evidence of Aksumite family life has survived to confirm class distinctions. There is some evidence that owners of large wealthy estates existed. To work the land, Aksumite society relied on enslaved people, who were likely criminals or foreigners captured in war. The empire was organized around several urbanized centers with monumental architecture including grand royal palaces, as well as lower-class homes made from stone or mud with thatched roofs. A written Semitic language known as Ge'ez survives in inscriptions from this period. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the Aksumites held polytheistic beliefs, and numerous religious sanctuaries and temples exist from this early period. A priestly class oversaw the state religion, and the king may have held a prominent role in the religious hierarchy.

King Ezana came to power in the mid-fourth century, and what we know about the Christianization of Aksum comes largely from his reign. Ezana conducted successful military engagements against the Beja and Nubian people, subduing the Kingdom of Kush that had ruled southern Egypt for at least the previous millennium. A great builder, Ezana is also likely responsible for the construction of several obelisks. Inscriptions on *stelae* (commemorative slabs or pillars) and obelisks erected in Aksumite cities describe his exploits and profess his faith, while coinage shows the Christian cross gradually replacing other symbols (Figure 10.16).



Figure 10.16 An Aksumite Stela. This monumental stone slab was erected by the Aksumite king Ezana and attributes his fourth-century military victory over the Nubians to the Christian God. The inscription in three languages—Ge'ez, Sabaean, and Greek—suggests the diversity of Aksum's people and the intended audience for this monument. (credit: "The Ezana Stone" by Alan/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Originally holding polytheistic beliefs, Ezana was converted to Christianity through the initiative of Frumentius, a Christian from the Syrian city of Tyre. Entering the region of Aksum as an enslaved man, Frumentius chose to stay after being freed in order to encourage the growing Christian community, and Athanasius, the Christian patriarch of Alexandria, consecrated him as bishop of the Ethiopian Church. This custom of patriarchs ordaining bishops for foreign cities often strained their relations with local rulers.

But it showed that the Christian powers outside Aksum were interested in controlling religious policy there, and Ezana's conversion may have been a means for Aksum to become more closely allied with the Roman Empire.

Interference from the Christian community abroad culminated in the arrival of proselytizing missionaries from the Roman world in the fourth and fifth centuries, who were working to spread the message of their faith with new peoples. While Christianity had largely been adopted in urban centers thanks to the activity of Frumentius, these later missionaries were able to spread the faith into the Aksumite countryside. They established hermitages and monasteries in traditionally pagan sites and occasionally suffered persecution by the local inhabitants. Yet Christianity continued to spread, and inscriptions of the time show biblical passages being translated into Ge'ez. Because of infrequent oversight by the patriarchs in Alexandria, however, Ethiopian Christianity developed unique characteristics, blending local beliefs in its own church ceremonies and holidays.

The Judaic group living in Aksum was known as Beta Israel. Probably founded by artisan traders visiting Aksum in the first century, Beta Israel was isolated from other Jewish communities outside the empire. Therefore, like those of Aksumite Christianity, its religious practices were sometimes distinct from the way the faith was practiced in other contexts. In several traditions, Aksum was the kingdom of the biblical figure the Queen of Sheba and the location of the lost Ark of the Covenant, an important artifact supposedly brought from Jerusalem by Ethiopia's first emperor, Menelik. Still, the Ethiopian Jewish community experienced periods of both tolerance and persecution within Aksum.

Christianity continued to flourish in Aksum into the sixth-century reign of King Kaleb. By this time, churches were a common feature in Aksumite cities, and many of the most prominent examples were built in the sixth century with inscriptions claiming that Kaleb had contributed to their construction. The floor plans of Aksumite churches generally followed that of Byzantine churches or basilica, meaning they were oblong in shape with a rounded apse at one end. Still, some were unique in their design, with a circular plan that might have been based on local house types.

The apex of Aksumite society, in the sixth century, coincided with the extension of its cultural and political influence into southern Arabia. Kaleb had already established more connections overseas, initiating a silk trade with China. In Arabia, he sought to aid the local Christian communities with a military campaign against the Himyarite king Dhu Nuwas. Owing to their claimed lineage from the biblical figures King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the Aksumites may have felt some pull to conquer the biblical kingdom of Sheba in southern Arabia. These overtly Christian motivations allowed for an alliance with the Byzantines in the campaign against the non-Christian Himyarites. With the Byzantine emperor Justin (uncle of the future emperor Justinian), Kaleb subdued Dhu Nuwas, and Aksum controlled southern Arabia until the Sasanian conquest in 572.

After the reign of Kaleb, the Aksumite Kingdom fell into decline, having failed to garner enough resources from working the land to sustain its population. Although it is unclear why this decline occurred so quickly, the climate may have been a factor because the region appears to have become especially arid after the middle of the eighth century. Economic difficulties in the kingdom may have also contributed. Kaleb's campaign in Arabia could have overextended its finances and military strength, and the Sasanian occupation of the regions around the Red Sea might have disrupted Aksum's trade network. There appears to have been growing dissatisfaction among the ruling class, and evidence from inscriptions suggests that revolts occurred in some Aksumite cities. As a result of these contributing factors, Aksum fell from political and cultural prominence in the mid-600s.

Link to Learning

Explore Ethiopia's Aksumite rock churches and the continuing practice of Christianity in Ethiopia today.

The Kingdom of Himyar

The Kingdom of Himyar flourished in southern Arabia from the first century BCE to the sixth century CE, on the coast of modern-day Yemen (Figure 10.15). The Himyarites originated from the kingdom of the Sabaeans, a Semitic people who had occupied southern Arabia from at least 1000 BCE. The Himyarites, however, were able to form their own kingdom because of the discovery of a prosperous trade route on the Red Sea coast. From the first century BCE to the second century CE, the Himyarites absorbed the Sabean and Qataban kingdoms, as well as several local tribes, and created their own capital in Zafar. This centralization of power unified the entire region of southern Arabia under a single government for the first time.

Once Himyar had become unified, it sought to maintain good relations with its neighbors by focusing on the exchange of goods from abroad. Unlike the Sabaeans, who had earlier dominated trade in the region through overland routes, the Himyarites shifted

their focus to maritime trade. They had access to a port on their southern coast that lay along an important sea route from Egypt to Asia, and they traded luxury goods such as ivory and spices, acting as a waypoint between the Roman Empire, East Africa, and India.

The Himyarites had traditionally practiced a polytheistic religion, but in Late Antiquity the kingdom experienced a religious transformation when King Abu Karib As'ad chose to convert to Judaism in the early years of his reign, around 390 CE. The conversion of the people followed, and Judaism spread among the elite Himyarites first, perhaps as a means of appeasing the king and gaining political goodwill. However, some scholars have speculated that Himyar's focus on Judaism was politically motivated, because it appears that a substantial Jewish population already existed in Arabia. The king may have felt compelled to create a Jewish state when one was no longer possible in Palestine because the Christian Byzantines controlled it. Much like the Byzantine emperors, who were religious reformers, the kings of Himyar publicly displayed their religious devotion. Several inscriptions from this period are dedicated to "the one God of Heaven and Earth." Kings also constructed synagogues for the burgeoning Jewish community.

Himyar came into increasing contact with Christian missionaries inside its borders, and several churches were built in Himyarite cities in the fourth and fifth centuries. The earliest known Christian missionary was the diplomat Theophilus, sent as an ambassador by the Roman emperor Constantius II around 354. Because of Himyar's access to lucrative trade routes, the Byzantines sought to influence the local population by converting them to Christianity, much as they had done in Aksum. The Himyarites responded to this outside interference in their kingdom by dealing with the Christians violently. Christian missionaries, Byzantine merchants, and other perceived outsiders were seized and put on trial. Overseen by the king and other religious officials, the trials resulted in the execution of numerous Christians in the late fifth century. Political rather than religious motivations spurred much of this violence, but in the following period that rationale changed, and the violence against Christians escalated.

In 522, King Dhu Nuwas began to conduct a military campaign against any Ethiopians or Christian sympathizers in the kingdom. Priests were killed and churches burned or dismantled and converted into synagogues. At Najran, home to a large Christian population, Dhu Nuwas set up a blockade in an effort to turn the population against the city's Christians. He ultimately executed hundreds of Christians there and in Zafar. Hoping to form a larger Jewish state, Dhu Nuwas also sought alliances with the Sasanians and Jewish residents in Palestine. As previously discussed, this violence and political maneuvering in Himyar piqued the interest of Aksum, which was the kingdom's chief rival because of its nearby location across the Red Sea.

The conquest by the Aksumites in the 520s was followed by the rule of Abraha, the Ethiopian who had commanded the Aksumite forces. A staunch Christian, Abraha sought to eradicate Judaism and other faiths in Himyar, attempting to wipe out idolatry and any lingering elements of paganism in the region. His major building projects included a grand church and the reconstruction of the Marib Dam. Abraha's rule was brief, however, and Sasanian loyalists controlled Himyar until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century.

The Past Meets the Present

South Arabian Geography and Agriculture

The Arabian Peninsula is largely a desert landscape, experiencing hot temperatures and little rain year-round. In the southwest, however, in what is today Yemen, the highlands allow for somewhat cooler temperatures and consistent rainfall. This makes for a fertile and hospitable region. There is much evidence that crops were grown in ancient Arabia, mainly date-palms, olives, grapes, and other fruits. But farmers also cultivated wheat, cotton, and henna. What made this farming possible were feats of engineering that allowed the local population to harness water.

For example, in the city of Marib in central Yemen, a great dam was constructed to provide water for local agriculture. Marib was the capital of the Sabaean kingdom, which used the dam to great purpose for farming in the city by means of an intricate irrigation system. However, the construction of the dam may predate the Sabaeans, perhaps having begun in the eighteenth-century BCE. In the 520s CE, the conquering Himyarites took control of the structure and raised the height of its walls, though it later collapsed in 570.

The ability to harness water was important to sustaining prolonged settlements in Arabia in Late Antiquity. In addition to constructing dams and irrigation systems, the people of this region collected water from flash floods and used terracing in hilly regions.

Of all Yemen's most famous agricultural products, however, few have had as large an impact on world history as coffee. From the medieval period onward, central Yemen in particular became known for the growing and trade of *Coffea Arabica*, or Arabica coffee beans. While it is believed that these beans originated in the Horn of Africa before crossing the Red Sea, it was in Ottoman-controlled Yemen during the fifteenth century that the hot beverage known as coffee was first consumed. Even today, more than half of all coffee beans grown and consumed throughout the world are these Arabica beans.

- What agricultural products come to mind when you think of the Arabian Peninsula?
- What does the spread of Arabica coffee and its popularity around the world say about the interconnectedness of people throughout history?

Link to Learning

Learn more about the Marib Dam and agriculture in South Arabia.

Religious Influence at the End of Antiquity

The arrival of new traditions of faith was a defining feature of Late Antiquity, and state-sponsored religion was a critical element in the conduct of empires' relations with one another and with their own subjects. An increasing number of individuals in Late Antiquity came to identify themselves not as citizens of a particular location or even an empire, but as members of the community associated with their religion.

Unlike paganism, Christianity was a proselytizing religion; that is, Christian leaders hoped to convert others to their faith. Elite Christian thinkers disseminated religious knowledge to a wide audience and strove to construct a single agreed-upon narrative of what Christian identity meant. Theological writings, ecumenical councils, and the interpretation of Christian rituals were all part of this meticulous effort, and ongoing participation in the defining of belief and practice were instrumental in Christianity's spread during this period.

The running of the state also became intimately tied to religion and religious policy, as the policies of Justinian and other Christian emperors and the institution of Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian Empire show. The Aksumites and Himyarites too, although they embraced different faiths, used religious imagery in their inscriptions and monumental buildings. Each empire's elite endorsed this kind of religious messaging, converting to the new faith in great numbers, while the general populace in Late Antique communities often remained religiously diverse.

Judaism became a religion without a firm geographic center after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the first century CE. The Jewish diaspora refers to the subsequent dispersion of believers out of the traditional Jewish homeland of Israel/Palestine, which led Jewish groups around the Mediterranean to feel a sense of displacement and the need to form a community. Though some of their individual practices may have differed, those in locations as varied as Spain and southern Arabia could largely agree on the tenets of their faith. In Late Antiquity, Christian theologians' attitudes toward Jewish people hardened, and restrictive laws were instituted by the Byzantine emperors. Yet despite these hostilities, Jewish culture flourished, especially in Palestine, resulting in the construction of many new synagogues and art (Figure 10.17).



Figure 10.17 The Finding of Moses. This wall painting from a third-century synagogue in the city of Dura-Europos, in modern-day Syria, is one of many with biblical themes. It depicts the discovery by the pharaoh's daughter of the infant Moses in the Nile River. (credit: "Dura Europos fresco Moses from river" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Christians marked their devotion in numerous ways during this period. One was asceticism, a form of self-denial that includes foregoing bodily pleasures and adopting a life of chastity, virginity, and renunciation of normal society. Monasteries that housed groups devoted to the ascetic life spread across the empire, usually in remote locations and often in the desert. Despite their isolation, however, many accepted visitors, so that the reputation of various holy people might spread to Christians everywhere. Many ascetics played a leading role in their communities, sometimes extending beyond the realm of civil behavior. For example, Late Antiquity witnessed a surge in violence carried out by ascetic monks against nonbelievers in cities of the empire, in an effort to preserve a sort of "pure" Christianity.

Despite continuing efforts to define proper Christian orthodoxy, regional differences among religious sects persisted during this time. For example, a crucial divide developed between urban and rural devotion. Saint Anthony was perhaps the most famous of the so-called Desert Fathers who in the third century chose to give up his possessions and practice asceticism in the Egyptian desert. These ascetics attracted followers, and as a result monasteries and hermitages flourished in less hospitable areas. Monasteries such as Kellia in the Egyptian desert housed a community of monks who lived together but had some contact with the surrounding region, while hermitages were places of more extreme seclusion for the religiously devout. By contrast, churches and synagogues were located in often crowded cities, where attendance at services was a daily life for laypeople. But these religious centers had to compete with other concerns for people's attention. Evidence suggests that elements of religious devotion that originated from the polytheistic environment of earlier centuries also persisted, such as home shrines, magical spells, and other private practices.

On a larger scale, geographic divisions produced different types of devotion. Aksum in Ethiopia embraced a unique version of Christianity because of its relative isolation from the rest of the Christian world. In the Mediterranean as well, people of the same faith could differ in their experience of the same religion. For example, Nestorian Christianity emerged in the fifth century in the debates about Christ's divinity, claiming that Jesus existed as two individuals—human and divine. Though officially rejected by the church in the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, Nestorius's teachings flourished in Persia and spread eastward due to the efforts of missionaries.

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8.5: The Margins of Empire

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the economic and cultural exchange between the Kushan Empire and other societies
- Explain Palmyra's relationship with the Roman Empire and how it was able to become an independent state
- Analyze the way Arab tribes interacted with the Roman Empire and Sasanian Persia

On the Silk Roads linking Europe and Asia in Late Antiquity, several small kingdoms functioned as important intermediaries for goods and people entering the Mediterranean world, as well as being trade partners, military adversaries, and allies of the great Byzantine and Sasanian Empires. The Kushan Empire served as an important cog in the trade route linking the Mediterranean and East Asia, but the ethnic and religious diversity of its population is also important in understanding this empire's role in Late Antiquity. Palmyra was a major trading partner in the Mediterranean world, but the rule of Queen Zenobia shows how quickly a city-state could take advantage of its geographic position and a tumultuous political situation to expand its borders. Finally, the diversity of groups in the Arabian Peninsula provided the context for the rise of Islam in the following period. The peoples discussed in this section demonstrate the complexity of the wider world of Late Antiquity. They made connections far beyond their borders, and their multiregional societies often had culturally diverse populations.

The Kushan Empire

The Kushan Empire was located in northwest India and flourished from the second century BCE to the third century CE. The empire initially arose from the Yuezhi people's uniting of several nomadic tribes into a single state. Eventually renamed Kushan after its ruling dynasty, this state gradually took territory from the Parthians' eastern empire. Sometime in the first century BCE, the Kushans moved south, establishing the dual capital cities of Kapisa and Pushklavati near the modern-day cities of Kabul and Peshawar. Under the control of the emperor Kanishka, who ruled the empire during the mid-second century CE (the exact dates are uncertain), the Kushan Empire reached its greatest extent and cultural influence. Kanishka conducted military campaigns, extending Kushan into central China and northern India, and the empire eventually included parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as northern India (Figure 10.18).



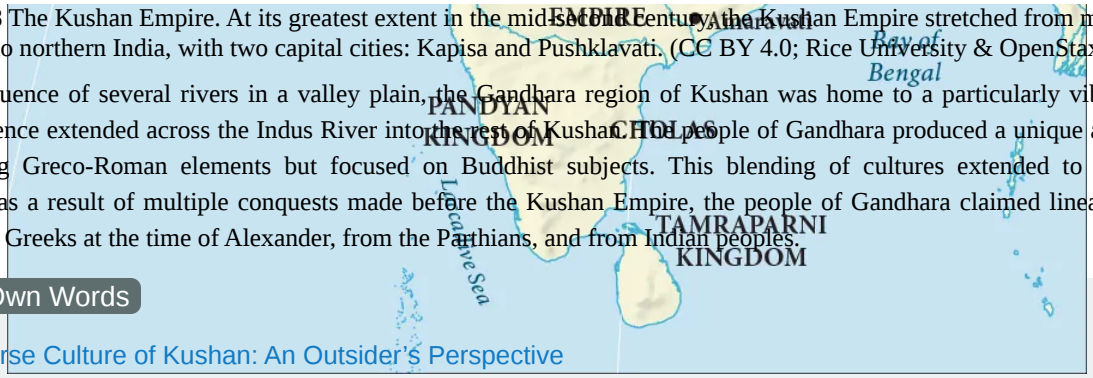


Figure 10.18 The Kushan Empire. At its greatest extent in the mid-second century, the Kushan Empire stretched from modern-day Uzbekistan to northern India, with two capital cities: Kapisa and Pushklavati. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

At the confluence of several rivers in a valley plain, the Gandhara region of Kushan was home to a particularly vibrant culture whose influence extended across the Indus River into the rest of Kushan. The people of Gandhara produced a unique artistic style, incorporating Greco-Roman elements but focused on Buddhist subjects. This blending of cultures extended to the region's population; as a result of multiple conquests made before the Kushan Empire, the people of Gandhara claimed lineage from the Macedonian Greeks at the time of Alexander, from the Parthians, and from Indian peoples.

In Their Own Words

The Diverse Culture of Kushan: An Outsider's Perspective

There was a literary tradition in central Asia during the period of the Kushan Empire, but anything that could have provided primary information about Kushan has been lost. The region was fascinating for outsiders, however, who wrote extensively about its different peoples, its diverse culture, and its extensive trade network. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written in Greek by an anonymous Egyptian merchant around 70 CE, is a firsthand account of trade routes beginning in Egypt and covering east Africa and Arabia before finally focusing on the east coast of India. The author discusses the nature of each route, the goods imported and exported, and the nature of local people in each region.

> *The country inland from Barygaza is inhabited by numerous tribes, such as the Arattii, the Arachosii, the Gandaraei and the people of Poclais, in which is Bucephalus Alexandria. Above these is the very war-like nation of the Bactrians [Kushan], who are under their own king. And Alexander, setting out from these parts, penetrated to the Ganges, leaving aside Damirica [Limyrike] and the southern part of India; and to the present day ancient drachma [Greek coins] are current in Barygaza, coming from this country, bearing inscriptions in Greek letters, and the devices of those who reigned after Alexander, Apollodotus and Menander." (47)*
>
> *"After this region under the very north, the sea outside ending in a land called This, there is a very great inland city called Thinae [China], from which raw silk and silk yarn and silk cloth are brought on foot through Bactria to Barygaza, and are also exported to Damirica [Limyrike] by way of the river Ganges. But the land of This is not easy of access; few men come from there, and seldom. The country lies under the Lesser Bear [Ursa Minor] and is said to border on the farthest parts of Pontus and the Caspian Sea, next to which lies Lake Maeotis; all of which empty into the ocean.*
>
> *—Author unknown, The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, translated by Schoff*

- What sense do you get about the extent and diversity of the Kushan trade network based on this author's account?
- What features of this account demonstrate that it was written by an outsider, rather than an indigenous member of Kushan society?
- What challenges do historians face if these are the only types of accounts available to teach Kushan history?

Kushan played a crucial role along the Silk Roads, acting as the link between the trading partners China and the Roman Empire. Its connections to Rome are clear from the Roman coins found in the Kushan region, as well as from written evidence that several Kushan embassies were sent to Roman emperors. Romans in turn received various luxury goods from Asia via Kushan, including jewelry, furs, and silk. In addition, Kushan protected a mountain pass that linked its empire to central China, allowing people and goods to easily enter this region. Its trade and cultural ties in China extended as far as Mongolia. Through its proximity to the sea to the south via the Indus River valley, Kushan also connected maritime and overland trade routes, and Kushan materials have been found in locations from Scandinavia to Ethiopia.

The religious identities of the region were likewise diverse, with a mix of people practicing Buddhism and Zoroastrianism among other faiths. Religious accommodation was a hallmark of Kushan, and its rulers might have felt compelled to embrace various faiths to win over people newly integrated into the empire. For example, some coinage of Kushan rulers shows a fire altar that bears a striking resemblance to Zoroastrian iconography. Yet Buddhism appears to have been important to the rulers of Kushan, who gave this religion special preference. For example, Emperor Kanishka undertook several initiatives to promote Buddhism. He made Buddhist texts more widely available and had many translated into other native languages such as Sanskrit. Around 100 CE, he convened the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir. This council decided to recognize two sects of Buddhism, Mahayan and Hinayan, and compiled the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma texts, a systematic presentation of Buddhist doctrines. Kanishka also contributed to the production of art in Kushan. In what may have been a further attempt at accommodating different beliefs, Kushan art includes the first images of the Buddha in human form (Figure 10.19).



Figure 10.19 The Buddha. This skillfully made third-century sculpture, about three feet high, depicts the Buddha in human form. The flowing drapery of his dress may have been influenced by the Greek toga, suggesting the multiethnic makeup of the region of Gandhara where it was made. (credit: “Buddha” by Purchase, Denise and Andrew Saul Gift, in honor of Maxwell K. Hearn, 2014/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

The pass connecting Kushan and China also allowed Buddhist monks to bring their religion to China in the second century. The most prominent example of this religious transmission was the activity of the Kushan monk Lokaksema, who traveled to China sometime in the 180s. Originally from Gandhara, Lokaksema was a Buddhist scholar who spent his time in China at the court of the Han dynasty, translating Mahayana Buddhist texts with his students. Once they were available in Chinese, these *sutras*, representing a genre of Buddhist scripture, could reach a wider audience. Thus Kushan’s links allowed Buddhism to grow both intentionally and organically, given that the presence of Buddhists on the area’s extensive trade routes surely led to its spread.

After the death of the emperor Vasudeva I in the early third century, the Kushan Empire split into eastern and western halves that were ruled separately. Centered in modern-day Afghanistan, the western half of the empire fell under the control of the Sasanians in 248, who replaced the ruling dynasty with loyal chiefs referred to today as Indo-Sasanians. The Indo-Sasanian kingdoms were given partial autonomy, so they were self-governing for a time while also paying tribute to the Sasanians. The activities of Buddhist monasteries and the production of art appear to have persisted despite the political changes of this period.

The Gupta Empire campaigned against Kushan's eastern half, centered in the Punjab region of modern-day northern India, leading to its eventual absorption into this empire around 375. The final remnants of the Kushan Empire were eventually taken over by the Hephthalites (the White Huns) in the fifth century.

Palmyra as Rival to the Roman Empire

Located in south-central Syria, the city of Palmyra rose in influence in the third century BCE because of its proximity to a newly built east–west road. As a result, the city was linked to a wider trade network between the Roman state and the east via both the Silk Roads and the Persian Gulf. By funneling goods to the Roman state, the city came to the special attention of the Romans in the first century BCE. Though there is evidence that Roman officials and military were in the city at this time, Palmyra's government remained semiautonomous throughout the period.

Palmyra was made part of the Roman province of Syria in the first century CE, and it eventually achieved the status of a Roman colony. This designation meant that its inhabitants were Roman citizens, and at least on the surface, public life was culturally Roman. The city continued to receive imperial favor, being visited by several Roman emperors. Palmyra became the site of architectural adornment with the construction of several remarkable monuments and structures. These included the Great Colonnade, the city's main street, and a famous temple dedicated to the god Baal. Several different Mesopotamian civilizations worshipped Baal, who was considered the chief deity of weather and fertility.

The emperor Trajan added the Nabataean Kingdom, inhabited by a Semitic people of northern Arabia, to the Roman Empire in 106 CE. As a result of this annexation, the Nabataeans' trade network seems to have disintegrated, an event that greatly benefited the Palmyrenes who no longer had to compete against them. However, the growing power of the Parthian Empire at this time led some trade routes to the east to become cut off. To address these sorts of threats to Palmyra's trade network, the city allied itself more closely with the Roman Empire. In 267, the leader of Palmyra, Septimius Odaenathus, was assassinated while fighting the Parthians as an ally of the Roman Empire. His widow Zenobia took over as regent of the Palmyrene Kingdom, declaring herself empress.

In 269, Zenobia broke off ties with the Roman state and expanded the borders of her kingdom, first taking Anatolia and then Egypt. Because of the disarray of the Crisis of the Third Century, during which their empire split into three separate states for a time, the Romans had left these regions relatively unguarded. Palmyra benefited greatly, now having links to extensive trade networks via the Red Sea. Her kingdom's independence was short-lived, however, since the Roman emperor Aurelian conquered Palmyra in 272 and took Zenobia captive. Sources differ on her ultimate fate, but one famous anecdote tells of her being led through Rome in gold chains, a sign of the wealth she had accumulated as the leader of this prosperous kingdom (Figure 10.20).



Figure 10.20 Queen Zenobia. Issued in 272 CE, this rare silver coin names its subject Zenobia and shows her as queen of Palmyra wearing a royal diadem (left). The reverse of the coin (right) says “Regina” (queen in Latin) and shows the Roman goddess Juno, wife of Jupiter, holding a dish for pouring offerings and a scepter. (credit: “Zenobia” by Classical Numismatic Group/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Though the emperor Aurelian returned and sacked the city of Palmyra in 273, a vast archaeological site there remained well preserved until relatively recently. Explore the consequences of ISIS’s occupation of Palmyra and destruction of this ancient city between 2015 and 2017, and the recent efforts to restore it.

Following the capture of Zenobia, Palmyra’s influence in the region dwindled. The city remained under Roman control, since Aurelian had left behind a military garrison whose soldiers formed a major part of the city’s population. In the late third century, the eastern frontier of the empire was reorganized, and the changed arrangement of forts and roads put Palmyra at a disadvantage for participating in trade. Certain emperors took some interest in the city; Diocletian had a public baths complex constructed, and Justinian is said to have had the city’s walls rebuilt. Palmyra’s Christian population also appears to have grown during this period. The first church there dates from the fourth century, and Christians took over the temple of Baal in the fifth century. Despite continued habitation, however, Palmyra now had less regional influence, and the nearby city of Nisibis became the region’s main trade hub.

The Arab Tribes

Nomadic tribes have a deep history in the region of Arabia. From at least the early first millennium BCE, they survived in this somewhat harsh environment through pastoral farming, raising livestock such as sheep and goats to produce milk, wool, and other goods. They are known as Bedouin**,** from the Arabic word *badawī* meaning “desert dwellers,” and their nomadic lifestyle was a key part of their Arab identity. Bedouin tribes consisted of familial clan groups that were patriarchal (ruled by men) and patrilineal (inheritance was through the father). Because of their familial relationships, tribes were tight-knit groups that had skeptical views of outsiders, occasionally coming into violent conflict with other tribes (Figure 10.21).



Figure 10.21 Territories of Arab Tribes. The map shows approximate locations of some of the numerous Arab tribes that competed for regional control around 600 CE. These tribes were semi-independent kingdoms susceptible to Byzantine and Sasanian influence, especially in northern Arabia. (credit: modification of work "Map of Arabia 600 AD" by "Murraytheb"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

After military conflict brought them to the eastern empire in the first century BCE, the Romans allowed Arab tribal chiefs of both sedentary town-dwellers and nomadic Bedouin groups to govern themselves. By the second century CE, however, the Roman Empire had begun to absorb the northern regions of Arabia, reflected in its subduing of the Nabataeans and the emperor Trajan's creation of the Arabian province. But the Romans never made true headway in this region, occupying only the northwestern fringes of Arabia, and for a relatively short period. Instead, Arab tribes continued to be a problem for the Roman Empire on its frontier as they migrated to the outskirts of Syria by the third century.

The Arabs served as clients, a type of ally, of the Sasanians, especially in the fifth and sixth centuries, as well as *foederati* of the Byzantine Empire in its long conflict against the Sasanians. For example, the Lakhmid kingdom in northern Arabia was at its height during this period. As an ally of the Sasanian Empire, Lakhmid used its military might to control the northern Arabian tribes. In addition, the Sasanian Persian king Khosrow I cooperated with the Lakhmids in the conquest of Yemen in the sixth century. In a similar role, the Ghassan kingdom was allied with the Byzantines and functioned as a buffer between the eastern empire and the Sasanians. The Ghassanids often clashed with the Lakhmids, whom they defeated in 554, eventually capturing their capital city (Al-Hirah) in 578.

Since there were several Arabian groups in the region, its pre-Islamic culture was diverse and multifaceted. As the most prominent group by the end of the sixth century, the Ghassanids are thought to have contributed to the creation of a somewhat cohesive Arab identity, which included kinship organization, the growth of cultural traditions such as poetry, and the use of languages that later became Arabic. Possibly settled by this time, the Ghassanids constructed monumental buildings in their urban centers and governed a diverse Arab culture.

The religious life of Arabia was diverse. The peninsula was home to those practicing Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrian, and polytheism. Traditional polytheistic views included animism, or the recognition of a spiritual essence in natural objects such as plants, animals, and rivers. Arabian polytheists worshipped idols and totems, physical representations of divine spirits. Containing a

variety of religious idols, the Kaaba sanctuary in the city of Mecca was the site of religious pilgrimage during this period, perhaps setting the stage for Islamic pilgrimage in the following centuries. Members of the Jewish diaspora had begun to migrate into Arabia in the first century CE. New converts to Judaism in this region as well as the influence of Himyar led to the development of a substantial Jewish population here. By Late Antiquity, Christianity had also gained a foothold, especially in the north, as the influence of the Byzantine and proselytizing missionaries contributed to the growth of the Christian population.

The composition of poetry was a major feature of pre-Islamic culture and formed part of an oral tradition that passed poems from generation to generation. Performers memorized often lengthy poems for recitation before public and private audiences. These works express tribal identity because their content often concerns the nature of nomadic life and descriptions of the natural world. In addition to this oral tradition, pre-Islamic literature began to be written down more often by Late Antiquity, and Arabic script was increasingly in use by the sixth century. Papyrus documents surviving from cities like Petra show Arabic script alongside Greek and Latin, pointing to the region's diversity and transitional state.

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8.6: Key Terms

asceticism
the practice of self-denial and rejection of pleasures as a way to express religious devotion

Bedouin
the name given to nomadic tribes of Arabia

Code of Justinian
a legal project carried out by Emperor Justinian to compile and edit Roman edicts issued from the second to the sixth century CE

ecumenical councils
meetings organized by emperors that gathered Christian bishops from around the empire to settle matters of doctrine within the Church

foederati
foreign states and tribes that were given semiautonomy as Roman allies in exchange for pledging military service to the Roman Empire

Jewish diaspora
the dispersion of the Jewish people beyond their ancestral homeland of Israel/Palestine following the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple

Late Antiquity
a transitional period between the ancient and medieval worlds that occurred from roughly 150 to 750 CE

tetrarchy
the rule of four emperors, two senior and two junior, established by the emperor Diocletian to quell the Crisis of the Third Century

Theodosian Code
a document initiated by the emperor Theodosius II compiling laws from around the empire that had been issued since the early fourth century

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8.7: Section Summary

10.1 The Eastward Shift

After the political tumult of the third century, the emperor Constantine reinvigorated the Roman Empire by establishing a new capital in Constantinople and embracing Christianity. Both Constantine and the Christian emperors who succeeded him attempted to manage the church and Christian orthodoxy through ecumenical councils, new laws, and increased bureaucratization in the Roman government. This new religious culture resulted in the neglect of traditional Roman polytheism, and the empire's eastward shift came at the expense of the western empire. In the Roman West, Germanic peoples became both allies and enemies of the Roman state. The imperial government was able to manage these groups for a time, but by the fifth century, the Roman West had fragmented into various Germanic kingdoms.

10.2 The Byzantine Empire and Persia

The two great superpowers of Late Antiquity, the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Empire, vied for supremacy in the fifth and sixth centuries. Though the Byzantine Empire had to contend with the Sasanians as a particularly formidable challenge, the reign of Justinian witnessed the zenith of Byzantine culture. Justinian carried out monumental building projects, codified Roman law, and oversaw the reconquest of parts of the Roman West. The Sasanians meanwhile consolidated control over a vast region of central Asia, overseeing a large trade network and instituting Zoroastrianism as the state religion. Military conflict characterized the relationship between these two empires, but there were also periods of peace and cultural exchange.

10.3 The Kingdoms of Aksum and Himyar

Two kingdoms flourished on the periphery of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires in Late Antiquity. In East Africa, Aksum oversaw a trade network with a wide geographic scope. King Ezana's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century was a seminal moment for the empire because it was then able to use religious motivation to conduct a military campaign in southern Arabia. Here, the Himyarite Empire subsumed local groups to become a unified state that converted to Judaism sometime in the fifth century CE.

These two kingdoms demonstrate the diversity of Late Antique societies because each had to manage its disparate populations and interact with different regional powers. Their history also shows the political motivations of their governments' religious policies. While the use of religion to justify administrative and military campaigns was a hallmark of Late Antique life, ordinary people expressed their individual faiths in a variety of ways.

10.4 The Margins of Empire

The Kushan Empire in central Asia is an example of the diversity found beyond the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity. The Kushan Empire dominated trade along the Silk Roads, was home to a religiously diverse population, and promoted the burgeoning religion of Buddhism within and outside its borders. The city of Palmyra was able to rival the Roman Empire for a short time in the third-century eastern Mediterranean. By taking advantage of a tumultuous political situation, Queen Zenobia expanded her empire, and Palmyra flourished as a nexus of trade in the region. The peoples of pre-Islamic Arabia likewise interacted with the major superpowers of Late Antiquity. The Arabian Peninsula was a culturally diverse region and home to a mix of different religions and distinct tribal groups.

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8.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What made the Western Roman Empire more prone to societal disruption than the Eastern Roman Empire?

a. The West had a larger population of Christians.
b. The West had a longer frontier and was less urbanized.
c. Western cities were ruled exclusively by bishops.
d. German kings rejected Christianity.

2.
How did the Huns affect the migration of Germanic peoples?

a. They bribed the Visigoths to invade Italy and sack Rome.
b. They put pressure on the frontier, pushing people into Roman territory.
c. They forced the Vandals to attack the Saxons.
d. They spread Christianity past the frontier of the empire.

3.
What role did bishops play in Roman governance?

a. They served in the Roman military.
b. They instituted monetary reforms in periods of crisis.
c. They participated in ecumenical councils and dominated local politics.
d. They collaborated with pagans in public education.

4.
Through what means did the Sasanian kings rule their empire?

a. direct centralized control
b. semiautonomous rulers in the eastern empire
c. proxy governments, such as that of Armenia
d. Zoroastrian priests controlling city governments

5.
What regions did the Sasanians take from Byzantine control in the seventh century?

a. Italy and Spain
b. Bactria and Armenia
c. Syria and Palestine
d. Yemen and Mesopotamia

6.
How did the Sasanians and Byzantines practice cultural exchange?

a. They both participated in Christian ecumenical councils.
b. They both refused to conduct trade with China.
c. They attempted to invade Italy as a joint military force.
d. They sent embassies to each other’s courts.

7.
In what century did the Parthian Empire collapse?

a. the first century
b. the second century
c. the third century
d. the fourth century

8.
What body of water allowed Himyar and Aksum to conduct long-distance sea trade?

a. Black Sea

b. Danube River
c. Caspian Sea
d. Red Sea

9.
How did Christianity initially reach the kingdom of Aksum?

a. It was brought by the Syrian teacher Frumentius.
b. It was introduced by violent ascetic monks.
c. It was practiced by an embassy from the Byzantine court.
d. It was spread by Jewish people from Himyar.

10.
How did Aksumite and Himyarite leaders publicly express their religious devotion?

a. by creating inscriptions and building monuments to their faith
b. by trading only with empires that shared their faith
c. by forbidding nonbelievers to enter their territory
d. by making Zoroastrianism the state religion

11.
To what biblical figure was Aksum possibly connected?

a. King David
b. Esther
c. Queen of Sheba
d. Moses

12.
To what area was the Kushan Empire able to introduce Buddhism?

a. Georgia
b. Caspian Sea
c. Uzbekistan
d. China

13.
On what trade routes was Palmyra able to capitalize because of its location?

a. Caspian Sea and Danube
b. Silk Roads and Persian Gulf
c. Black Sea and Bosporus
d. Aegean Sea and Cyprus

14.
Of what event was Palmyra able to take advantage, to the detriment of the Kushan Empire?

a. third-century crisis
b. fourth-century arrival of Christianity
c. fifth-century monastic violence
d. sixth-century Byzantine reconquest

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8.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What relationship did Germanic peoples have with the Roman state?
2.
Why was Constantinople an ideal location for a new Roman capital city?
3.
Did Rome really “fall” in the fifth century CE? Why or why not?
4.
What made the period of Late Antiquity different from that of the ancient world?
5.
What similarities did Aksum and Himyar share in Late Antiquity?
6.
What characteristics made Aksum and Himyar powerful states in East Africa and Arabia, respectively?
7.
What were the clearest influences on the development and decline of the Kushan Empire?

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8.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
Of all the factors that brought about the administrative disintegration of the Roman West, which do you think was the most important? Why?
2.
How did the spread of Christianity and its acceptance by emperors alter Roman society from what it was in earlier antiquity?
3.
Should we continue to refer to the Byzantine Empire in this period as the Roman Empire? Why or why not?
4.
What marked Zoroastrianism as unique among religious traditions in Late Antiquity?
5.
How did religious beliefs serve as both unifying and divisive factors in Late Antiquity?
6.
How did religious issues in Aksumite and Himyarite culture affect the development of these societies?
7.
How were Aksum and Himyar affected by their relationships with the Byzantines and Sasanians, and what influence did each have on other states?
8.
Do you think people were focused more on religion or on politics in Late Antiquity? Why?
9.
Why did both the Sasanians and the Byzantines create alliances with Arab tribes in the fifth and sixth centuries CE?
10.
In what way did outsiders to the former Roman Empire affect its successors?
11.
What role did long-distance trade play in the development of the Palmyra, Kush, and Arab societies?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates

9.1: Introduction
9.2: The Rise and Message of Islam
9.3: The Arab-Islamic Conquests and the First Islamic States
9.4: Islamization and Religious Rule under Islam
9.5: Key Terms
9.6: Section Summary
9.7: Review Questions
9.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
9.9: Application and Reflection Questions

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9.1: Introduction



Figure 11.1 The Prophet Abraham. This illustration from al-Biruni's fourteenth-century history called *al-Athar al-Baqiyah* depicts the prophet Abraham destroying idols that were being worshipped instead of the one God. Abraham holds an important place as a common ancestor in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. (credit: Centre for Research Collections, University of Edinburgh, shelfmark Or.Ms.161, folio number f.88v., used with permission)

Chapter Outline

11.1 The Rise and Message of Islam
11.2 The Arab-Islamic Conquests and the First Islamic States
11.3 Islamization and Religious Rule under Islam

The modern monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a great deal in common with one another, including a number of traditions and beliefs. At the center of these shared traditions is the worship of one god, but the leadership of the prophets—individuals who were chosen to receive messages to humankind from God—is shared, too. Perhaps no prophetic figure is quite as central in all three faiths as the prophet Abraham (Figure 11.1). Abraham was a patriarch of the Israelites in Jewish and Christian tradition, a common ancestor known for his intense commitment to the worship of the one God in the scripture, the book of Genesis. In one of the best-known stories from the scripture featuring him, he was willing to sacrifice his own son if necessary in order to obey his God. Islamic tradition holds that he is also the ancestor of all the Arabs, and the house of worship he constructed in Mecca, in western Arabia, has become a revered site of pilgrimage for Muslims around the world.

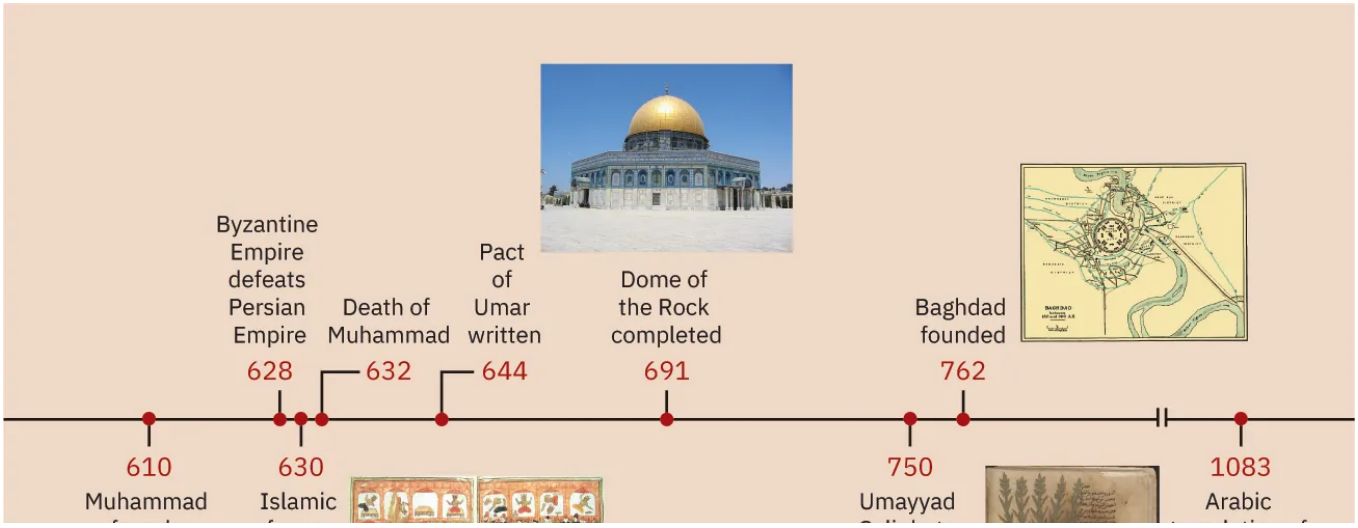


Figure 11.2 Timeline: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates. (credit “610”: modification of work “Qur'an and Rehal” by “sayyed shahab-o- din vajedi”/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0; credit “630”: modification of work “Muhammad destroying idols” by Histoire Géographie, Ème Nathan/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “691”: modification of work “Exterior of Dome of the Rock or Masjid Al Sakhrah, in Jerusalem” by Thekra A. Sabri/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0; credit “762”: modification of work “Baghdad, 150 to 300 AH” by www.muhammadanism.org/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1083”: modification of work “Kitāb al-Ḥaśā’iś fi hāyūlā al-‘ilāg al-ṭibbī Or. 289” by Universitaire Bibliotheken Leiden/Leiden University Libraries, CC BY)



Figure 11.3 Locator Map: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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9.2: The Rise and Message of Islam

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the political, geographic, and economic circumstances within the Middle East during the rise of Islam
- Discuss the origins of Islam and the career of the prophet Muhammad
- Explain the uniqueness of the community Muhammad built

The story of Abraham, called Ibrahim, within Islam is an important one. Not only was he a monotheist at a time when his people had embraced polytheism and begun to worship various idols, but according to Islamic tradition, he was the first person to settle in what later became the city of Mecca. Abraham arrived there with his servant and concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael. There he constructed the Kaaba, considered by Muslims to be the house of God and the most sacred site in Islam.

Muslims believe that as generations passed, however, the descendants of Ishmael, the Arabs, forgot their monotheism and began to worship idols, entering a period of ignorance known as the *jahiliyyah*. There they remained until God sent a new prophet, Muhammad, to correct their religious practices and deliver them from ignorance and disbelief. This lapse and deliverance, according to the faithful, is the story of Islam.

Arabia on the Eve of Islam

Seen from the outside, the Arabian Peninsula of the fifth and sixth centuries CE was a seemingly marginal space, on the southern fringes of the last great realms of antiquity, the Byzantine (Roman) and Sasanian (Persian) Empires. The geography of much of Arabia was harsh; the peninsula was filled with many dry and inhospitable places where rainfall, access to water, and cultivatable land were in short supply. Even today, a large portion of the center of modern Saudi Arabia is taken up by the “Empty Quarter,” the Rubʿ al-Khali, a 250,000-square-mile sand desert that barely sustains the few local Arab tribes that continue to live in the region. To many, the Arabian Peninsula might not seem like an obvious setting for the rise of a ruling empire and one of the world’s largest religious traditions (Figure 11.4).



Figure 11.4 The Byzantine and Sasanian Empires. This map shows the Byzantine (Roman) and Sasanian (Persian) Empires at the beginning of the seventh century CE. Note the long border the two empires shared, and the southern borders with Arabia that remained out of their direct control. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The reality, however, is that the Arabian Peninsula is—and was—more diverse than it might immediately seem. In the fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries, it was the home of disparate tribes often united by the bonds of kinship typical of nomadic and seminomadic peoples around the world, and divided for the same reason. As they do with the Celts, Iroquois, Mongols, and Persians (to name but a few), historians often group peoples together because of their use of a common language, their habitation of a specific geographic area, and aspects of culture they share such as food, dress, and religious practices. But beyond these shared features, little unified the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula prior to the seventh century. Many communities in the region were divided along tribal lines while vying with one another for power, prestige, influence, and available resources.

The great Byzantine and Persian Empires to the immediate north had a history of expansion and conflict. Despite their strength, however, neither desired to dominate Arabia. To those classical states, much of Arabia appeared as a backwater occupied by migratory and aggressive Arab tribes and offered no reason for them to turn their imperial ambitions southward. Few resources were produced in the region that suggested conquest would be worthwhile, even if western Arabia did play a role in the caravans of trade goods that traveled between east and west.

However, the region was a tapestry of unique cultures and history. The Bedouin were migratory Arab tribes that largely subsisted on animal herding and, in some instances, on the raiding of trade caravans and settled communities. Many Bedouin and other seminomadic Arabs practiced polytheism, the worship of many gods and goddesses who were often considered patrons of certain tribes or residents of certain locales. Polytheistic religions were not all that was found in the Arabian Peninsula: the monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Christianity were both present in the region before the arrival of Islam, and they influenced its formation. Given the harshness of the environment, in fact, during the ancient and late antique periods, important monasteries were founded for Christian worship, allowing the monks there to fully dedicate themselves to an ascetic life detached from the earthly world (Figure 11.5).



Figure 11.5 St. Catherine’s Monastery. Perhaps the most famous Christian monastery of the Arabian Peninsula is St. Catherine’s, constructed in the sixth century CE and adjacent to Mount Sinai (in the background of the photo), where the prophet Moses is said to have received from God the religious laws known as the “Ten Commandments.” (credit: “Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt” by Joonas Plaan/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

In the very south of the Arabian Peninsula, in what is Yemen today, was a kingdom known as Himyar. Its rulers controlled some of the most fertile lands in the region. They built their state on agricultural produce, on luxury goods such as frankincense and myrrh, and on their role as intermediaries in both East African and Indian Ocean trade. The Himyarites and their predecessors the Sabaeans played significant roles in long-distance trade, using camel caravans along the western coast of Arabia to bring goods from Africa and Asia to the markets in places such as Alexandria, Damascus, Jerusalem, and beyond (Figure 11.6). Their cultural influence was important, too, with a number of the southern Arab tribes connecting their history and lineage directly with these prestigious states. The decision by the Himyarite rulers to convert to Judaism in the late fourth century CE made monotheism more prominent in the region.



Figure 11.6 Himyar and Aksum. The Arabian Kingdom of Himyar (shaded green) and the African Kingdom of Aksum (orange) both played important roles in the overland and oversea Silk Roads trade, bringing goods northward to markets in Egypt, Palestine, and beyond. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

In the very north of Arabia, along the southern borders of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, were the Arabs who had the most sustained interactions with those two imperial powers. While tribes in the region had long acted as trade intermediaries between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean states, those of northern Arabia were most regularly engaged in harassing the trade caravans that brought goods to and from the urban imperial centers. To combat this aggression on their southern borders, both the Byzantines and the Persians opted to employ certain Arab confederations to create a buffer between the settled peoples and the raiders from the south. Best known were the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, who were brought into the service of the Byzantines and Persians, respectively, by the sixth century CE and became increasingly acculturated to them.

The Ghassanids adopted many elements of Byzantine culture, including Christianity. In fact, it was among Christian Arabs specifically that historians have found some of the earliest surviving uses of the Arabic script, from the seventh century. The Byzantine emperors also formally recognized and rewarded the Ghassanids, at least for a time. The Ghassanid ruler was documented as a *phylarch* (local ruler or chieftain) and given titles of honor by the Byzantine emperor Justinian during the sixth century.

The Lakhmids established themselves in the central Iraqi city of Al-Hirah and were recognized as allies of the Sasanian Persians from the late fourth century onward (Figure 11.7). Some of the Lakhmids embraced a form of Christianity known as Nestorianism and, like the Ghassanids, were able to thrive on the patronage of the great empire while protecting its southern borders from other Arabs. Both tribes were more than just servants of their larger patrons, however. They were allies with a certain degree of autonomy that allowed their societies to flourish. The money and support they received allowed them to become powerful confederations in comparison to other Arab tribes, and their conversion to Christianity allowed the further spread of monotheism in the region.



Figure 11.7 The Lakhmid Fort at Kharnaq. This late fifteenth-century manuscript page by the renowned Persian miniaturist Kamal al-din Bihzad shows the construction of the fort at Kharnaq, a castle near the Lakhmid capital of Al-Hirah. (credit: “The construction of the palace of Khavarnaq” by British Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The relationship between the Byzantines and the Sasanian Persians was very often tense, however. Both empires had ambitions to expand their influence, and they regularly skirmished with one another and attempted to meddle in each other’s politics, including by supporting rival claimants to the throne. Their combative relationship was not unique in late antiquity. When Rome was still a united empire and Persia was ruled by the Parthian dynasty, conflict between those two sides occurred regularly. By the sixth century, however, such conflicts between the two great powers of the region were increasingly costly and risky. Both states had a good deal to lose from open warfare, and much of their conflict played out through proxies, often the Arab Ghassanids and the Lakhmids. This arrangement was beneficial for the Arab tribes so long as payment and recognition of their role was forthcoming. By the beginning of the seventh century, however, much had changed.

The borderlands between the Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Persia were often where conflicts broke out, and this happened several times during the sixth century, especially in places like Iraq and Armenia (now called the Caucasus). In the year 602, however, the conflict exploded. The Byzantine emperor Maurice, who had helped the Sasanian ruler Khosrow II regain the throne of Persia and brought peace between the two sides, was murdered by his own troops. They installed a new emperor, Phocas, and Khosrow vowed revenge, using the coup as a reason to begin what historians call “the last great war of antiquity” (Figure 11.8).



Figure 11.8 Byzantines versus Sasanians. This map shows most of the major conflict zones between the Byzantines and Sasanians during their wars of the sixth and seventh centuries. Think about how much time was spent in regular conflict and what life must have been like for noncombatants in places like Theodosiopolis, Dara, and Sergiopolis. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Between 602 and 628, the Byzantines and Persians waged a devastating conflict that had long-lasting repercussions for the entire region. In the first phase, Khosrow and the Persians overwhelmed the Byzantines and claimed much of their eastern Mediterranean territory, including Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and crucially, the vital agricultural province of Egypt. Phocas, facing upheaval within his empire aside from the war with the Persians, was deposed and then executed in 610 by the newly declared emperor Heraclius. Desperate to claim back lost territory, return stability to the state, and rebuild the army to face the Persians, Heraclius was able to lead the Byzantines to victory and end the conflict in 628 (Figure 11.9).



Figure 11.9 The Victorious Emperor Heraclius. This inlaid copper plaque is a twelfth-century depiction of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (right) overcoming the Persian Sasanian Shahenshah Khosrow II (left) during the war between the two sides. Note the symbolism of the heroic warrior-ruler Heraclius knocking the crown from the head of his rival. Despite the short-lived victory of the Byzantines in the war, depictions of their success remained popular images throughout the Middle Ages. (credit: "Sassanid King Khosrau II submitting to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius" by "Jastrow"/Louvre Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Heraclius and the Byzantines did not go on to destroy the Sasanian dynasty, however. While Khosrow II was overthrown in a civil war at the end of the conflict, neither side was truly capable of continuing a long and costly fight against the other. The Byzantines were ultimately victorious, but the war was devastating for both sides politically, militarily, and economically. Despite his accomplishments, Heraclius had placed all his focus and state expenditures on the war itself rather than on truly governing the empire. Both sides had lost an enormous number of soldiers over more than fifteen years of conflict, and those who survived were war-weary and ready for retirement. Neither side had the money to rebuild the army or their defenses when they had put so much of the state's resources toward victory—and survival.

With so much upheaval occurring despite the Byzantine victory, the war affected many aspects of society, including the state and nobility's ability to patronize scholarship, historical writing, and the arts, leading this period to be known as the "Byzantine Dark Age" because of the severe lack of historical writing that survived in the seventh and eight centuries. Finally, the borders were constantly changing, and many civilians just attempting to live their lives were likely tossed between sides as the tides of war changed. More war would have taken an exhausting toll even on the people living in seemingly safe places like Jerusalem, Antioch, and Damascus.

As it was, the impacts of the conflict were far-reaching. The later Byzantine chronicler Theophanes wrote in the early ninth century about how the conflict had changed the relationship between the Byzantines and the Arabs in the year 630–631, including, almost certainly, tribes like the Ghassanids that had enjoyed special privileges and payments from the state. Theophanes wrote, "There were some nearby Arabs who received modest allowances from the emperors for guarding the desert pathways. A eunuch came to

distribute to the soldiers' allowances; but this time, when the Arabs came to receive theirs, as was their custom, the eunuch drove them away. 'The ruler can hardly afford to pay his troops,' he said, 'much less give money to such dogs as these.' The Arabs were outraged, went to their comrades, and showed them the route to the district of Gaza, the pathways toward Sinai, which were extremely rich."

The timeline and circumstances of this long final conflict between the Byzantines and Sasanians, and the exhausted state in which both sides were left, were also significant for future events. While these great powers were distracted by the devastating war between them, their southern border was likely far from their rulers' minds. Yet at the same time, the Arabs of western Arabia were being united for the first time in history, through the leadership of a man named Muhammad and the religion of Islam, with direct repercussions for the survival of the two ancient empires.

The Religious Tradition of Islam

While the conflict between the Byzantines and the Sasanians raged at the beginning of the seventh century, western Arabia began to take center stage in the creation of a new world religion deeply influenced by the environment, people, and cultures of the late antique Middle East. That religion was Islam, a word meaning "submission [to the one God]." Islam is a monotheistic faith that shares many features with both Judaism and Christianity, while at the same time having many features that were uniquely Arabian and that eventually brought the culture and traditions of the Arabian Peninsula to greater prominence.

Understanding Islam's origins and early decades can be challenging. Much of what we know about the earliest community of Muslims comes from sources within the community itself that often assume the reader is already a believer, so they omit important details. And because many people were illiterate at this time and not writing their history as it happened, we have less evidence outside religious scripture to help us reconstruct it. While the Arabs placed great emphasis on remembering the events and people of the area's past, they transmitted this information primarily through a process of memorization and oral recitation, and memory aids, such as poetry, were vital methods as material was passed down through generations. Written histories of the past for future generations were seen as less important than the living "performance" of information through the oral tradition.

While other contemporary societies had become increasingly focused on writing for centuries before the seventh century, the Arab commitment to oral transmission in this period was not unprecedented. The history of early Judaism was similarly transmitted before being committed to writing much later, and historians also face challenges trying to reconstruct the origins of Christianity when little contemporaneous writing survives. Memorializing, memorizing, and transmitting events of the past through epic poetry also has precedent in the Mediterranean world, as seen in the preservation of works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, attributed to the Greek poet Homer, and the ancient Indian world, as in the case of the *Mahabharata*.

At the center of the founding of Islam are the city of Mecca, the worship of one God—Allah—and the leadership of the prophets. Even to Muslims today, Allah is not considered to be a god separate from the God of Judaism and Christianity; *Allah* is simply the Arabic word meaning "the one God." In fact, Christians who live in the Middle East and speak Arabic today refer to the God of the Christian Bible by using the word "Allah" in their own worship. Belief in the one God and the message of the Islamic prophet Muhammad is the first and most important of the "Five Pillars of Islam," known as the *shahada*, the profession of faith. To embrace Islam as their religion, adherents must recognize the creed that "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." Muhammad, as recognized by Muslims, was the final prophet in a long list with whom the one God had communicated throughout history, including figures such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Muhammad was a divinely chosen man who is not, nor ever has been, worshipped as a God or as a relative of God himself.

Many of the other pillars of Islam also have features in common with other world religions such as ritual fasting, charity, and daily prayer. For Muslims, these acts are specified as daily prayer while facing the direction of the holy mosque in the city of Mecca; almsgiving, the donation of money and goods to the community and people in need; fasting (if able) during Ramadan, the holy month during which the Muslim scripture of the Quran was first revealed to Muhammad; and participating at least once (if able) in the pilgrimage to Mecca—the hajj—to relive important moments in the life of Abraham and his family's arrival in Arabia and to circle the house of God, the Kaaba, in prayer.

The Past Meets the Present

Hajj: The Islamic Pilgrimage to Mecca

One of the core tenets or "Five Pillars" of Islam is participation in the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. This event, when undertaken during the month of Dhu al-Hijja, is known as the hajj. Each year millions of Muslims travel to the holy city to take part in a process that has been going on for almost fourteen hundred years.

While Mecca was the home of the prophet Muhammad, for Muslims the pilgrimage is about much more. The rituals and events in which they participate are intended to reenact important events in the life of a different prophet, Abraham. The sacred mosque that is the focus of much of the pilgrimage is the holiest site of Islam, built to surround the Kaaba, the black-shrouded cube structure at the center that is believed to be the original home of monotheism (Figure 11.10). Some Muslims believe the Kaaba was constructed by Adam, the first man, and then reconstructed by Abraham.



Figure 11.10 The Sacred Mosque in Mecca. This photo shows the sacred mosque in Mecca, Islam's holiest site, with a large crowd of pilgrims surrounding the Kaaba, the black-shrouded building in the center. (credit: modification of work "Mekke Suudi Arabistan" by "Konevi"/Pxhere, CC0 1.0)

The five- to six-day hajj recognizes the long history of monotheism in Arabia, acknowledging that Muhammad's career and message were the correction and perfection of monotheistic worship begun centuries earlier. In addition to Adam, Abraham, and Muhammad, other great figures of history have been adopted and associated with worship at the Kaaba, including Iskandar, more recognizably known as Alexander the Great.

Islamic law recognizes that the hajj is not a trip every Muslim will be able to take. Some may not be healthy enough, and Islamic charitable organizations around the world collect donations to support those who cannot otherwise afford it. Pilgrims may also travel to the holy mosque during other times of the year, which is not considered as having made the hajj but is instead called the *umra*, the "lesser pilgrimage."

- What are the historical implications of the pilgrimage to Mecca being one of the core tenets of Islam?
- How might the obstacles to making such a pilgrimage today be greater or smaller than in the past?

Muslims have believed throughout their history that Islam and its holy writings are not a new faith created in the seventh century. Instead, the faith that Muhammad brought to the Arabs in the early 600s was merely a corrective to the monotheistic religions that had come before. From the perspective of most Muslims, Islam is the same faith as Judaism and Christianity, with adherents of all three traditions worshipping the same God and recognizing divine intercession in humanity through the leadership of the prophets. Muslims also recognize the holy scriptures of Judaism and Christianity as having been given to humans by God but then corrupted

over time. Islam thus sees itself as a purer form of these faiths and directly connected to both. The shared history and lineage of the three run through the prophet Abraham, whom all list as an ancestor. Many modern scholars of religion thus refer to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the Abrahamic faiths.

For all the influence that other monotheistic worship in the region may have had on the formation of Islam in the seventh century, however, the faith has many features we might consider uniquely Arab or Arabian. First, of course, is the setting itself. While the land that is modern Israel and Palestine played a central role in the narratives of Judaism and Christianity, much of the story of the formation of Islam as a distinct religion is found in western Arabia, a region of the peninsula known as the Hijaz. Its holiest sites lie in this region, and the life of its founder was spent almost entirely there.

The faith is firmly connected to Arabic, the indigenous language of the region, especially in its holiest scriptures and also in cultural features like the survival of Arabic poetry as a means of recording the past. The tribal structure of pre-Islamic Arabian society also defined the first several decades of the religion and the states it inspired, which included a social hierarchy that made it nearly impossible to convert to Islam for the better part of the first century of the faith unless an individual was first embraced as a member of an Arab tribe. In this way, conversion was connected to the old ways of the Arabs, which did not require a convert to be of a particular ethnicity or bloodline but did require the adoption of the cultural traditions and markers of the Arabian tribal society. For these earliest adherents of the faith, it seems likely that they felt the one God had chosen the western Arabian peoples and their traditions for special recognition, and embracing these features was a prerequisite for being among the “chosen” people. But more influential than anything, perhaps, was the Muslims’ belief in the leadership and message of the man whom God chose as his final prophet, an Arab of the early seventh century from the Hijaz of western Arabia.

The Islamic Prophet Muhammad

Muslim tradition tells us that Muhammad was a merchant from a prominent Arab tribe called Quraysh in the Hijaz region. Born in the city of Mecca, he spent his early life engaged in the trade that passed along the north–south trade routes through his city, a hub that had become a waystation and a good place to conduct business (Figure 11.11). The tribe of Quraysh dominated leadership and trade in the region in large part because its members were the protectors of the sacred Kaaba, which in this period, we are told, had become a house of idol worship, a center of polytheism among the Arabs. Long-distance trade of luxury goods could be risky because of raiding that occurred along trade routes, and the Kaaba had become a sanctuary where fighting was illicit, making it a safe place to conduct business. The Quraysh were enriched as the stewards of this important sanctuary and had a keen interest in protecting its role in society.



Figure 11.11 Mecca as a Trade Hub. Muslim sources tell us that Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, made the city of Mecca an important waystation for those trading luxury goods by land and sea. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

According to Muslim belief, in the year 610 the middle-aged Muhammad, who had traveled to a cave just outside Mecca for contemplation, received contact from God through the intermediary of the angel Gabriel (Jabrīl in Arabic). Muhammad was told to recite the first revelations of a scripture that became the Muslim holy book, the Quran. He returned home amazed and surprised by what he had experienced. As a well-traveled and successful trader in the region, he had much to lose from undertaking a religious mission with a novel message. For one thing, a new religion would threaten the balance of power within his Arab tribe by plainly rejecting the polytheism that many in the community practiced and the financial benefits that came with the Kaaba. However, Muhammad essentially abandoned a financially stable and comfortable life as a merchant to embrace what he believed was required by God: becoming a preacher and working to save the souls of his family and kin from a coming day of judgment.

There has been much disagreement throughout history over who was the first man to convert to Islam after hearing Muhammad's message, but there is no debate among Muslim sources about who was the first *person* to do so: his first wife Khadija. As a successful merchant in her own right—who had lifted Muhammad's standing in their community by marrying him and bringing him into her caravan business—Khadija too would have had much to lose in supporting the new religion. The earliest biographer of Muhammad, Ibn Ishaq, described the critical support she provided Muhammad by saying, "Khadija believed in him and accepted as true what he brought from God, helping him in his work . . . through her, God lightened the burden of his prophet."

While many of Muhammad's confidants and family members embraced Islam shortly after the revelations began and continued, his career as a prophet, especially the first twelve years, was fraught with challenge. His preaching of monotheism upset the political status quo and was often resisted. The support of his family, especially his wives, was critical to his success as a preacher, and the guidance of Khadija was especially significant. Tradition suggests that when Muhammad thought he might be mad as the revelations first came to him, it was she who convinced him to trust and embrace his new calling.

In 622, Muhammad's twelfth year of prophecy, his community fled persecution and increasing aggression by the polytheist Meccans. They were invited to join another community of Arabs in a city called Yathrib, later known as Medina, "the city" or more

specifically “the prophet’s city.” There they were welcomed among other Arab tribes, including some practicing Judaism. This *hijra*, meaning “emigration,” was a watershed moment for Muhammad’s early community. At a low ebb and without any certainty of survival, Islam now changed from a small religion mostly confined to Mecca to a larger community united by Muhammad that solidified its place in world history. The *hijra* holds such importance in the history of Islam that the Islamic lunar calendar counts 622 CE as its first year. (Dates in the Muslim calendar, used by many around the world today, are often labeled in English with AH, for “After the Hijra.”)

Link to Learning

Many Muslims throughout history have avoided depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad in human form in their art, with some feeling that portraying the Prophet could be misconstrued as idolatrous, or revering something (or someone) besides God. But Muslim artists have also depicted their founder Muhammad in words and calligraphic art for centuries, as a sign of respect and as part of their recounting of the important narrative of his life.

Muhammad’s Community

While the narrative of Islam under Muhammad’s leadership centers on Arabs and Arab society in the seventh century, many factors influenced his message, his leadership, and the growth of the community of Muslims, called the *ummah*. The Muslim emigration to Medina was one step in a wider process as Muhammad sought shelter for his community, an opportunity to spread the message of Islam outside his region, and ultimately the unification of Arab tribes into a confederacy the region had never seen.

Even before fleeing Mecca, some from Muhammad’s community sought refuge and support wherever they could find it as they attempted to expose more of the region to the monotheistic message of Islam. One support was found across the Red Sea, in East Africa in the Christian Kingdom of Aksum. There, the Negus—the leader of Aksum in what is modern-day Ethiopia—provided shelter for Muslims fleeing Meccan persecution and allowed them to practice their faith under his protection. Many remained there until they were able to return to Muhammad and emigrate to Medina, too. This support from the Aksumites was important to the survival of Islam, and in fact the decision by some early Muslims to seek refuge in Ethiopia is sometimes referred to as “the first *hijra*.”

In Medina, the previously polytheist Arabs, Jewish Arabs, and Muhammad’s *ummah* formed an alliance for their common defense. Muhammad served first as an arbiter of disputes between the tribes and, soon after, as the city’s de facto leader. Under his guidance, the community devised the Constitution of Medina as a means to solidify the agreement between the tribes and their mutual responsibility to protect their city and its people from outside attack. Later Muslim rulers saw the constitution as a blueprint for the creation of a religious society that tolerated those of other faiths while supporting the worship of the one God, mutual defense for the community, and Muhammad’s leadership.

The constitution stated that “the believers and Muslims of [the tribe of] Quraysh and Medina and those who join them . . . form one *ummah* to the exclusion of others.” It goes on to explain that the Jewish Arabs of the tribe of Banu Awf “are secure from the believers [the Muslims]. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs.” The phrases most commonly used in the constitution to describe Muhammad’s followers are “Muslims” (“those who have submitted to God”) and “believers” (*al-Mu’minun*). For this reason, some historians have described the earliest *ummah* as a “community of believers” that was open to most monotheists. In these earliest decades of Islam, Muhammad’s new community had much in common with the monotheistic Jewish people and Christians, and we find little evidence of the distinctive Muslim identity that formed over the next several centuries.

In Their Own Words

Jewish and Christian Narratives in the Quran

The holy scripture of Islam, the Quran, is deeply intertextual, meaning it has a relationship with and is often in dialogue with other texts, namely the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian Bible. Here in translation are excerpts from Surah (Chapter) 5 that, in

part, address Muhammad's community about where their faith fits with the other monotheistic traditions, Judaism and Christianity.

> *The Jews and Christians say, "We are the children of God, the ones He loves." Say: "Then why does He punish you for your sins? No. You are mortals, of those He has created. He forgives those whom He wishes and He punishes those whom He wishes. God has sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and what is between them. To Him is the journeying."*
>
> *O people of the Scripture, Our messenger has come to you, making things clear to you after an interval between messengers, so that you cannot say, "No bearer of good tidings or warner has come to us." A bearer of good tidings and a warner has come to you. God has power over everything.*
>
> *And [recall] when Moses said to his people, "O my people, remember the blessings of God to you when He placed prophets amongst you and made you kings and gave you what He had not given to anyone [else] among created beings. O my people, Enter the holy land which God has prescribed for you. Do not turn your backs, lest you return as losers."*
>
> *And recite to them in truth, the tale of the two sons of Adam [Cain and Abel], when they offered sacrifices, and it was accepted from one of them and not from the other. [The latter, Cain] said, "I shall kill you." [Abel] replied, "God accepts only from those who are god-fearing.*
>
> *If you stretch out your hand to me to kill me, I shall not stretch out my hand to kill you. I fear God, Lord of created beings.*
>
> *I wish you to take on both your sin and my sin and become one of the companions of the Fire. That is the recompense of evil-doers."*
>
> *Then his soul prompted him to kill his brother; so he killed him, and became one of the losers.*
>
> *Then God sent a crow, which scratched into the earth to show him how he might hide the corpse of his brother. He said, "Woe on me. Am I unable to be like this crow, and hide the corpse of my brother?" And he became one of the repentant.*
>
> *Because of that, We have prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul, other than in retaliation for [another] soul or for corruption in the land, will be as if he had killed all the people; and whoever saves one will be as if he had saved the life of all people.*
>
> *Our messengers have come to them in the past with the clear proofs; but even after that many of them commit excesses in the land.*
>
> *—Sura 5 of the Quran, verses 18–21 and 27–32, translated by Alan Jones*

- Who is the "messenger" referenced here, and what is their goal on earth?
- What lessons do you think are being communicated to believers in this reading?

- What might the references to Moses and Cain and Abel tell us about Quran's early audience?

The even-handed approach to members of this new *ummah* was critical to the ultimate success of Muhammad and his community. Much of the last ten years of Muhammad's life was spent with this new Muslim community in Medina, engaged in conflict with their former brethren in Mecca. Fighting between the two sides was fierce, and there were also tensions within Medina and the early *ummah* as Muhammad's followers grew in number and prominence at the expense of other Arabs in the city, in particular, the Jewish contingent. Many on both sides were related by blood even if their religious beliefs had altered. Muhammad's community continued to grow and win more supporters until, on the eve of battle outside Mecca in 630, his former tribe of Quraysh surrendered, and the population of the city converted to Islam. Muhammad and his followers were then able to return to Mecca, where he entered the holy sanctuary of the Kaaba, now filled with the polytheist idols worshipped by the Arabs, and smashed them all, echoing a famous story about the biblical prophet Abraham (Figure 11.12). From the perspective of Muslims, the original house of Abraham, which had always been dedicated to the worship of the one God, was now cleansed.



Figure 11.12 Cleansing the Sanctuary of Mecca. In this early nineteenth-century depiction from Kashmir, India, the Muslim army triumphantly enters the sanctuary of Mecca to destroy the idols kept there, which are shown on the top and left edges of the scene. Muhammad is not himself depicted in the image, though the National Library of France, which holds this work, indicates he is depicted as a flame. (credit: "Muhammad destroying idols" by Histoire Geographie 5ieme Nathan/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Muhammad had succeeded in uniting the majority of Arab tribes of western Arabia under his leadership. He spent the next two years continuing to expand his community and spreading the message of Islam, until his death from natural causes in the year 632.

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9.3: The Arab-Islamic Conquests and the First Islamic States

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the motivations for Islamic expansion during the seventh and eighth centuries
- Identify where and how Islam expanded during the seventh and eighth centuries
- Discuss the establishment of the first Islamic dynasty in the Middle East
- Describe the nature of Islamic society during the seventh and eighth centuries

When Muhammad died in 632 CE, members of the early Muslim *ummah* needed to immediately answer several important questions. Who was capable of now leading the community, of following in the footsteps of a leader who claimed prophecy—the ability to communicate with God—when none of those who remained could do so? Another critical question was about the survival of the community: what, exactly, had Muhammad accomplished by uniting the Arab tribes, and where would they go from here? The first few years following Muhammad's death tested the community's resolve while its members sought to articulate what made this moment in their history unique.

The Arab-Islamic Conquest Movement

Arab tribes had come together for a common cause in the pre-Islamic period, such as a war against another tribe or recognition of the strength of a chieftain. But once that cause had been accomplished or that chieftain had died, the confederacy typically disbanded, its purpose fulfilled. In the wake of Muhammad's death, at least some Arab tribes likewise believed the community's purpose had been completed. His accomplishment in bringing people together under the banner of Islam was not one the surviving leaders of the community intended to be temporary, however.

There were urgent questions about the leadership of the community, and immediate disagreements about it as well. In many tribal- and clan-based societies like that of the Arabs, leadership was not hereditary, meaning it did not immediately pass to the heir upon the death of the leader. Thus, as Muhammad was dying, two primary claimants for leadership emerged: his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, and a friend and confidant of Muhammad's named Abu Bakr. Ali, related to the Prophet by blood and marriage, was comparatively young in a society that saw leadership in its elders, although he claimed to have been chosen by Muhammad as his heir and successor. Abu Bakr, in contrast, was one of the elders of the community, well respected and popularly chosen. Both had been among the first to convert to Islam.

Members of the community had concerns about their own standing. Some were the earliest converts who had joined Muhammad when he was still in Mecca, some had welcomed his community in Medina when they needed shelter, and still others had not converted until shortly before Muhammad's death. In the end, Abu Bakr was chosen to be the first successor to Muhammad, the caliph or religious and political leader of the Muslim community. This was accomplished through popular acclamation by tribal leaders, who ultimately won out over those who favored the lineage of Ali. Islam had weathered this first hurdle, although the question of leadership had longer-term implications for the unity of the *ummah.* Ali, believed by some to have been chosen by Muhammad as his heir, was likely aggrieved at the decision, although he accepted it. Other stakeholders may also have felt slighted, including a number of Muhammad's wives, several of whom were shunned despite their close relationship as members of the family of the Prophet. And while this new role of caliph would provide leadership to the young community at a critical juncture, there seems to have been near immediate recognition that things without Muhammad would be different, not least of which because the caliph was not assuming the mantle of another prophet capable of communicating directly with God as Muhammad had.

Tensions arose after Muhammad's death not just over leadership and inheritance, but also over whether the alliance was ever intended to last beyond its founder. Some Arab tribes left to return to their homes, while others may have believed they could discard their commitment to the worship of the one God and membership in this confederation. From the perspective of the Muslims, however, this was apostasy, and a conflict known as the Ridda Wars then began in an attempt to force these Arab tribes to continue to honor their agreements with the Muslims. The Ridda Wars also appear to have been expansionist, bringing into the fold, whether by treaty or force, Arab tribes that had never been aligned with Muhammad's community during his lifetime. This effort was the first step of a wider movement called the Arab-Islamic or Arab-Muslim conquests, and by 633 the entirety of Arabia had been brought under the control of this first Islamic state.

Abu Bakr did not live long after Muhammad, and the conquest movement did not stop with his leadership, nor with uniting just the Arab tribes under the banner of Islam. The new state's expansionist desire seems to have existed from the outset, and the Arab-Muslim armies turned their attention northward to the old empires of Sasanian Persia and Byzantium. They were likely inspired by the richness of these lands, where they knew resources were more plentiful and luxury trade goods regularly traveled. But there were other factors, too. The Arab-Muslims may have felt emboldened by their successes in Arabia, seeing them as recognition of God's favor and of their destiny to rule the world.

Religious belief and zeal are difficult for historians to quantify, but we have seen throughout history that nomadic and seminomadic societies must forcefully seek the resources they need to survive while defending themselves against threats that sedentary societies face less often. The hardiness and capability of the Arab-Muslims as a fighting force during this period was also a factor. The weakness of the empires to the north would have been seen as a clear opportunity for the raiders who had long supported themselves by harrying the frontiers. And there was the timing: Muhammad and his successors were creating and expanding the new Muslim community in the 620s and 630s, as the war between the Byzantines and the Sasanian Persians was entering its last stages and leaving both empires weakened at a critical juncture.

Conquering Persia and the Byzantine Empire

It was not always clear that the Arab-Muslims would be successful against the Byzantines and the Persians, the last empires of antiquity. Nonetheless, starting in 634 and continuing into the early eighth century, they found enormous success conquering much of the territory around the Mediterranean basin and central Asia, going as far west as Spain and Portugal and all the way to the Indus River valley in the east. The new Islamic state, or caliphate (an area under the control of a caliph), was larger than the realm of Alexander the Great, the Romans, or the Han Chinese; it was the largest empire the world had yet seen (Figure 11.13).



Figure 11.13 The Eighth-Century Islamic Caliphate. This map shows the extent the new Islamic caliphate had achieved by the end of its first dynasty, the Umayyads. During the eighth century CE, the Umayyads ruled the world's largest empire. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The crucial early years of Islamic expansion were overseen by the first four caliphs, a group of rulers who came to be called the "rightly guided" or Rashidun. These four figures—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and the originally overlooked son-in-law of Muhammad, Ali—ruled between 632 and 661, a period when much Byzantine and Persian territory was conquered, and the message of Islam spread throughout a predominantly Christian Middle East. While the Byzantines and the Persians had employed the Arabian Ghassanids and Lakhmids to guard their borders and serve in their wars, the arrival of the Arab-Muslim armies was unlike anything either empire had seen before.

The Byzantine emperor Heraclius, heralded for bringing victory over the Persians, was not able to enjoy his triumph for very long. Meanwhile, defeated Sasanian Persia was coping with the effects of a destabilizing civil war. The ruler who ultimately emerged in 632, Yazdegerd III, was little more than a puppet king, a child figurehead, and the once-unified Sasanian state devolved into a fractured entity ruled by the noble families.

Link to Learning

This brief audio essay from BBC Sounds discusses the development of the Arab-Islamic conquests and their long-term successes.

The Arab-Muslim armies began their invasion with the provinces of Iraq and Syria before moving eastward into the Iranian plateau and westward into Egypt. On all fronts, the first decades of the conflict proved extraordinarily successful for the conquerors. Shortly after winning several skirmishes and capturing the Syrian city of Damascus, the Arab-Muslims bested the Byzantine army at the Battle of Yarmuk in 636. Unable to defend the remaining cities of the region, the Byzantines then abandoned Greater Syria, consisting of what are today Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. The Arab-Muslim armies continued northward and westward, laying siege to and capturing the Egyptian port city of Alexandria in 641. Many other Byzantine provinces soon followed. In Iraq, the armies of Persia lost to the Arab-Muslims at the Battle of Qadisiyya, bringing an end to any sustained resistance by the Persians.

Still, the conquest of Persia proved to be a longer-term process. Sasanian-controlled territory was vast and geographically diverse, and the independence the Sasanian nobility had wrested from the central government following the war with the Byzantines meant the Arab-Muslims needed to negotiate with many local governors and landed elites for the surrender of their territory. At the same time, dynamics between the Sasanian nobility and the lower classes had already begun changing. The nobility existed in a well-established court culture and practiced the traditional Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. Outside this elite circle, however, Zoroastrianism had long been declining in popularity, while other religious traditions, including Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism, grew. The collapse of the Sasanian ruling family in Persia also provides a unique glimpse into something that had not happened among the elite before: the brief rise of a female ruler, Boran. The daughter of Khosrow II, Boran came to power briefly during the civil war after the Byzantine victory over her father. While such opportunities for female power in the region were few and far between, her rule underscores that seventh-century Persia was already a state and a people in transition, and the arrival of the Arab-Muslims with the cultural practices of Arabia and the religion of Islam only expedited change.

Although the Byzantines and Persians had put up resistance, by the 650s much of their territory had been taken by the new Islamic state of the Rashidun. Heraclius died in 641, with the territories he and the Byzantines had fought to retake from the Persians largely lost. The Byzantine Empire survived the Arab-Muslim conquests, but it never again controlled much of the territory of the old Roman east. The Sasanian ruler Yazdegerd III fled east to escape capture by the Arab-Muslims or their supporters, spending much of his short life on the run before being killed by his own people in 651. By that time, the entirety of the Persian Empire had effectively been brought into the control of the new Islamic state.

The Conquerors and the Conquered

From the perspective of the Arab-Muslims, the conquest movement had been enormously successful, a demonstration of the power of God and his favoring of their *ummah*. From the perspective of Christians who were not aligned with the Muslims during this period, the arrival of the Arab-Muslims was also seen as an act of God, a God who was angry at the sinfulness of the Christians and who had sent the Arab-Muslims as a punishment they needed to bear.

Calling these events the “Arab-Muslim conquests” is somewhat misleading, however. While the first years of expansion did see several major battles, including Yarmuk and Qadisiyya, most of the territory came under Islamic control through peace agreements. Cities and regions agreed to terms of surrender that protected their residents, many of their belongings, and their right to practice their religion. Peaceful agreements made sense for non-Muslim populations. Especially during the seventh century, the Muslims maintained a policy of noninterference toward the religious practices of subject populations. As long as they paid taxes to their new Muslim government, the conquered could live in the Islamic state and still practice their religion somewhat freely.

The Muslims developed a legal classification for the Jewish people, Christians, and Zoroastrians who lived under their rule. They referred to them as *ahl al-kitab*, or People of the Book, which recognized them as monotheists who had received a revealed scripture from God in the past, and who were worthy of protection by the Islamic state so long as they paid taxes and submitted to Muslim rule. For many, this situation was an improvement on their earlier lives. Under Byzantine rule, for instance, those who did not follow the official Christian religion of the empire were often discriminated against. They could be barred from holding certain jobs, charged extra taxes, and otherwise be badly treated as heretics. For Jewish populations, the situation had often been even harsher. Many had been unable to openly practice their faith or gather outside the synagogue. While they were not officially monotheists and were not seen as having a revealed scripture, Zoroastrians under the Muslims were still treated as People of the Book, likely for pragmatic reasons owing to their noble status in Persian society.

Dueling Voices

Reaction to the Arab-Islamic Conquests

With the arrival of the Arab-Muslims in Persia, Christian leaders vied with one another for prestige, followers, and perhaps preferential status with the new ruling Muslim elite. Sophronius, the author of the first excerpt presented next, was Patriarch of Jerusalem (one of the most senior roles within the Eastern Orthodox Church) from 634 until his death in 638. The second writer, Ishoyahb III, was Patriarch of the Church of the East, or the Nestorian Church, from 649 to 659, leading the most popular Christian denomination of the former Persian Empire.

> *Why do barbarian raids abound? Why are the troops of the [Arab-Muslims] attacking us? Why has there been so much destruction and plunder? . . . That is why the vengeful and God-hating [Arab-Muslims], the abominations of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries, oppose the Byzantine armies arrayed against them, and in fighting raise up the trophies [of war] and add victory to victory. . . . Yet these vile ones would not have accomplished this nor seized such a degree of power as to do and utter lawlessly all these things, unless we had first insulted the gift [of baptism] and first defiled the purification, and in this way grieved Christ, the giver of gifts, and prompted him to be angry with us, good though he is and though he takes no pleasure in evil, being the fount of kindness and not wishing to behold the ruin and destruction of men. We are ourselves, in truth, responsible for all these things and no word will be found for our defense.*
>
> *—Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, translated by Robert G. Hoyland*

> *As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule over the world, you know well how they act towards us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honor the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries. Why then do your [inhabitants of Merv, a city in the former Persian*

> *Empire] reject their faith on a pretext of theirs? And this when the [inhabitants of Merv] themselves admit that the Arabs have not compelled them to abandon their faith, but only asked them to give up half of their possessions in order to keep their faith. Yet they forsook their faith, which is forever, and retained the half of their wealth, which is for a short time.*
>
> *—Ishoyahb III of Adiabene, translated by Robert G. Hoyland*

- What was the experience of Christians under the rule of the new Muslim conquerors?
- Who were the audiences for these two letters? Why does the audience matter to their messages?
- Why might the writers have such different perspectives on their treatment by the Arab-Muslims?

The term "Arab-Muslim conquest" has another drawback in that some participants were non-Arabs, including people from East Africa, North Africa, and Persians who chose to join the Muslim armies. Among them were some Amazigh (Berber) tribes from North Africa and the elite Persian cavalry, the *asawira*. Other fighters *were* Arabs but had not necessarily formally converted to Islam. These included Arab members of devout Christian tribes such as the Banu Taghlib. There are likely many reasons for non-Arabs and non-Muslims to have contributed to the Muslim effort. Joining in the conquests would at least have entitled the participant to a portion of the spoils of war and standing in the new society, both of which were immensely beneficial.

In the end, the most important differentiator of status in this earliest society was not Arab versus non-Arab or Muslim versus non-Muslim, but rather conqueror versus conquered. Thus, in the first centuries of Islamic history, society was organized into those who paid tax for the protection and benefit of the state, and those who received that payment and provided that protection and those benefits. Those who were ethnically Arab had opportunities to enjoy special preferences within government and society in the earliest decades, but by the end of the eighth century, this distinction eroded as more non-Arabs became involved in the affairs of state.

Islam's First Dynasty

The Rashidun caliphs are remembered not just for overseeing the process of conquest in the region but also for helping to articulate what Muhammad's *ummah* should look like, and what made Islam different from other monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity. The first four caliphs committed to writing a canonized Quran and helped interpret and articulate the religious law. For matters of faith the Quran did not directly address, they played a crucial role in transmitting the hadith, the sayings and actions of Muhammad and his closest confidants, to help answer those questions. Together, the Quran and the hadith make up the bulk of religious law for Muslims to the present day, and the Rashidun caliphs have long been regarded as interpreters of this material for later Muslims who were not able to interact with Muhammad themselves. Critical for the transmission of the hadith were those who had spent the most time in Muhammad's presence, not only the Rashidun but also his wives. Among the most important for the hadith was Muhammad's youngest wife Aisha, whose achievements as a transmitter and interpreter of Islamic law in the decades following her husband's death cannot be understated.

The rule of the "rightly guided," despite their name, did not escape challenge and controversy. The reign of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, resulted in the first Islamic civil war, which proved devastating for the long-term unity of the new religion. The war was fought over the murder of the third caliph, Uthman, in 656, and his successor's inability to bring the killers and their collaborators to justice. Uthman's family—the tribe of Umayya—rose to resist Ali's claim to the caliphate. It was a conflict that deeply wounded the unity of the Islamic world and saw many early family members and supporters of Muhammad take up arms against one another. For example, Aisha played a leading role in opposing Ali at the Battle of the Camel at the outset of the civil war. The eventual murder of Ali in 661 deepened the divide between his supporters and other Muslims.

With Ali's death, the Umayyads, led by Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, established Islam's first hereditary dynasty. Moving the capital of their state from the Prophet's city of Medina to the Syrian city of Damascus, they became a major imperial power in the region while beginning to articulate what made Islam different from other religious traditions in the region. As the founder of the dynasty, Mu'awiya proved to be a particularly shrewd politician, but his preference for nepotism meant his family's long-term legacy was mixed. Despite a second civil war in the 680s and 690s, his successors continued to favor their own, while at the same time the conquest of further territory slowed and then stopped.

After the Muslims met defeat at the walls of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, the later Umayyad period, which ended in 750, was defined by the dynasty's struggle for legitimacy. At first the Umayyads followed the tactics of the Rashidun, creating everything from art to buildings with forms and symbols that were familiar to the Byzantine and Persian worlds. In doing so, they attempted to provide continuity with the old empires they replaced, while at the same time earning authority among the largely non-Muslim population they now ruled. Within the running of the state, too, many government officials in these early decades—in positions from tax collector to scribe at the court of the ruler—were non-Muslim holdovers from the Byzantines and Persians. They helped the early Muslim rulers establish and administer a government the size of which they had never experienced.

As time passed, however, the Umayyads achieved a more successful demonstration of what made Islam distinct. They did this by changing the symbols and style of their art, embracing written Arabic—the language of the Quran—as unique to Muslims, centering the Islamic prophet Muhammad as the "seal" on a long line of Rabbinic (Jewish) and biblical (Christian) prophets, and asserting an anti-Trinitarian message. This last decision, about the nature of Jesus in the Christian tradition, proved the source of growing tension between Muslims and Christians as time passed.

Beyond the Book

Early Islamic Art and Architecture

Little written material of the seventh-century Arab-Muslim conquerors survives. As the century waned, however, Arabic script began to appear on coins and buildings, offering important sources for historians.

The earliest Islamic caliphs had mimicked the styles and motifs of their Byzantine and Persian rivals to justify their rule and demonstrate a continuity of government. What would have happened, for instance, if they had immediately minted coins utterly different from those their citizens were using (Figure 11.14)? Would anyone accept them?



Figure 11.14 Byzantine Gold Solidus. A gold coin called a *solidus* from about 608 CE shows the (a) Byzantine emperor Heraclius the Elder and his son on the front and (b) a Christian cross on the reverse. The coin, minted by Byzantine rulers in today's Turkey or Cyprus, includes inscriptions in Greek celebrating victory over a usurper. (credit: "Revolt of the Heraclii solidus, 608 AD" by Classical Numismatic Group, LLC/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5)

The culture started to change after the second Islamic civil war in the early 690s. The victors, a branch of the Umayyad family, began to make the empire look increasingly Arab. Their governmental reforms included the gradual removal of signs and symbols associated with the old Byzantine and Persian rulers, such as Christian crosses on coins).

Another reform was the introduction of Arabic as the official language of the Islamic empire. Here again, gold coins demonstrate how widely this change was made, and how inscriptions specific to Islam began to appear (Figure 11.15).



(a) (b)

Figure 11.15 Umayyad Gold Dinar. (a) (b) On this gold dinar minted by the Umayyad caliph around 700, images common on Byzantine and Sasanian coins have disappeared and Greek replaced by the Umayyads' official language, Arabic. The inscriptions are invocations of the Muslim faith, including "There is no God but God, He is Alone, He has No Associate." (credit: "Gold dinar of Abd al-Malik 697-98" by American Numismatic Society/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

It took time for the Muslims to dramatically change the style and forms of their art. In the intermediate period—as illustrated by two of the earliest mosques constructed by the Muslims, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus—rulers married the old empires' traditions with new design elements (Figure 11.16, Figure 11.17). These examples reveal an early Islamic state beginning to articulate its own identity.



Figure 11.16 Dome of the Rock, Exterior. The Dome of the Rock mosque in the Old City in Jerusalem is one of Islam's holiest sites. Its hexagonal shape is very unusual, but it had a precedent in nearby Byzantine Christian churches. (credit: "Exterior of Dome of the Rock or Masjid Al Sakhrah, in Jerusalem" by Thekra A. Sabri/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

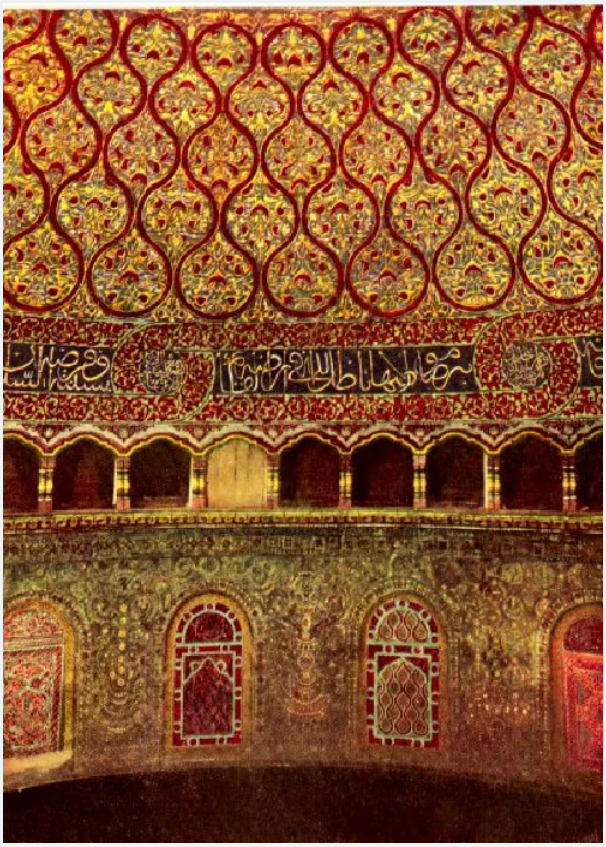


Figure 11.17 Dome of the Rock, Interior. Mosaics inside the Dome of the Rock include depictions of the mythological Senmurv bird, popular in Sasanian Persia, while the medium of mosaic tile itself was Byzantine. Arabic inscriptions from the Quran are found throughout the interior—a distinctly Islamic feature. (credit: "Mosque Of Omar 1914" by National Geographic/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- Why did the Arab-Muslims finally change their gold coins more dramatically at the end of the seventh century from the imitative versions they first minted?
- How can art and architecture help historians understand this early period of Islamic history? What do coins and the Dome of the Rock reveal?

The Umayyads also struggled within the *ummah*, however, when it came to their treatment of Arab ethnicity. As they worked to establish a new empire that was quickly growing beyond their ability to administer on their own, the Arab-Muslims relied on the continued employment of former Byzantine and Persian bureaucrats to help with the running of the state. These non-Muslim and primarily non-Arab government officials were critical to the early governance of the Rashidun and the Umayyad dynasty, but by the eighth century they were rapidly being shunned in favor of Arabs. In some cases, non-Muslims were passed over for the best positions, while in other situations, new converts to Islam grew increasingly frustrated at not being considered full members of the conquering elite.

As more people encountered the message of Islam, interest grew among non-Arabs wanting to convert to the new faith. The Umayyads largely pushed back against this trend, and not just because for the upkeep of the state they relied on revenue from taxes Muslims did not have to pay. They also perceived their faith as a religion by Arabs for Arabs. As they saw it, God had sent the Arabs his last prophet—Muhammad, an Arab—to spread his message in their language, Arabic. Becoming a Muslim was not just a religious conversion but a cultural one as well. Non-Arab converts needed, in essence, to convert to an ethnically Arab culture, to be adopted by an Arab tribe as a protected member called a *mawali*, before any religious conversion could occur. This was an onerous process that discouraged conversion. But as more Arab-Muslims settled in the conquered regions and intermarried with the Indigenous population, more children were born of mixed parentage, bringing the increasing focus on "Arabness" and pure Arab dominance of the Umayyads under even greater scrutiny. It was the treatment of *mawali* as second-class citizens that proved the Umayyads' undoing, and that ushered in a more universalist view of Islam that further solidified the religion's hold in the region.

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9.4: Islamization and Religious Rule under Islam

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how the Abbasids established themselves as the dominant state in the Middle East
- Discuss the formation of sects within the Islamic community
- Analyze how Islam influenced the religious and cultural experience of people living under Abbasid rule

The Rashidun and Umayyads played an important role in articulating the new religion of Islam while establishing the Islamic state in the Middle East. But the dynasty that followed them in 750 CE was the one that solidified Islam's place in the region and in world history. While the Abbasid caliphate did not greatly extend the borders of the Islamic state, its achievements included overseeing and building on the transmission of ancient knowledge that had gone unseen in much of world history until then. The Abbasids presided over what was arguably the end of antiquity in the Middle East and its transition to the Middle Ages, becoming one of the most important powers of their time. They also faced the fracturing of their authority over the outlying provinces, and the growth within Islam of distinct sects with different theological beliefs and goals.

The Abbasid Caliphate

The last decades of Umayyad rule were defined by factionalism and infighting. Arab tribes vied for power and influence, while non-Arab converts to Islam became increasingly frustrated over being marginalized, especially in the far east of the empire. There, in the province of Khurasan, Arab-Muslims had settled after the conquests, often intermarrying with the Indigenous Persians (Figure 11.18). By the mid-eighth century, several generations of these mixed-ethnicity Muslims had come to feel disenfranchised in the region, and Khurasan became a hotbed of revolutionary activity. Many who were frustrated with Umayyad rule and ready for a change met to imagine a more open Islamic community, one in which all ethnicities could enjoy the full benefits of Islamic society, and marginalized groups like the supporters of the fourth caliph Ali and his family would have more opportunity.



Figure 11.18 Khurasan Province. The province of Khurasan (shaded orange) made up the northeastern extent first of the Sasanian Empire and then of the realm of the early Islamic caliphates. Discontent among the mixed-ethnicity Muslims living there grew during the eighth century. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

This revolutionary group championed the right of the family of Muhammad to hold the position of caliph. Its members supported the claims of the descendants of Ibn Abbas, a first cousin of Muhammad, and thus came to be known as the Abbasids. In 749, after several years of growing dissatisfaction, they rose in rebellion against the Umayyads, overthrowing Islam's first dynasty within a year and establishing themselves as the new rulers of the Middle East. Abbasids claimed the title of caliph from the year 750 through to the early sixteenth century, although the power they sought waxed and waned over time.

Shortly after coming to power, the Abbasids of the eighth century reoriented the focus of the Islamic world, pulling it away from Arabia and closer to the East by founding their new capital, Baghdad, in central Iraq (Figure 11.19). Especially with the prominence of Khurasan and the Islamic East in the rise of the Abbasids, shifting the capital city closer to the East also made a great deal of sense. Baghdad was a planned city intended to take advantage of the immense wealth and talent the Islamic state had accumulated over almost a century and a half of conquest and consolidation under the Umayyads. It was built on the banks of the Tigris River in Mesopotamia, a land that had supported some of the earliest human civilizations because of its remarkable fertility. As the Abbasid state grew wealthier and more powerful, Baghdad became a prominent center of trade and culture, and the city sprawled outward along the banks of the river and into the fertile farmland that surrounded it.

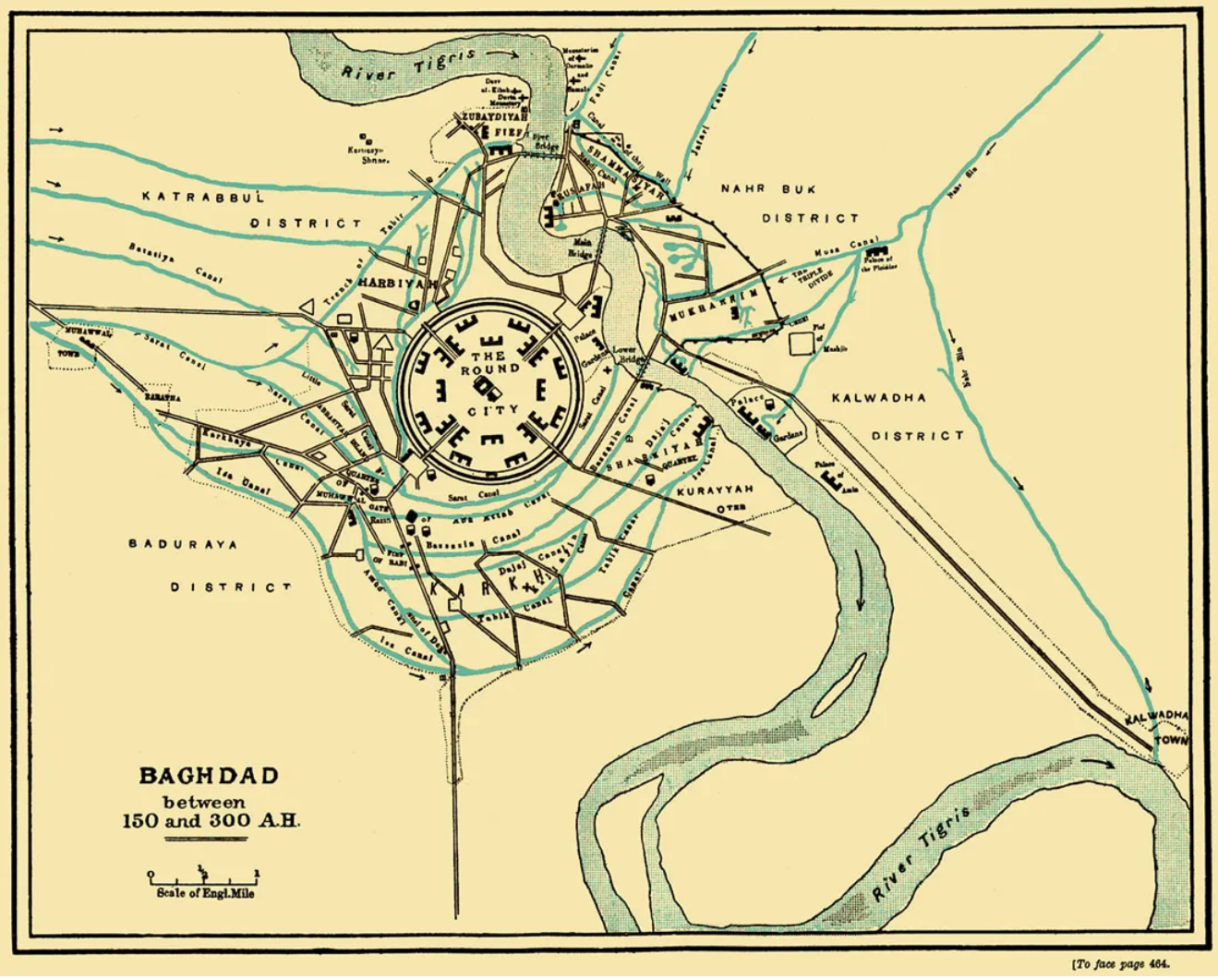


Figure 11.19 Baghdad between 767 and 913 CE (150 and 300 AH). The Abbasid capital in Baghdad was designed to be the greatest city in the region, if not the world. As this map from the 1880s shows, it was constructed with a circular layout, and those who lived inside the walls of the main city, closest to the caliph's palace, enjoyed special prestige. (credit: "Baghdad 150 to 300 AH" by www.muhammadanism.org/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The decision to move the focus of Islamic rule further east also signaled a significant shift in the region's politics and economics. The inhabitants of the former Persian Empire had played an integral role in helping the Abbasids to rise, and they became a major power base for the dynasty as it advanced. Persian language, culture, and traditions came to exert a greater influence on early Islamic society, especially at the court in Baghdad. And as Baghdad overtook traditional Mediterranean cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Damascus, and Jerusalem in prominence, the center of trade moved further east along the Silk Roads that connected with the Indian Ocean world and a continually growing China.

Link to Learning

What would it have been like to live in medieval Baghdad? In some ways, it was a bit like living in New York City. This brief video describes the culture and status of medieval Baghdad in the Abbasid period.

The Abbasid Translation Movement

The society the early Abbasids created was one of the great marvels of the Middle Ages, and the growth of Baghdad and its courtly culture played a major part in that achievement. But as central as Baghdad was to the advancement and success of the Abbasids, so too were the people who made up their cosmopolitan empire. The early Abbasids strongly supported learning, especially in their capital, and fostered what is now called the Abbasid Translation Movement, or the Greco-Arabic Translation Movement. Few people were literate at this time, but it was an especially important moment in world history thanks to new technology and opportunities that improved access to education and literacy more generally. Especially important was the introduction of Chinese papermaking techniques into the Middle East. These methods allowed for the creation of significantly less expensive books, and the Abbasids' patronage of scholarly work proved the catalyst for an explosion of medieval learning.

The Abbasids sought to preserve the knowledge of past societies by translating the works of the ancient world into Arabic, especially from Greek and Persian, as the Islamic world transitioned from an oral to a writerly society during the ninth century. Writing and scholarly research were not always well funded in the premodern world, so wealthy patrons, including the caliph himself, provided financial support to scholars capable of completing this work. As a result, the Abbasid elite were able to attract the best and brightest to participate, and a culture of learning grew among the upper echelons of society and especially in Baghdad. Scholars were often native speakers of Greek and Syriac who were generally non-Muslim. The Abbasids' support of this multicultural and multiethnic community ultimately increased the number of works produced in Arabic during the first centuries of their rule, while at the same time providing exceptional educational opportunities as Islamic schools called *madrasas* were founded and grew.

The achievements of the translation movement were considerable, preserving many incredibly important astrological, geographic, mathematical, medical, and other scientific and philosophical texts in Arabic at a time when non-Arabic copies had become increasingly rare. These texts included seminal works by the Greek thinkers Aristotle, Dioscorides, Galen, Hippocrates, and Ptolemy that were given advanced study in the Muslim world when their popularity and even availability were extremely limited in the rest of the Mediterranean (Figure 11.20).



Figure 11.20 The Abbasid Translation Movement. This is a page from an Arabic translation of the first-century Greek physician Dioscorides's treatise, *De materia medica* (*On Medical Material*). It dates from the eleventh century, but many manuscripts like it were first rendered from the original Greek into Arabic during the Abbasid Translation Movement. (credit: "Kitāb al-Ḥašā'iš fī hāyūlā al-ʿilāg al-ṭibbī Or. 289" by Universitaire Bibliotheken Leiden/Leiden University LibrariesK, CC BY)

From the Persian world, the Abbasids focused on the translation of materials related to statecraft, etiquette, the history of kings, and economics. All these were topics considered essential for a professional education, especially for a class of state bureaucrats known as "secretaries" whose job was to administer the empire and its people on behalf of the ruler. Yet the Abbasids were not simply having the great texts of ancient peoples brought into their language and their madrasas during this period. The manuscripts, especially works of science, were in some cases many centuries old. So, a major goal of the translation movement was not just to preserve but also to correct and expand them. Baghdad, then, became the "house of wisdom" through this emphasis on learning and continued scholarly endeavor. Although the scholars who improved these traditional works often go uncredited in the new volumes they produced, their work allowed the Abbasids to apply contemporary knowledge and understanding to the ruminations of previous generations. Early Abbasid society was a time and place of learning and openness to considering old, new, and foreign ideas; to making them a part of the "Islamic sciences"; and to bringing material from the Mediterranean, Central Asian, and Indian Ocean worlds into the empire.

Sect Formation in the Middle East

The early Abbasid period brought stability to the Islamic world, but it was not permanent. Although there had been contention within the Islamic *ummah* from the very beginning, it was during the Abbasid rule that more distinct sects formed, based on doctrinal differences and questions about the leadership of the community that traced back to the first century of Islamic history.

The catalyst for the formation of denominations within Islam was a growing divide between the groups now known as the Sunni and the Shia (sometimes written as *Shi'ite*), the two primary "umbrella sects" within Islam. The Sunni take their name from the *sunna* or customs of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Adherents follow a canonized, common form of the hadith and interpretation of the Quran, although different schools of law exist that provide variable interpretation and guidance to the religious faithful. Today the largest group of Muslims around the world, the Sunni also came to be identified as those who accepted the decision, following Muhammad's death, that the first leader of the community would be his father-in-law Abu Bakr rather than his son-in-law Ali. The Shia derive their name from the Arabic phrase *Shiat Ali* or "the followers of Ali," who eventually became the fourth caliph. They began as those who believed in the claim by Ali and the Prophet's family that Ali had been designated the new leader of the Muslim community following Muhammad's death.

Tensions between the two groups continued to escalate through the first Islamic civil war, fought between the caliph Ali and the Umayyad ruler Mu'awiya, and escalated with the massacre of a large portion of Muhammad's family, including his grandson Husayn ibn Ali, at Karbala as the second Islamic civil war was beginning. The commemoration of these events in the early Islamic period remains a major feature of the denominations of Shia Islam. The Shia came to revere the family of the Prophet, seeing in them a role beyond providing a new caliph. They believe members of Muhammad's family transmit divine knowledge, charisma, and authority, and they afford certain of them the title of imam, signifying the religious leader of the community of Muslims. At the center of this focus on the Prophet's family in the faith's earliest century was the lineage of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, the wife of Ali, and her children, who included Husayn. As time passed, however, and as Islam became increasingly more patriarchal in the Abbasid period, the emphasis shifted to the male members of Muhammad's family and their lineage through Ali specifically.

In the medieval period, the divide between the Sunni and Shia was not complete. The issue of succession following Muhammad's death was not irreconcilable, and the Sunni respected the family of the Islamic prophet Muhammad even if they did not see an automatic or exclusive right to rule through Ali's bloodline. The early Shia supported the Abbasids' claim to leadership because the Abbasids required the caliph to be a member of the Prophet's family, but Ali's kin were eventually overlooked in the line of succession. As rivalry grew between these early Shia and the Abbasids, it seems likely that the Shia then articulated that the authority of the imam specifically passed through the family of the Prophet through Ali, and not through anyone less closely related to him—likely to support their own claims to rule.

The role of the caliph as a leader in the Islamic world also began to change dramatically in the Middle Ages. This shift was due not just to the Shia conception of the imam. Rather, as the Abbasids came to power, a religious clerical class also arose within Islam. Known as the *ulama* (literally "the scholars"), they came to hold an increasingly important role as the interpreters of Islamic law within non-Shia, Sunni Islam during the Abbasid period (Figure 11.21).



Figure 11.21 A Member of the *Ulama* as Teacher. This thirteenth-century image of a group of students learning from a teacher (far right) in a library depicts religious education in the Abbasid period. (credit: "Les Makamat de Hariri" by Bibliothèque nationale de France/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Before the Abbasid period, the early caliphs had successfully made a case for being vested with both secular and religious authority, including the ability to interpret the scripture and issue religious proclamations. As the *ulama* acquired a more prominent role in Abbasid society, however, they claimed more of this power and authority for themselves, diminishing the religious entitlements that earlier caliphs had claimed. As the centuries passed, the religious role of the caliph weakened further, and the decision to compile and write down the hadith, which had been transmitted only orally for the bulk of the first two centuries, gave further authority to the keepers and teachers of this material at the expense of the caliph within early Sunni Islam.

Islamization before the Crusades

What was it like for Indigenous peoples of captured territories to live under Islamic rule during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the experience was variable, especially considering the size of the empire the Abbasids came to rule. What *is* surprising is that the majority of these inhabitants were not Muslims themselves.

The largest group belonged to eastern Christian denominations, including Melkites, Jacobites, Copts, and Nestorians, but significant minority populations of Jewish people and Zoroastrians also lived throughout the empire. We have seen that non-Muslims were allowed to keep their religion and continue to live under Islamic rule by paying a special tax. Early on, the Muslims

instituted a series of rules to limit the interactions between themselves and non-Muslims, and a later series of regulations regarding religious intermarriage and child-rearing slowly converted more of the population to Islam over time.

For example, a Muslim generally could not marry a non-Muslim under Islamic law, but if such a marriage occurred, a Muslim woman's future husband had to convert to Islam to marry her, and the children of a Muslim husband had to be raised as Muslim. Thus, it seems likely that the process of conversion to Islam at this time was quite slow and that the Muslims remained a numeric minority for centuries even though they wielded the majority of power in the empire.

In Their Own Words

The Pact of Umar

The "Pact of Umar" is a legal document detailing the rights and responsibilities of Christians living under early Islamic rule. Often attributed to Umar, the second Rashidun caliph who ruled from 634 to 644, it may date anywhere from the seventh to the early ninth century.

> *In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. This is a letter to the servant of God Umar, Commander of the Faithful, from the Christians of such-and-such a city. When you came against us, we asked you for safe-conduct for ourselves, our descendants, our property, and the people of our community, and we undertook the following obligations toward you:*
>
> *We shall not build, in our cities or in their neighborhood, new monasteries, Churches, convents, or monks' cells, nor shall we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall in ruins or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims.*
>
> *We shall keep our gates wide open for passersby and travelers. We shall give board and lodging to all Muslims who pass our way for three days.*
>
> *We shall not give shelter in our churches or in our dwellings to any spy, nor bide him from the Muslims.*
>
> *We shall not teach the Quran to our children.*
>
> *We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it.*
>
> *We shall show respect toward the Muslims, and we shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit.*
>
> *We shall not seek to resemble the Muslims by imitating any of their garments, the qalansuwa [a type of headwear], the turban, footwear, or the parting of the hair. We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their kunyas [a part of an Arab name].*
>
> *We shall not mount on saddles, nor shall we gird swords nor bear any kind of arms nor carry them on our- persons.*
>
> *We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals.*
>
> *We shall not sell fermented [alcoholic] drinks.*
>
> *We shall clip the fronts of our heads.*

> *We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the zunar [a type of belt] round our waists*
>
> *We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall use only clappers in our churches very softly. We shall not raise our voices when following our dead. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims.*
>
> *We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to Muslims.*
>
> *We shall not build houses overtopping the houses of the Muslims. . . .*
>
> *We accept these conditions for ourselves and for the people of our community, and in return we receive safe-conduct.*
>
> *If we in any way violate these undertakings for which we ourselves stand surety, we forfeit our covenant, and we become liable to the penalties for contumacy and sedition.*
>
> *—"The Status of Non-Muslims Under Muslim Rule"*

- Who is said to be writing this agreement, and why does that matter? Why was it written?
- You may see the pact as onerous and limiting for Christians. Can it be read differently? How?

Even during the Abbasid period, Islam was still a new religion. The Muslims benefited from allowing non-Muslim communities a certain amount of autonomy and segregation, so long as this did not limit or infringe on the rights and privileges of the ruling Muslim elite. They even allowed non-Muslim religious courts to adjudicate many cases among Jewish people and Christians. They may also have feared a temptation among adherents to stray from the new faith to older traditions like Christianity and Judaism, which had a great deal in common with Islam at that time.

Along with religious conversion to Islam, cultural conversion, which took place much more rapidly, formed part of the process of Islamization in the Middle East and North Africa. As the early Islamic state grew wealthier and more powerful through continued expansion, and as the Arab-Muslim conquerors became a clearer and stronger elite in the new society, members of the nobility of Indigenous populations were keen to maintain their own wealth and status in whatever ways they could. Thus, they began to bring aspects of Arab and Islamic culture into their daily lives while retaining their commitment to their own religious communities.

It became common, then, for Christians in places like Jordan and Egypt to adopt the Arabic language while outside their homes or churches, and a native language such as Syriac or Coptic within their own communities and for their worship. Non-Muslim men and women also adopted styles of dress and grooming similar to those of the Muslim elite (even if there was anxiety among religious leaders about this type of acculturation, as seen in the Pact of Umar), along with naming practices, especially in places like Islamic Spain. They also began to embrace aspects of Islamic art and architectural design. In the same way as the Rashidun and the first Umayyad caliphs had relied upon imitative design and symbols to legitimize themselves in the earliest period of Muslim rule, so did non-Muslims now adopt features of Islamic culture to gain, maintain, or regain status within the Abbasid world.

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9.5: Key Terms

Abrahamic faiths
the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which all trace their origins through a common ancestor, the prophet Abraham

caliph
an Islamic title designating a spiritual and secular leader

caliphate
an area under the control of a Muslim ruler called a caliph

hadith
the words and actions of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors that, along with the Quran, form the fundamental basis for Islamic law

hajj
the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca

hijra
an Arabic term meaning “emigration” that describes a defining moment for early Muslims as they fled Mecca for Medina in 622 CE

imam
the religious leader of Shia Muslims

Islamization
the religious and cultural conversion of those living under Islamic rule

mawali
non-Arab converts to Islam in the early Islamic period who had to be adopted by an Arab tribe as part of the conversion process

Quran
the holy scripture of Islam, which Muslims believe was given to humanity by God through Muhammad

Rashidun
a term meaning “rightly guided” that describes the first four caliphs after Muhammad’s death: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali

Shia
one of the two umbrella sects of Islam, whose members believe leadership of the Muslim community should reside in the family of Muhammad only through his son-in-law Ali

Sunni
the larger of the two umbrella sects of Islam, whose adherents did not require leadership of the community to come specifically from the descendants of Muhammad through Ali

ulama
a class of religious clerics and scholars who act as the primary interpreters of Islamic law

ummah
the community of Muslims

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9.6: Section Summary

11.1 The Rise and Message of Islam

While the Arabs of northern Arabia were uniting as a capable fighting force looking for opportunities to expand, the Byzantines and Sasanian Empires were at a low ebb. In the early seventh century, the Byzantine Empire had won a long and costly war against the Sasanians, sometimes fought on both sides by proxies from northern Arabia, but now the combatants were exhausted and financially drained. Meanwhile, Muhammad's historic unification of the majority of Arab tribes under the single leader of a monotheistic faith was only the beginning of the story of Islam. After Muhammad and his followers were forced to flee Mecca for Medina in 622, fighting between the two communities continued for several years before those in Mecca converted to Islam, and Muhammad made a triumphant return to the city. The stage was now set for a significant shift in the balance of power in the region.

11.2 The Arab-Islamic Conquests and the First Islamic States

The issue of leadership following Muhammad's death caused immediate tensions within the Islamic *ummah* even as the first four caliphs, the Rashidun, oversaw significant territorial expansion. Tensions between the family of Muhammad—especially his son-in-law Ali, the fourth caliph—and the Umayyads resulted in a civil war that brought Islam's first dynasty to power.

Within a century of Muhammad's death, an Islamic state ruled over the world's largest empire at that time, first unifying the Arabian Peninsula through the Ridda Wars and then taking territory previously ruled by the flagging Byzantine and Sasanian Empires. Mimicking the leadership and culture of their Byzantine and Persian predecessors as a means to legitimize their own role, the Umayyads began the process of articulating what made Islamic culture unique among the other cultures of the region. By the later period of their rule, they began to privilege the position of the ethnically Arab members of the empire and to increasingly "Arabize" the government and its functions, despite the fact that the Arab-Muslim conquerors remained a minority population and did not promote or support the conversion of non-Muslims to the new faith.

11.3 Islamization and Religious Rule under Islam

Through a process of conquest, conversion, and coexistence, the early Abbasids created a cosmopolitan medieval empire centered at their new capital of Baghdad. By assimilating the late antique traditions of the Byzantines and Persians before supplanting them, integrating Arab culture northward throughout the region, and overseeing the preservation and dissemination of knowledge from the ancient world, the Muslims of the Middle East created a thriving cultural hub with considerable impact on world history in this period and beyond. While religious conversion to Islam remained slow, a process of cultural conversion and an increased openness to non-Arab converts to the faith saw the escalation of Islamization throughout the Abbasid empire from Spain and Portugal in the west to India in the east.

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9.7: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What two empires were at war during much of Muhammad's prophetic career?

a. the Mughal and the Sasanians
b. the Byzantines and the Sasanians
c. the Byzantines and the Aksumites
d. the Himyarites and the Holy Roman Empire

2.
According to Muslim belief, which of the following statements is true?

a. Muhammad was the first in a long line of monotheistic prophets.
b. Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad were the same person.
c. Muslims worship the same God as Jewish people and Christians.
d. Islam is a polytheistic faith.

3.
What is the holy scripture of Islam?

a. Quran
b. Torah
c. Bible
d. Kaaba

4.
What united the members of Muhammad's *ummah*?

a. the use of the Arabic language and service to the Byzantine Empire
b. the belief in one God, Muhammad's leadership, and mutual defense
c. previous membership in the Jewish faith
d. residence in the city of Mecca

5.
What state was defeated and assimilated into the early Islamic state?

a. Han China
b. Aksumite Ethiopia
c. Byzantine Empire
d. Sasanian Persia

6.
In the earliest decades of Muslim rule, what was the most important differentiator of status?

a. Muslim versus non-Muslim
b. Arab versus Persian
c. conqueror versus conquered
d. Byzantine versus Roman

7.
Who were the *mawali* in early Islamic society?

a. non-Arab converts to Islam
b. religious leaders of the young Muslim community
c. caravan traders traveling along the Silk Roads
d. the first dynasty of Islam

8.
What were the Ridda Wars?

a. a conflict between Muslims and other Arab tribes that began the conquest of Arabia

b. the Arab-Muslim invasion of Sasanian Persia
c. the first Islamic civil war
d. an uprising of enslaved people against the Umayyad dynasty

9.
Why did the Muslims create Baghdad as a new capital city?

a. No other cities were hospitable to the Arabs, so they needed to build their own.
b. The Abbasids wanted to return the capital of their empire to Arabia.
c. The Byzantines recaptured the old capital city of Damascus.
d. The center of the Islamic world was shifting eastward after the Abbasid Revolution.

10.
Where was the province of Khurasan located?

a. Western Arabia
b. Northeastern Persia
c. Southeastern Persia
d. North Africa

11.
What did the process of Islamization look like during the early Abbasid period?

a. Christians adopted the Arabic language and Islamic forms of dress while not necessarily converting to Islam.
b. The entire Indigenous population of the Middle East and North Africa converted to Islam.
c. People feared Muslims and the Muslim faith more generally.
d. Arab-Muslims refused to allow any non-Arabs to convert to Islam.

12.
What was a defining feature of the earliest supporters of Ali, who became the Shia?

a. the refusal to recognize Muhammad as an Islamic prophet
b. the elevation of the family of Muhammad through his son in-law Ali
c. a belief in multiple gods that are subservient to the one God of Islam
d. the refusal to support the Abbasid family over the Umayyads in the Abbasid Revolution

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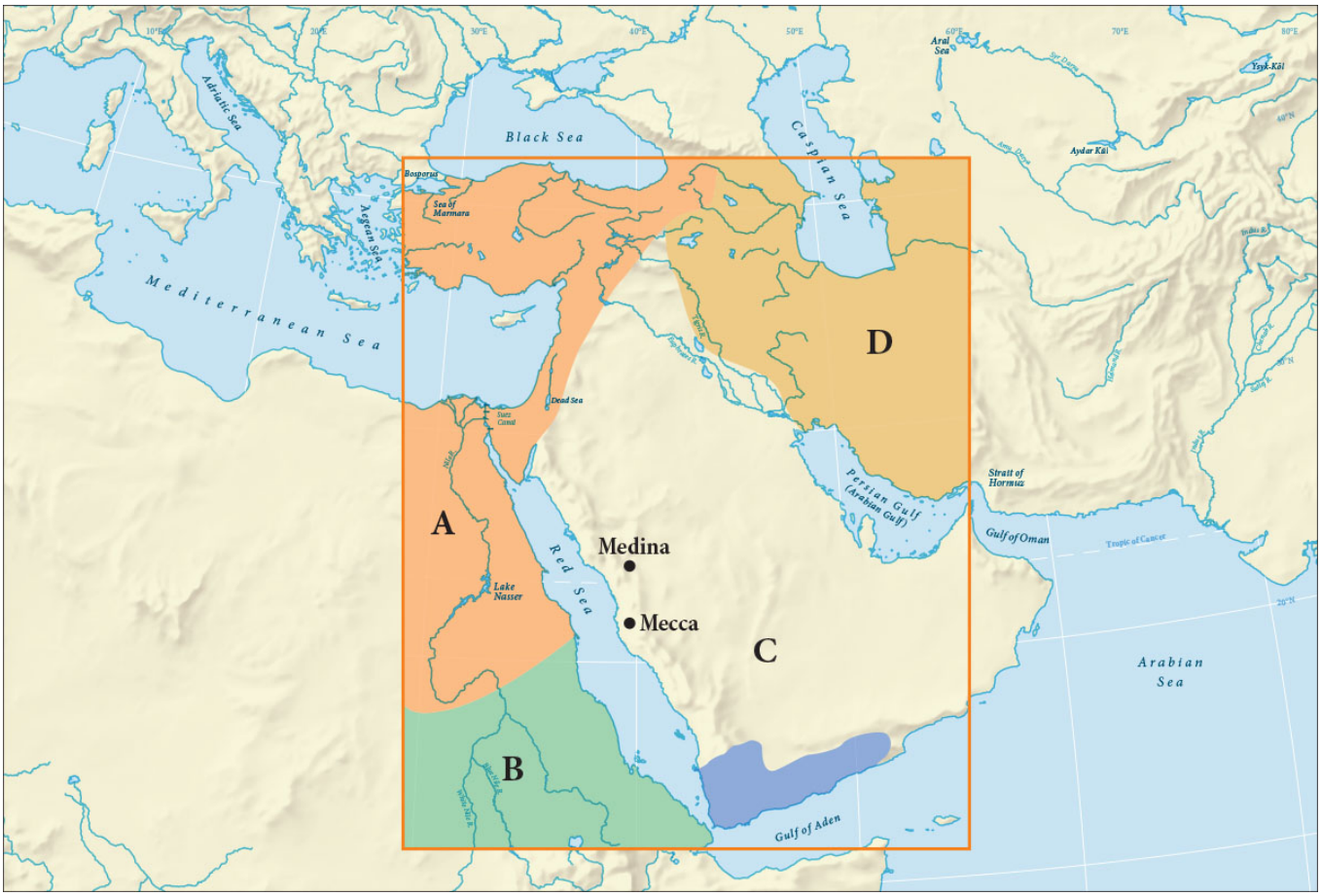
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9.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What role did the cities of Mecca and Medina play in the formation of Islam?
2.

Look at the following map (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax) and identify the Kingdom of Aksum, the Byzantine Empire, the Kingdom of Himyar, and the Sasanian Empire. For what reasons was Mecca not aggressively sought as a target of conquest by these neighboring states?



3.
How did monotheistic faiths spread through the Arabian Peninsula before the rise of Islam?
4.
Discuss the factors that led to the success of the Arab-Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries.
5.
What issues did the Muslim community have to consider in choosing Muhammad's first successor?
6.
Why did the earliest Arab-Islamic conquests first focus on the Arabian Peninsula?
7.
What differences separated the two umbrella sects of Islam, the Sunni and the Shia, in the Abbasid period?
8.
What features of Abbasid society helped make the Abbasid Translation Movement such a successful intellectual endeavor?

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9.9: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
What were the most important historical influences on the formation of Muhammad's community, and what was their impact on Islam?
2.
What made Islam different from Judaism and Christianity as a monotheistic religion in the region?
3.
Why were some religious communities of the Middle East accepting of Muslim rule despite not converting to Islam themselves?
4.
What benefits were provided by the early Umayyads' decision to run their empire like that of the Byzantines and Sasanian Persians? Why did they change?
5.
Who were the minority communities of the early medieval Middle East? What did it mean to be a minority?
6.
What did the process of cultural conversion by non-Muslims during the first centuries of Islamic history look like?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia

10.1: Introduction
10.2: The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages
10.3: East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages
10.4: Border States- Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan
10.5: Key Terms
10.6: Section Summary
10.7: Review Questions
10.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
10.9: Application and Reflection Questions

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10.1: Introduction



Figure 12.1 A Caravansary. Along the Silk Roads, caravansaries were vital outposts where merchants traveling between Turkey and China could stay and meet other traders to exchange goods, commodities, and ideas. The Shah Abbasi caravansary shown here is now a national heritage site in Nishapur, in modern Iran. (credit: modification of work “Abbasi caravanserai of Nishapur” by Sonia Sevilla/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Chapter Outline

12.1 The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages
12.2 East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages
12.3 Border States: Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan

The early Middle Ages was a time of increased connections across continents. This period was marked by the continued development of the maritime networks centered on the Indian Ocean, and of the Silk Roads—a series of trade routes linking China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East. A globally connected medieval world was emerging, one united by long-distance trade networks and enhanced by the exchange of ideas. An important element of this system was the caravansary, an inn funded by the state or wealthy individuals where travelers could spend the night and store their goods securely (Figure 12.1). In addition to providing shelter, caravansaries were a place for merchants to meet other traders to exchange goods as well as share and spread Islamic ideas and traditions.

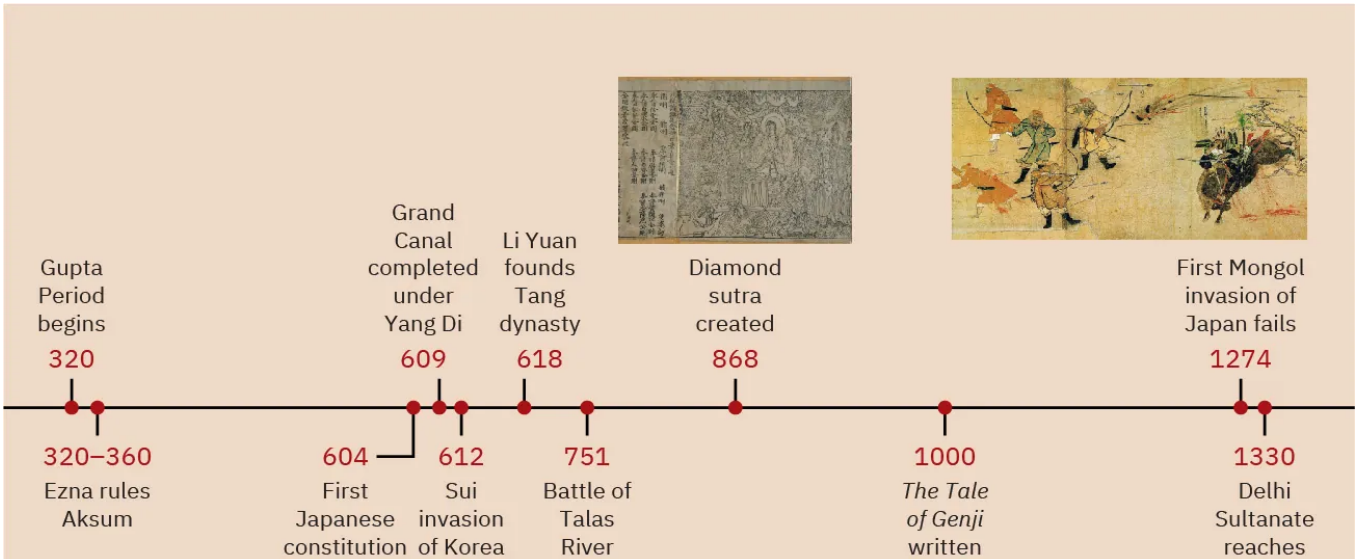
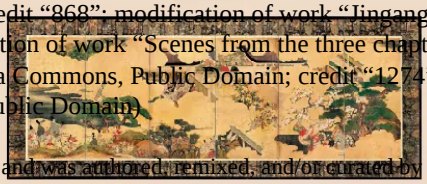


Figure 12.2 Timeline: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia. (credit “868”: modification of work “Jingangjing” by British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1000”: modification of work “Scenes from the three chapters of The tale of Genji [Genji monogatari]” by Art Gallery of South Australia/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1274”: modification of work “Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba 2” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



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10.2: The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify important political developments in South Asia
- Discuss religious and social practices in South and East Asia
- Describe the rise and fall of the Sui and Tang dynasties in China

Beginning in the eighth century, the Khyber Pass, renowned as the means by which Alexander the Great and his army traveled from Afghanistan to India, made it possible for a new religious tradition to enter northern India. This tradition was Islam, which soon came to dominate the areas of modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as portions of India. In time, Muslims created the powerful Delhi Sultanate, which stretched from the Punjab in the northwest to Bengal in the northeast.

Islam arrived in China during the early Tang period (618–690 CE) by way of the Silk Roads trade as well as through diplomatic missions sent to the Tang court at Chang'an by the Umayyad caliph at Damascus. Before Islam's appearance in China, the Tang dynasty, like its predecessor the Sui, had been influenced by the Indian tradition of Buddhism; the Sui emperor and his Tang cousins adhered to many Buddhist precepts. Monumental constructions such as the Grand Canal and the Huaisheng Mosque, which was built in the seventh century CE and stands today in Guangzhou, demonstrate the grandeur of these two dynasties. Yet, in the end, their expenses outran their income, leading to their ultimate collapse.

South Asia in the Early Middle Ages

India, usually referred to as South Asia, shares the Asian subcontinent, culture, and history with several countries in the modern period, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. Before the Middle Ages, two powerful religious and philosophical traditions emerged there, Hinduism and Buddhism, the latter spreading by traveling merchants via the Silk Roads, both overland and overseas.

In the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great, his army, and his people came to what is today Afghanistan and the region of the Hindu Kush. Although they did not remain there, for the next three centuries this Hellenistic Seleucid kingdom continued to trade with India and spread Greek ideas. The arrival of Alexander's army in the region was a crucial step in the process of bringing the Afro-Eurasian world closer together. Long-distance travel in this period was still arduous and undertaken primarily by merchants, but important cultural shifts were beginning. Although Alexander's death shortly after his Indian campaigns meant that neither he nor his successors came to rule over this part of the world, disparate and previously separate cultures and peoples began sharing material goods, technologies, and ideas in ways that only continued as the centuries passed. This change was accelerated by the rise of the Mauryan Empire, the first major kingdom to dominate the Asian subcontinent. The Mauryan Empire was founded by Chandragupta Maurya in 322 BCE and lasted until around 185 BCE. During that time, the region saw great intellectual developments, such as the implementation of place value in numbers and the addition of zero to the numbering system, while long-distance trade continued to expand and widen the spread of these new ideas and concepts.

While India experienced a time of unity and great success during the Mauryan age, the subcontinent again broke into separate kingdoms following invasions by the White Huns, which fatally weakened the empire. One of the more stable regimes to emerge in this period was the northern kingdom of Thanesar, under its Buddhist ruler Harsha Vardhana, whose reign lasted from 606 to 647 CE. We know a great deal about Harsha thanks to contemporary accounts by the Indian poet Bana and the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zang. According to both, Buddhism had penetrated the region surrounding Thanesar to a considerable degree, despite the Guptas' earlier favoring of Hinduism. It was also clear, though, that Buddhism had declined as a result of Gupta neglect because its monasteries throughout India were in a state of disrepair. Still, Xuan Zang found Harsha's kingdom well run, wealthy, and justly administered. As far as the monk was concerned, Thanesar was a model state. It did not outlive its king by many years, however. Soon after Harsha's death, the Arab advance that began in the early part of his reign had become a wave that, in the early eighth century, swept across northern India.

In the early seventh century, the new religion of Islam had begun to expand, encompassing Arabia and soon spreading even farther. By 659, Muslim forces were advancing eastward and clashed with the rulers of Sindh in modern-day Pakistan; by the early eighth century, armies of the Umayyad Islamic state had conquered the region. Under increasing pressure from foreign invaders, India

splintered into rival principalities ruled by independent rajas, or princes. These kingdoms, which extended from the Indus River valley in northwestern India to the Ganges River in the northeast, flourished for a time. However, long centuries of fending off invasions by Islamized Turkic warlords from central Asia had taken their toll.

The career of Mahmud of Ghazna is a good example of these developments. The son of a Turkic mamluk, or military slave, who ruled from 998 to 1030, Mahmud was intent on developing his region as an important Islamic state and launched dozens of campaigns against the princes of northern India from his base in Afghanistan. The onslaught was quite successful, for by the twelfth century, the Muslim Ghaznavid dynasty ruled an area that stretched from the Aral Sea in the north to Lahore in the east and encompassed the vital Silk Roads conduit of Khurasan in the southwest (Figure 12.3). The Muslim advance did not end with the establishment of the Ghaznavid state, however. Wars raged across northern India, and by the end of the twelfth century, the remaining independent Indian princes had become fatally weakened. Vulnerable to conquest, the kingdoms of the rajas collapsed.



Figure 12.3 The Ghaznavid Dynasty. At its height, the Ghaznavid Empire encompassed a vast swath of central Asia and included parts of modern Iran, Afghanistan, and the historical region of Turkestan. With several vital trade centers such as Samarkand and Merv, the state for a time played a key role in maintaining Silk Roads connections between the East and West. (credit: “Map of the Ghaznavid Empire” by Unknown, created in DEMIS World Map Server/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

In the twelfth century, a new line of Turkic invaders arose in present-day Afghanistan, led by Muhammad of Ghur (Ghur was an especially important town in the region). A Persian ruler subject to the Ghaznavids, Muhammad declared his independence from Ghazna and conquered most of the lands of his former lords. In 1192, his forces defeated an army of some 100,000 Rajputs, considered Hindu India’s most ferocious warriors, in one of the most violent engagements of his increasingly bloody career. The crowning achievement of Muhammad’s campaigns was establishing a Muslim state at Delhi, deep in the heart of northern India. It

endured as the Delhi Sultanate for more than three centuries (1206–1526), during which time it was the center of Islamic India (Figure 12.4).



Figure 12.4 The Delhi Sultanate. The orange shading shows the Delhi Sultanate in 1330, at its greatest extent. Its size allowed it to control much of the Indian Ocean trade on the western side of the subcontinent. However, the absence of larger cities in the center and south-center of the subcontinent meant that Indigenous peoples there were less likely to come into contact with Islam and its practitioners, so this region was not under the control of an Islamic state. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Thus, through a series of invasions over the course of some five hundred years, Arab and then Turkic invaders made their way into northern India, bringing Islam and stimulating political integration in the process. Because the minority Muslim rulers did not enforce cultural homogeneity, the invasions also strengthened the cultural diversity that was already a hallmark of Indian social order. For example, the Islamic rulers of the sultanate gave Hindu subjects the status of *dhimmis*, which protected their rights as non-Muslims, although they still had to pay the special tax, the *jizya*, placed on non-believers. The sultans of Delhi often employed Hindu laborers on construction projects such as the building of mosques, which led Muslims to integrate certain forms of Hindu symbolism and motifs such as trees and plant life into the structures. In the fourteenth century, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq expanded and even encouraged Hindu religious freedom, himself participating in Holi, the annual celebration of spring, while he allowed Hindu pilgrimages to the Ganges River, Hinduism's holiest site.

Before the arrival of Islam in South Asia, Hinduism was the dominant religion in the subcontinent. The result of a synthesis of beliefs that occurred after the Vedic period of Ancient India (c. 1500–500 BCE) and a response to Buddhism's commercial and urban influence, Hinduism developed a philosophy and belief system more widely accessible to the rural and agrarian peoples of India. An elaborate universe of Hindu deities was also established that included divinities from other religions, widening Hinduism's accessibility and appeal. Perhaps most importantly, Hinduism stressed personal devotion to a particular deity to obtain a truly individualized religious experience.

The Muslim Turks who arrived in India in the twelfth century recognized the Hindus as a protected people, allowing them to practice their own religious traditions and govern individual territories so long as they paid taxes and tribute. Buddhists, however, were not given the same measures of religious freedom, although it is not clear why. They were forced to flee or be executed, and many went to areas of Southeast Asia, Nepal, or Tibet, where Buddhism remains a major religion today. Over time, in the northern areas of the Indian subcontinent, which include modern Pakistan and Bangladesh, many Hindus converted to Islam, which then became the majority religion of the region. In the Vijanagar Empire in southern India, on the other hand, far fewer conversions took place, perhaps due to its distance from the centers of Islam.

In 1221, the province of Khurasan, which had invaded the Punjab in the tenth century, was itself invaded by the Mongols from China, led by Chinggis Khan (often referred to as “Genghis Khan” in the West). The Mongols then turned their attention to the Delhi Sultanate, which managed to successfully weather an attempted Mongol invasion in 1222. Over the next several decades, northern India experienced a series of invasions accompanying renewed Mongol expansion. Although most were repelled, countless Muslims were displaced and resettled on sultanate lands deeper in the subcontinent’s interior.

A Multicultural South Asia

Throughout the decline of the independent principalities of northern India and, ultimately, the conquest of the Delhi Sultanate, the north slowly became increasingly Muslim, while the south retained Hindu cultural beliefs and ideas. By the thirteenth century, Buddhism had diminished as a popular form of worship in India and Hinduism had evolved from a religion in which only priests offered sacrifices to one in which a wider array of people could actively participate. With this change came increased personal devotion to the individual gods, including Vishnu and Shiva (Figure 12.5). Each village usually had a temple in which they were enshrined and worshipped, and various incarnations of the gods developed from these numerous local beliefs. For example, Krishna was an incarnation of Vishnu. Eventually, Vishnu and Shiva came to have consort wives, and their powers could not be activated except through union. Thus, many female deities also came to be worshipped. In contrast, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism all feature male-centered systems.



Figure 12.5 The Hindu God Vishnu. This eighteenth-century painting on paper shows the poet Jayadeva (left) bowing to Vishnu, the beneficent preserver. Vishnu is one of three major Hindu gods; the others are Brahma (creator of the universe) and Shiva (giver

and destroyer of life). (credit: “Jaydev worshipping lord Vishnu” by The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Hindu religion evolved to become the dominant religion likely because it was a belief system with broader appeal than Buddhism. Originating in the period following the Vedic Age (c. 1500–500 BCE) and evolving over centuries, Hinduism developed from much older traditions, especially those of the Aryan peoples who arrived in India beginning in the third millennium BCE. One particularly distinctive facet of Hindu tradition that originated among these peoples was the Indian caste system. At its origin, the caste system was limited, and all of society was organized into four categories known as *varnas*. The four major *varnas* were Brahman (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants and farmers), and Shudra (servile people). In these early days of the system, a person’s *varna* was determined by their profession but also their dharma—their adherence to proper behaviors for their caste as stipulated by cosmic law, including avoiding contact with lower castes—and the karma they accrued by virtue of their dharma (Figure 12.6).



Figure 12.6 Bodhisattvas. In Buddhism, bodhisattvas are people who are seen as spiritually advanced and on the path toward Buddhahood. This detail of a twelfth-century manuscript painting depicts Maitreya, a bodhisattva who, according to Indian tradition, is the teacher of dharma. (credit: “Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Maitreya Detail” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Karma worked both ways: A believer’s failure to follow their dharma resulted in negative residue, whereas faithful obedience resulted in positive residue. At the personal level, the incentive behind amassing karma was samsara, the continuance of the soul after death and the soul’s transformation. The more positive karma someone built up, the greater the chances of being reincarnated in a higher *varna* in the next life—with the ultimate goal being the attainment of moksha, or release from the karmic cycle and the achievement of a complete understanding of the world. If too much bad karma accumulated, on the other hand, the opposite occurred: reincarnation at a lower *varna*.

Yet the ramifications of the caste system went far beyond the personal. Nothing less than the continued existence of the universe was at stake. Adherence to dharma helped ensure the universe remained in balance, while failure to do so risked chaos and

destruction. A rigidly hierarchical system of social segregation maintained this belief system. However, the *varna* communities created by the caste system also provided social support to their members and a vital stabilizing element in an Indian society otherwise rocked by political upheaval, foreign invasion, and war (Figure 12.7).

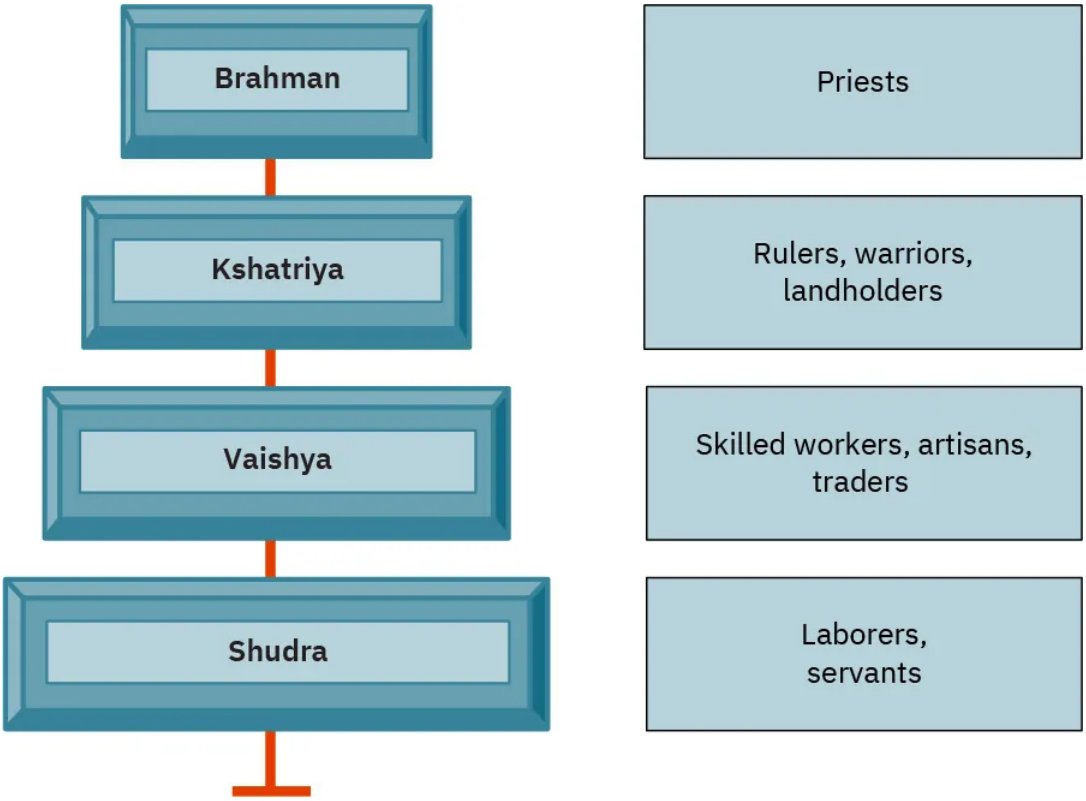


Figure 12.7 The Indian Caste System. The Indian caste system was a hierarchical one, with ranked *varnas* that, in the system's earliest days, related to a person's profession. Someone could move up or down within this hierarchy depending on their dharma and their accrual of karma during their lifetime. Still, such mobility came primarily through reincarnation at the end of a person's life. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The basic social unit of Indian society and the focus of life was the extended family, which included parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws. Most peasant families lived in villages and worked as farmers. Farming was more important than cattle raising for several reasons, not least the prohibition against eating cows. Hindus believe these animals to be sacred but also used them as draft animals on farms. Their manure helped fertilize crops, and their milk was a sustaining element of the Hindu diet. Key crops were rice, millet, wheat, barley, lentils, and peas. The extended family's large web of relationships encouraged everyone to work together for the betterment of the community. Villages were usually walled, with gates that were shut at night after the farmers returned from the fields.

Like Confucianism in China, Hinduism fostered a patriarchal family structure in which women were subservient. Men were viewed as stronger than women and less governed by their emotions, while older men, due to age and presumed experience, were thought to be wiser than younger men and thus superior to all others. Male domination of Hindu family life was reinforced by the fact that the oldest male was head of the household and might have several wives, who generally came to live with their husband's parents.

Although children often assisted the family in daily work such as farming, in wealthier homes the basics such as reading, writing, and arithmetic might be taught. Daughters were often married at a young age, and finding the ideal husband—who could provide for the family financially—was a key concern. A wife had no life apart from her husband, and if widowed, she might shave her head, sleep on the floor, eat only a single meal a day, and avoid attending family festivals. A wealthier widow, particularly from the Kshatriya or warrior caste, might throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre in an act of ritual suicide known as *sati*.

In Their Own Words

Crime and Punishment in Tenth-Century India

Abu Zayd al-Sirafi was a sailor from Sirafi, a center of the spice trade, who traveled throughout the Indian Ocean during the tenth century. The following is his account of how Indians used ordeal by fire to allow the gods to decide whether an accused person was guilty. As you read, note whether Abu Zayd felt this was an effective system and consider what biases may exist in his account.

> *Moving now to India, if a man accuses another of an offense for which the mandatory penalty is death, the accuser is asked, "Will you subject the person you have accused to ordeal by fire?" If he agrees to this, a piece of iron is first heated to such a high temperature that it becomes red-hot. The accused man is told to hold out his hand, palm up, and on it are placed seven leaves from a particular tree of theirs; the red-hot iron is then placed on his hand, on top of the leaves. Next, the accused has to walk up and down holding the iron, until he can bear it no longer and has to drop it. At this point, a leather bag is brought out: the man has to put his hand inside this, then the bag is sealed with the ruler's seal. When three days have passed, some unhusked rice is brought, and the accused man is told to husk it by rubbing it between his palms. If after this no mark is found on his hand, he is deemed to have got the better of his accuser, and he escapes execution. Moreover, his accuser is fined a maund [about 82 pounds] of gold, which the ruler appropriates for himself. On some occasions, they heat water in an iron or copper cauldron until it boils so furiously that no one can go near it. An iron finger-ring is then dropped into the water, and the accused man is told to put his hand in and retrieve the ring. I have seen a man put his hand in and bring it out unharmed. In such a case, too, his accuser is fined a maund of gold.*
>
> *—Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, Accounts of China and India*

- What biases do you see in this account?
- Does Abu Zayd feel ordeal by fire is an effective system? Why or why not?
- Why do you think ordeal by fire was once a common method of identifying guilt around the globe?

Toward the end of the Gupta period, in the sixth century, rulers began giving land grants to officials and Brahman priests to help stimulate local economies. Often entire villages were included in the gifts, and their inhabitants came under the control of the grantees. Eventually, land grants were also awarded to temples and monasteries, in the hope that this could encourage wider economic growth and lessen dependence on the central state.

Although this was a politically chaotic period, new ideas and belief systems spread and many cultural and technological advances occurred. Improvements in shipbuilding and textile manufacturing stimulated coastal trade, for example, especially in Southeast Asia. Paradoxically, many such developments were the result of the same forces that destabilized India's politics, for the continual invasions and migrations of foreigners in the north cross-fertilized the region's cultural base, producing new ideas and practical innovations. The diffusion of ideas was enhanced by India's annual monsoon winds, which lengthened maritime traders' exposure to Indian society and culture by preventing those who arrived in summer from returning home until the winter monsoon season.

One of the most influential and enduring effects of trade was the spread of Buddhism, which began to take hold elsewhere as it competed with, and in some ways reshaped, Hinduism. Many Southeast Asian regions adopted it, from what is now Thailand up to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam and down to Java. By the first century BCE, there were two branches of Buddhism: Theravada ("the path of the elders," the oldest extant form of Buddhism) and Mahayana ("the greater vehicle"). Mahayana, the larger branch, spread along the great trade routes of Asia into the borderlands of the Parthian Empire, eventually reaching China, Korea, and Japan, where it was gradually infused with local ideas. Theravada Buddhism established itself in Sri Lanka, southern India, and parts of Southeast Asia. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism did not emphasize the caste system and in many instances opposed it, thus

strengthening its influence abroad. It therefore appealed to lower-caste individuals as well. Nonetheless, Hinduism influenced many monarchies, particularly through the concept of dharma. Sanskrit, the written language of India, also spread to many southeast Asian courts, cementing the broad influence of Indian culture.

Sui and Tang China

Following the collapse of the Han Empire in 220 CE, three states ruled over China: the Wei in the north, the Wu in the south, and the Shu in the west. A temporary reunification occurred under the Western Jin dynasty from 265 to 316, but from 316 to 589 China was again divided, this time into north and south. Along the Silk Roads, merchants established monasteries, convents, and shrines, bringing Buddhist traditions into China. Many Chinese traders therefore adopted Buddhism, particularly under the Sui dynasty (Figure 12.8).



Figure 12.8 The Sui Dynasty. This map shows the extent of the Sui dynasty in 609. Like the Qin before them, the Sui pursued empire-building and vast public works projects such as the Grand Canal, which was vital to the movement of Sui armies during

campaigns in the south. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Link to Learning

Read the Metropolitan Museum of Art's brief overview "Buddhism along the Silk Road" to follow the trade routes of the Silk Roads in East Asia and to explore the images, iconography, and ideas of Buddhism as it traveled those routes.

A Mongol general from northern China, Yang Jian, was an affirmed Buddhist. His military abilities allowed him to gain such fame that he was able to create a marriage alliance between one of his daughters and a northern prince. With growing power, at the death of the ruler, he claimed the role of regent to his grandson before later deposing him. Yang then made himself the first emperor of the new Sui dynasty in 581 and adopted the name Wen. Emperor Wen gained his soldiers' allegiance by granting them lands acquired through conquest, a years-long process that reunified most of the old Han lands. To consolidate his control over the empire, Emperor Wen created a powerful centralized government, with loyal bureaucrats appointed to rule its many territories. To eliminate the risk that these powerful regional administrators could amass followers into a rebellious army, Wen periodically moved them to different territories, forcing them to build new networks from scratch.

Emperor Wen was succeeded by his son Yang Guang. Like his father before him, Emperor Yang Di, as Yang was known, was ambitious and grandiose. During his reign, he continued his father's practice of building large public works through forced labor, completing the Grand Canal in 609 to connect Luoyang in central China with Hangzhou in the south. The canal made the movement of foodstuffs and supplies between north and south possible on an unimaginable scale. From the south, with its warmer and wetter climate, came rice; from the drier and cooler north came crops such as wheat and millet (Figure 12.9). A crucial step in the economic integration of overland trade was taken when the canal was connected to the Sui capital and eastern terminus of the Silk Roads in Chang'an, finally extending all the way north to Beijing. Construction of this arm of the canal took seven years and required as many as five million workers, sometimes including entire populations conscripted to labor on the project. An early form of a police force supervised, enforcing corporal punishment on anyone refusing to work.



Figure 12.9 China's Grand Canal. This map of China's Grand Canal shows how it connects the country's north and south, just as rivers connect the east and west. The canal became critical to centralizing control of the Sui Empire. Its primary route is shown in orange, while the purple indicates shorter-lived expansions constructed to connect the southern Chinese provinces with this important economic thoroughfare. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Grand Canal was essential to the economic and administrative integration of the newly reunified Chinese empire under the Sui. The canal made it easier for goods to be transported and provided increased revenue by allowing the government to tax the products being shipped. It also greatly improved communication and the effectiveness of the government, as officials were able to travel quickly between north and south and to send communication more easily across the Chinese interior. The canal was also a vital tool of Sui foreign policy, allowing Chinese armies from the north to travel to the borders of Korea, from which Yang Di launched his futile campaigns of conquest.

The Past Meets the Present

The Grand Canal

The modern city of Hangzhou, situated at the head of a large bay extending out into the East China Sea, has a population of almost twelve million and is known around the country and world for its robust economy. One of the keys to Hangzhou's success is the busy canal that extends northward from the city and is plied around the clock by numerous barges carrying bulk materials to distant locations in the interior. The origins of the canal date back over two thousand years to pre-imperial China, and its use today is a reminder of the enduring legacy of ancient Chinese engineering and determination.

Commonly referred to as the Grand Canal, this man-made waterway has portions that were built in the fifth century BCE. But it was during the Sui dynasty when these older canals were connected, refurbished, and extended to create a continuous water route stretching 1,100 miles from Hangzhou to Beijing. Built with conscripted workers, it was intended to supply southern-produced grain to the large cities in the north, facilitate the movement of troops, and to generally better integrate the northern and southern portions of the vast empire.

Completing the canal, fitted with lock gates to regulate water levels over different elevations, was an engineering feat and a testament to the boldness of the emperor. It was supplemented by a parallel imperial road dotted with post offices. Unfortunately for the enslaved, peasants, and others conscripted to build it, the costs were enormous. An estimated two million workers died constructing the canal; and the cost in both lives and taxes almost certainly contributed to the downfall of the short-lived Sui dynasty in 618. Later dynasties, however, found the canal quite useful. By the fifteenth century, hundreds of years of expansions and technological improvements had made the Grand Canal the central feature of a vast and indispensable inland transportation network (Figure 12.10).

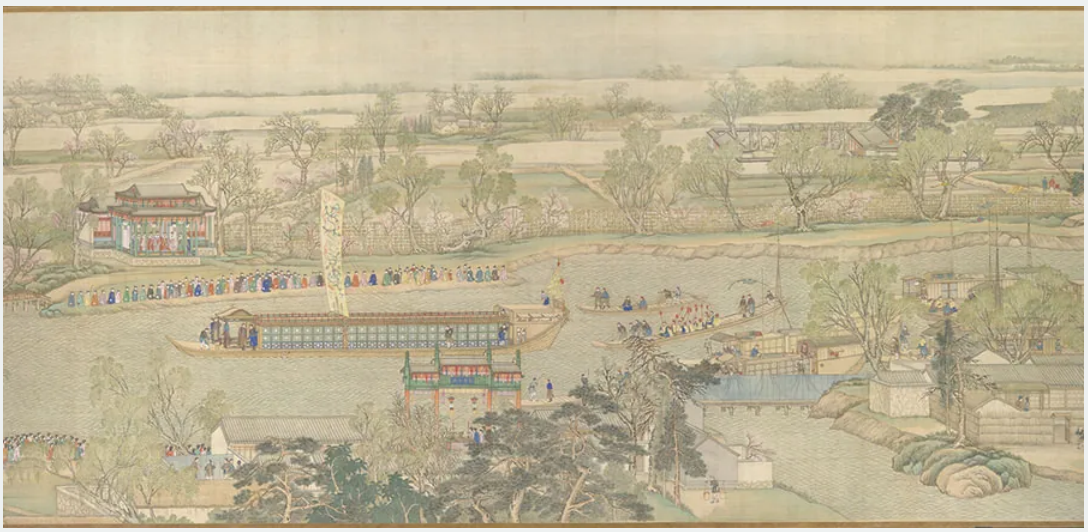


Figure 12.10 Touring the Grand Canal. This image from a larger scroll shows the canal as it looked in the late eighteenth century. Created by court painter Xu Yang in 1770, the scroll commemorates the emperor's 1751 tour of south China. Here you can see the emperor's large touring boat moving through the city of Suzhou on a now defunct portion of the canal. (credit:

"The Qianlong Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Six: Entering Suzhou along the Grand Canal" by Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1988/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

During the nineteenth century, the canal entered a period of decline as a result of a change in the course of the Yellow River and the rise of competing transportation routes made possible by railroads and steam-powered ships. Today, ships can no longer travel the full length of the canal. North of Jining, the canal is too shallow. Nonetheless, the canal remains an important transportation route, facilitating the flow of many millions of tons of raw materials through the interior. And improvement efforts have been underway for decades.

- What does the construction of the Grand Canal suggest about the ambitions of the Sui rulers, especially given the enormous costs involved in building the canal?
- In a modern world where so much freight is moved by air, rail, and highway, why do you think the Grand Canal continues to be a vital transportation route?

In the end, and despite the great benefits of the Grand Canal, its construction overextended the Sui. Enormously costly in labor and materiel, the waterway became a great source of grievance among the Chinese people, millions of whom were forced to work on it and neglect their families and farms. The situation was worsened by the combined effects of a natural disaster—the Yellow River flooded the North China plain and triggered famine throughout the countryside—and military defeat—the Sui invasion of Korea was repelled in 612. Undaunted, Yang Di pushed ahead with a second invasion campaign, stopping only when the exhausted military revolted. The emperor was assassinated in a period of turmoil in the region before Li Yuan, a provincial governor, acceded to the throne and announced the founding of the Tang dynasty in 618.

The Tang Empire, which lasted until 907, emerged just as Islam exploded out of Arabia and swept across North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula and into central Asia. Like the great Islamic empires that thrived during this period, the Tang promoted a cosmopolitan culture, a character greatly enhanced by wider international developments. In 674, for example, the advancing tide of Arab armies from the west forced members of the Sasanian royal family to flee to the safety of the Tang court at Chang'an, at the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads. This event inspired whole communities of merchants to move from Sasanian Persia to the Chinese capital, bringing all manner of exotic products and luxury goods, from silver artwork to Arab, Persian, and central Asian musical forms and dance.

It did not take long for the Tang elite to develop a taste for these items, creating an impressive industry of Persian-Arab-inspired goods and services to meet the growing demand. As a taste for Persian-Arab culture spread, trade relations between the Tang and India blossomed, bringing everything from mathematics to new sciences and medicines to China. These different cultural streams met in Tang China's major cities, which soon generated a diverse international culture greatly enhanced by the presence of merchant communities of Jewish people, Christians, Zoroastrians, peoples of the major Indian traditions, and a sizable minority of Muslims.

For much of its duration, Tang China was the most powerful empire in existence, and among its priorities was completing the consolidation and expansion begun under the Sui. To this end, the Tang embarked on a series of military campaigns into central Asia. Their large professional army was organized around a core of aristocratic cavalry of some seven million troops who routinely clashed with the mounted nomads of the Inner Asian Steppe, and an immense peasant infantry several million strong and garrisoned in the interior. By the 750s, Tang frontier units increasingly relied on pastoral nomadic peoples from the steppes, such as the Uyghurs, Turkish-speaking peoples who constituted the empire's most potent military force. Over time, Tang forces pushed into Manchuria (the area immediately north of the Korean Peninsula), Vietnam, and Tibet. At its height in the late ninth century, the Tang army controlled more than four million square miles of territory, an area roughly the size of the entire Islamic world during the same period.

The Tang achieved several early foreign policy successes, including reestablishing Chinese rule over Korea in 668, resulting in a tributary relationship with the peninsula's Silla dynasty. The Tang also opened diplomatic relations with Japan, which proved so effective that in 645 Japan embarked on its "Great Reform"—an all-encompassing adoption of Tang culture, including its imperial institutions (which the Silla also adopted), Confucian bureaucracy, and Buddhism.

The spread of Tang culture was greatly enhanced by several major innovations in China, including the world's first block-printing process, which proved opportune for printing Buddhist scriptures (Figure 12.11). Like the Sui, the Tang embraced and promoted Buddhism, the scriptures of which were usually hand-copied by scribes and disseminated among students. The scarcity of these

works meant that most commoners and even many elites had no access to them. China's artisans, however, devised a way to carve the mirror-image of a text into a block of wood, add ink, and then press the block onto paper. Scriptures and other forms of writing now became more accessible, spreading ideas from the elites to the masses. Block-printing remained the major method of transferring images onto paper until the end of the nineteenth century.



Figure 12.11 The First Block-Printed Book. This is a page from the *Diamond Sutra*, the world's first block-printed book, made in China in 868. Note the image of the Buddha in the center, and consider how the production of multiple copies of documents such as this could lead to wider knowledge of Buddhism. (credit: modification of work "Jingangjing" by British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Buddhism was important not only under the Sui. The Tang period witnessed the rapid growth of two forms of Mahayana Buddhism in particular: Pure Land, which had originated much earlier in India and had found adherents in China since the fifth century, and Chan, which developed during the fifth and sixth centuries but became popular under the Tang. Pure Land Buddhism was a school of popular devotion to Amida (or Amitabha), the Buddha of the "pure land" or the uncorrupt plane of existence believers anticipated reaching on their rebirth. Like the Hindu *bhakti* sects in India, Pure Land Buddhists held that to achieve salvation it was necessary not to study sacred texts but rather to engage in practices accessible to everyone, especially by invoking Amida's name.

Chan Buddhism, like Pure Land, deemphasized scriptural study but rejected the notion of personal devotion to a savior. Instead, Chan Buddhism, known more popularly by its Japanese name Zen, stressed the disciplined practice of meditation and following the example of a Chan master, who underwent great hardships performing humble tasks and wrestling with paradoxical questions, to achieve enlightenment. Chan Buddhism was austere and monastic in character, whereas Pure Land was the more popular form observed by lay people.

Buddhism's popularity became a flashpoint for violence in Tang China, however. In the mid-ninth century, the Tang Empire cracked down on what it perceived as the threat that hundreds of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns posed to its Confucian and Daoist leaders, who argued that Buddhism represented an alien influence on the state. Although this prompted the active

suppression of Buddhist monasteries and the confiscation of their wealth, it was not enough. Blatant persecution unfolded under Emperor Wuzong, resulting in the destruction of some forty thousand temples and shrines, the closure of more than four thousand monasteries, and the forced secularization of hundreds of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns. Culturally, the state moved to expunge the impact of Buddhism by reviving classical prose styles and the teachings of Confucius and his followers (Figure 12.12).



Figure 12.12 Emperor Wuzong. Emperor Wuzong, represented in an ink drawing from a Chinese encyclopedia of the early seventeenth century, engaged in widespread persecution of Buddhist monks and nuns in ninth-century (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax) China. (credit: modification of work “Emperor Wuzong of the Tang dynasty” by Baidu/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Tang period also produced a great deal of poetry, much of it influenced by the prevalent religious and philosophical traditions. For example, in the eighth century the poets Wang Wei, Li Bai (Li Bo), and Du Fu were influenced by Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, respectively, and many people could recite their poems from memory. Along the Silk Roads during this period, poetry spread along with China’s religious and philosophical traditions, first to Korea and from there to Japan. Neither area had a written script of its own yet, so admirers learned the poets’ works in Chinese.

Entrance into the Tang bureaucracy was based on passage of a merit-based exam administered every three years. This civil service exam, the first fully written such exam in history, had been developed from the Sui dynasty and tested sophisticated literary skills and knowledge of Confucian and Daoist classics. In theory it was open to all; in practice, however, until the late Tang period, women, the sons of merchants, and those who could not afford a classical education were excluded. Most laborers were also excluded because of their circumstances, as they could not take time away from their fields to study. In the end, people became government officials thanks to their literary achievements or the influence of their prestigious families.

Tang China also witnessed contradictory trends in personal behavior and relations between the sexes. In 665, Emperor Gaozong, infirm and sickly, handed power to his second wife, Wu Zetian. Following Gaozong’s death in 683, Wu ruled as empress dowager and regent for her son, though she held all the real power of the state. A devout Buddhist, she declared Buddhism the state religion, ordered scholars to write biographies of famous women, and in 690 took the extraordinary step of founding her own dynasty, the Wu Zhou (not to be confused with the much earlier Zhou dynasty). Three years later, Wu assumed the Buddhist title “Divine Empress Who Rules the Universe.” Although she was an intelligent and competent ruler, the founding of her own dynasty and the adoption of imperial titles felt to many like usurpation. Resistance soon followed, prompting her abdication and the restoration of the Tang dynasty.

Wu's reign was remarkable in China's male-dominated society. Still, the Tang Empire has been described as a "golden age" for women in China, perhaps because lingering contact with the nomadic peoples of the north and their relatively egalitarian society encouraged a somewhat similar view among the Chinese. As evidence of the increased prominence of women, historians also point to a flourishing culture of poetry written by courtesans, the careers of Empress Wu and her daughter-in-law Empress Wei, and the practice of using diplomatic marriages of Tang daughters to prominent foreign officials to forge political alliances. However, sumptuary laws dictated what women could and could not wear, elite men kept concubines, and the Tang legal system considered women property.

The Tang Empire reached its zenith in the early eighth century (Figure 12.13). By mid-century, however, internal and external challenges had set in motion the empire's terminal decline. Externally, the Tang were defeated at the Battle of Talas River in 751. There, Tang forces were beaten by the combined Turkic and Arab armies of the Abbasid Caliphate, which was expanding the frontiers of the Islamic empire deep into central Asia after overthrowing the Umayyads. Internally, China faced revolts in Korea, Yunnan (in extreme southern China), and Manchuria, which distracted and weakened the state.



Figure 12.13 The Tang Dynasty. This map shows the extent of China's Tang dynasty at its height in the eighth century. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Then, in 755, the Tang Empire was rocked by the massive An Lushan rebellion. Some 150,000 frontier troops led by the Tang commander An Lushan revolted against Emperor Xuanzong and the decadent court at Chang'an. It took eight years for the Tang to crush the rebellion, by the end of which China was both militarily and economically exhausted. The empire carried on in an enfeebled state, but over the ensuing decades, Chang'an ceded much military and civil authority to provincial warlords. In 906, following additional civil wars, the Tang dynasty collapsed, leading to a period of disunity until the Song rose to dominance in 960.

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10.3: East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the trade in goods, technology, and ideas that occurred along the Silk Roads
- Describe how Islam spread in South and Southeast Asia
- Discuss the role of East Africa in Indian Ocean trade

The Silk Roads made up one of the greatest trade routes in world history, linking east and west in a vast interlocking network that reached its heyday between the fifth and eighth centuries. It had begun to form a few hundred years before, when the Chinese Han dynasty sought to placate and control the great Xiongnu nomadic peoples to the north by trading with them, and with other nomadic peoples such as the Yuezhi in Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan). The Silk Roads eventually connected China, central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and even the Mediterranean basin, facilitating the exchange of goods such as silk and spices, technologies such as papermaking, and cultural traditions and religions such as Buddhism and Islam.

These road networks were critical to the spread of Islam, as seen in the wake of Muslim raiders entering the Sindh area of northwest India in the early eighth century. Maritime networks centered on the Indian Ocean also played a large role in this expansion. From India and through both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, Muslim sailors began to dominate much of the Malabar Coast of western India and the Swahili coast of eastern Africa, becoming fixtures in the lucrative Indian Ocean trade all the way to China and beyond. The influence of Muslim traders throughout the region went far beyond commercial exchange, however. One of the most significant results of this trade-based diffusion of Islamic culture in South and East Asia was the emergence of powerful states such as Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population today.

Travel and Exchange along the Silk Roads

By the first century BCE, China had become firmly established as the eastern end of the Silk Roads, with Rome as the western end. The Romans also traveled by sea to secure the goods that came through the ports of western India, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, as well as trading through key centers in Syria such as the great caravan cities of Petra and Palmyra, the Nabatean city famed as the main entry point for Chinese silk and eastern incense. In exchange for such goods, the Roman provinces of North Africa traded Roman glassware, wool, gold, and silver through intermediaries in the Middle East and central Asia and even into India (Figure 12.14).

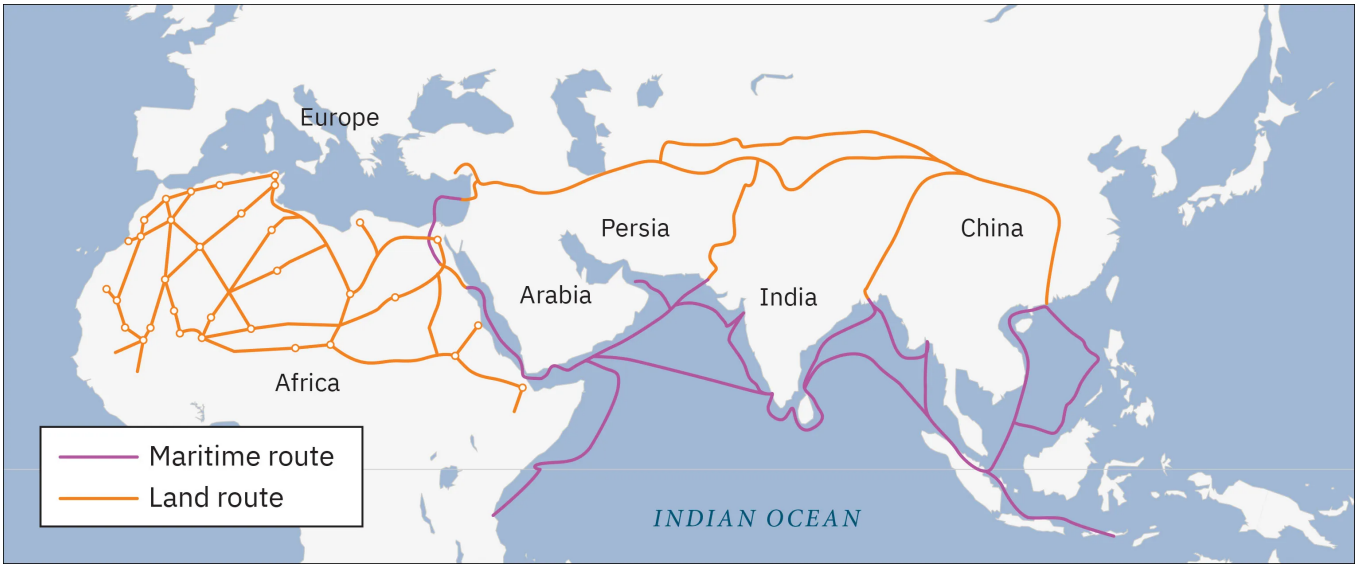


Figure 12.14 The Silk Roads in the First Century CE. The Silk Roads network was not a single route but many, including caravan routes that linked to the main trading regions, oasis towns, and overseas routes—the so-called Maritime Silk Roads—throughout

the Indian Ocean. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Before they reached the Romans, trade goods from the east were largely in the hands of the Kushan Empire. The Yuezhi confederacy in Bactria had unified to form this empire, trading with both China and the Indian subcontinent and providing a conduit between the two, particularly from the city of Taxila. The Kushan Empire managed to stabilize the trading routes connecting the Parthian western leg of the road with that of the central Asian steppes, spreading its control halfway down the Indian subcontinent in the process and ideally positioning itself to handle trade between India, China, and the Mediterranean.

By the third century CE, many empires using the Silk Roads had begun to decline, including the Romans, the Kushans, the Parthians, and the Han. The Kushans and Parthians were replaced by the Sasanids in Persia, who also annexed the northern portion of the Kushan Empire. The Gupta soon controlled the southern portion of India. The Mediterranean world was changing too; the Silk Roads’ new trade destination was the surviving Eastern Roman Empire, known as the Byzantine Empire from the late fifth century onward, following the fall of Roman dominance in western Europe. These new players continued and extended the trade network.

Long-distance trade during the early and later Middle Ages was fraught. The Silk Roads were not a four-thousand-mile-long superhighway outfitted to bridge eastern and western markets from Rome to China but rather a series of interconnected roads, many ill maintained, that were built up over time and eventually linked dozens of oasis towns and market cities such as Palmyra in the west and Bactria in the east. It is most useful to imagine it as a network of “legs” on a journey, along which merchants and traders traveled via caravan with their wares, pausing to rest at caravansaries along the way. Goods changed hands many times over these long distances, being exchanged between merchants who each traveled only part of the “road,” and their price increased the farther they went from their origin.

Buddhism arrived in China sometime during the period known as the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE). Monks traveling the Silk Roads between northern India and Afghanistan brought its universalizing message of a lifestyle open to all and offering salvation to any willing to listen, and they found a receptive audience among countless merchants traveling between China and central Asia. Over time, Buddhist monks established themselves in small communities and set up monasteries at a string of oases the length of the Taklamakan Desert—a chain that ran all the way to the Great Wall in northern China. At one of these, Yungang, weary travelers were greeted by five huge Buddhas carved from the cliffs and surrounded by tens of thousands of statues representing Buddhist deities and patrons (Figure 12.15). This great religious complex offered not only an opportunity to rest and recover but also an entry point to the Chinese market.



Figure 12.15 Buddha Statues at Yungang. These huge statues of Buddha were carved along the Silk Roads by the Northern Wei dynasty in China around the fourth century. They clearly demonstrate the importance of trade routes in the spread of culture and ideas. (credit: “Yungang Grottoes 2008” by Mirinda K./Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Many legs of the Silk Roads were perilous in the extreme. For example, upon departing Chang’an, the Tang capital and eastern terminus of the network, travelers almost immediately confronted the Gobi, the largest desert in Asia. Its terrain is compacted and rocky and thus ideal for long-distance travel by camel, but the lack of water necessitated the establishment of caravansaries, usually about a day apart along the road connecting China to the central Asian interior. To geographic and environmental hazards, travelers could add warring tribes and roving bandits and thieves. A menace since the beginning of the Silk Roads, robbers targeted the convoys of precious cargoes as they headed across open and unprotected terrain. While small armies and groups of archers accompanied some larger and better-funded caravans, and caravans sometimes merged into “super-caravans” for safety, these were the exceptions, not the rule. Most travelers undertook a caravan journey at great risk to themselves and the goods they carried.

Despite its dangers, however, the overland route was more appealing for many than the alternative, a hazardous and costly voyage across the sea. Pirates lurking in coastal waters harassed ships on the Maritime Silk Roads, and shifting weather and poorly charted waters posed enormous challenges to even the sturdiest vessels and hardiest merchants. The loss of a ship to a sudden storm or shallow reef (as happened repeatedly at the Gelasa Strait in Indonesia) could mean not only the deaths of crew and passengers but also the ruin of the merchants whose goods were sunk. To most merchants and traders, the risks posed by seaborne trade, not to mention the cost of hiring a ship and its crew, made it the less appealing of the two Silk Road routes open to them. As land empires such as the Sasanian Persians’ realm in central Asia grew more stable, the overland route became even more attractive.

Link to Learning

Read the short article "Unearthing the Islamic Relics of China's Medieval Port City" for more information about the importance of trade to the spread of religious ideas.

The Sasanian Persians were able to provide a great deal of security, allowing for more peaceful and effective trading. Much of their power in fact relied on and was derived from this trade. The Sasanian Empire was soon displaced by the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate, however, which came to control trade and produce textiles and other goods of its own to sell along the route, although demand for Chinese silks continued. In 750, the Umayyads in turn were overthrown by the Abbasids (749–1258), a new Islamic dynasty that sought to expand eastward from the Middle East even as the Tang dynasty drove westward from China. The Abbasids moved their capital to Baghdad, along the Tigris River in what is modern-day Iraq. This change streamlined their dominance of the Silk Roads, letting them use the Persian Gulf to effectively bypass the Red Sea, which was the seaborne trade route closest to the former Umayyad capital in Syria.

Despite their ambitions, the Abbasids' eastward expansion was halted in 751 when a combined Arab-Tibetan army met Tang forces in the Battle of Talas River near the town of Atlakh (Figure 12.16). Initially a stalemate, the battle turned in favor of the Abbasids when Turkic forces that were allied with the Tang switched allegiances and joined the Abbasids. Although the Abbasids were victorious, the engagement marked the end of expansion for both empires.



Figure 12.16 The Battle of Talas River. Note the centrally located site of the 751 Battle of Talas River, between the Abbasids in the west and the Tang in the east. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Throughout the rise and fall of these empires and others, control of trade routes, particularly the Silk Roads, was paramount. For example, people from the central Asian steppes exchanged hides, wool, and livestock for Chinese manufactured goods such as lacquerware, silk, floss, paper, porcelain, and iron tools. These goods and commodities were then traded for similar items along the way, eventually reaching buyers as far away as the Sanhaja tribes of West Africa and the Egyptians and Ethiopians in East Africa. The Silk Roads were never as vital to the Chinese economy, however, as they were to the others. The domestic Chinese economy was large enough to meet all the needs of the state and its people without imports, frustrating European powers intent on breaking

into the Chinese economy well into the modern period. At the same time, there was great desire for Chinese goods by western peoples, meaning that the balance of power in trade was almost always skewed in favor of East Asia.

The silk that gave the Silk Roads their name may have originally come from China, but it was not long before many other states began raising silkworms and processing the silk thread from their cocoons into luxurious cloth. The Byzantines, legend has it, acquired silkworms clandestinely in the sixth century when Christian monks visiting China spirited some cocoons away in hollowed-out walking sticks. Much of the labor of producing silk fell to women, who grew the mulberry trees needed to feed the silkworms, unraveled the cocoons, and wove the threads into textiles. They were vital to the trade that led to Chinese dominance of the luxury goods market that the Silk Roads were so famous for. The men were responsible for the upkeep of the tree farms and the sale and exchange of the finished products. Many rural and even urban areas survived by producing silk cloth in this way, like the cottage industries that thrived later in Europe.

Beyond the Book

The Art of Papermaking

Before the invention of paper, the key writing material in China was bamboo strips, which were very bulky and took up a great deal of room (Figure 12.17). For centuries, however, the Chinese had been perfecting the art of papermaking. During the second century CE, craftspeople took the bark from the mulberry tree (whose leaves were fed to silkworms) and pounded the fibers into a pulp. By spreading the mixture as sheets to dry, they created paper. Later they discovered they could add hemp rags or fishing nets or any number of similar items to the pulp to strengthen the paper, which was then sometimes called parchment. Unlike bamboo, paper and parchment could be rolled up and were much easier to carry.



Figure 12.17 Bamboo Strips as Writing Material. This set of bamboo strips dating from the Warring States Period (fifth to third centuries BCE) illustrates how writing was achieved in China before the invention of paper. (credit: “Strip no. 22 of Kǒngzǐ Shīlùn” by Shanghai Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Before the Battle of Talas River in 751, some of this paper had already made its way to Mecca in Arabia. Some Chinese prisoners of war from the battle were said to be papermakers who were taken to Samarkand and Khurasan, where they began to build paper mills. Evidence suggests this may be merely a legend, however, and that papermills were probably already in existence in Samarkand by this time. Nonetheless, the first paper mill in the Abbasid Caliphate was built in 794–795, and Spain began producing paper as early as the tenth century.

- What does the story of Chinese papermaking suggest about the ways in which ideas and technologies can be diffused to other cultures?
- How was this diffusion of ideas and technologies connected to, but not a product of, trade via the Silk Roads?

Link to Learning

Watch this video to view a specialized technique of papermaking that differs from the one discussed in the preceding "Beyond the Book" feature.

Religion and Trade in South and Southeast Asia

The growth of Islam gave Muslims a considerable role in world trade, particularly along the Silk Roads and in the Indian Ocean. By the middle of the eighth century, Islam had moved into northern India, and when the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad dynasty and then moved their capital from Damascus to Baghdad, they established what became one the most important cities along the Silk Roads and a location that allowed them to dominate the growing Indian Ocean trade.

This new capital was situated along the Tigris River, a vital trade conduit to the Persian Gulf and to the Indian Ocean beyond. In the ninth century, the city of Siraf on the Persian Gulf coast was regularly sending ships to China and back and became one of the most important trading ports of this period. However, Siraf's hold on trade weakened when an earthquake struck and damaged it in 997. Other regions stepped in, including Hormuz, Omar, and particularly Qeys, an island city in the Persian Gulf. Arab expansion into the Indian Ocean trade initially filtered through these ports, but it eventually expanded along the African coast as well (Figure 12.18).

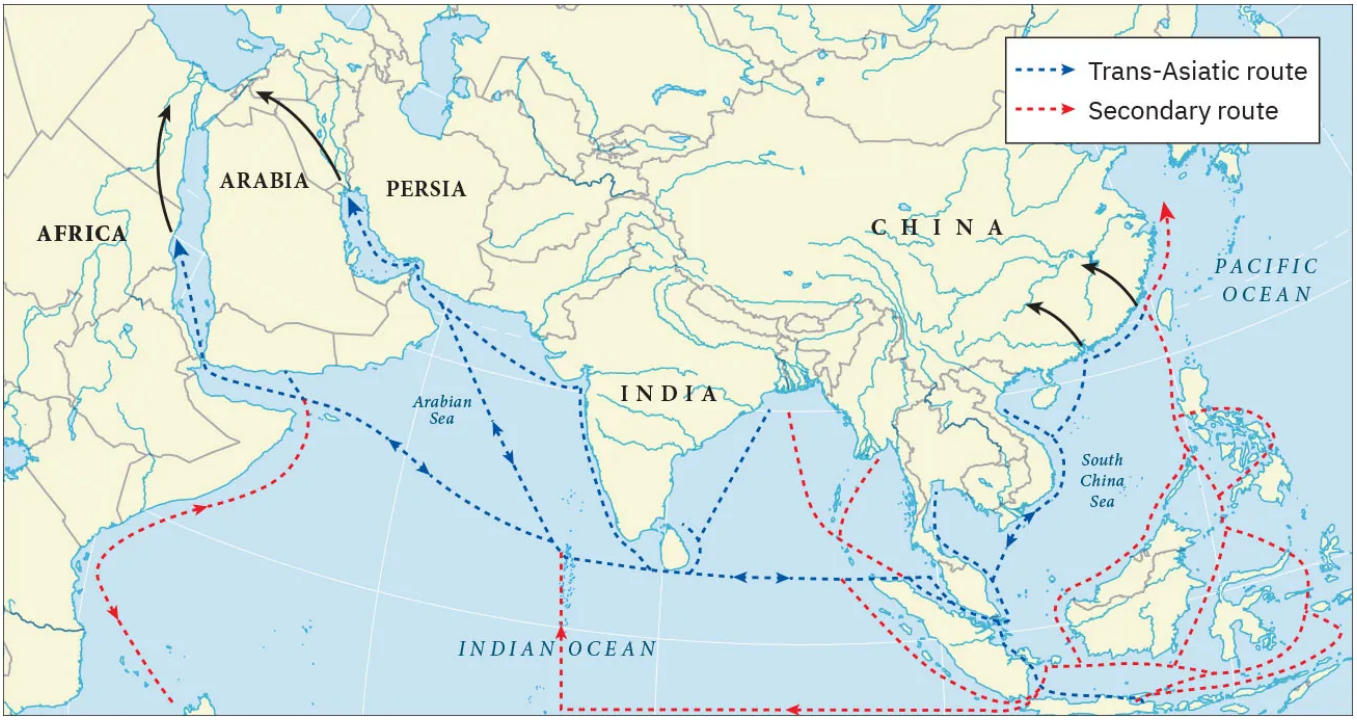


Figure 12.18 Indian Ocean Trade Routes. In the tenth century, Indian Ocean trade spread from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf down to Africa and around India to China. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Muslim presence in northwest India was also an important link in the chain of Indian Ocean trade. Muslim raiders invaded India in the eighth century and came through Khurasan and Ghazni in the late tenth and eleventh centuries and many of the local inhabitants converted to Islam. In Gujarat, just south of the Sindh region, the Hindu Chalukya dynasty still controlled much of the Indian Ocean trade through their key city of Khambhat. However, by the end of the twelfth century, their power was waning. When the Turkic peoples from present-day Afghanistan began to rule the area of Delhi independently as the Delhi Sultanate in 1206, this region slowly came under their influence.

Generations of incursions from Persian dynasties into South Asia meant that Persian influence deeply affected the region. That Persian influence can still be seen today in the language of Urdu in modern-day Pakistan, which combines Hindu and Farsi elements. One portion of the Delhi Sultanate was Gujarat, which the sultan Ala al-Din annexed in 1304 after years of ransacking Gujarati cities. When the central Asian warlord Timur (also called Tamerlane in the West) sacked and captured Delhi at the end of the century, Gujarat split off from the weakened state to become an independent Muslim sultanate under the Tughluq dynasty. The Tughluqs set about subduing the region's Hindu Rajput chieftains and building a navy at Diu, strategically located along important

trade routes between the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. Thus, much of the Indian Ocean trade in northwest India fell into the hands of this Islamic state.

From the decline of the Guptas to the rise of powerful northern Muslim sultanates such as Gujarat, peninsular India was home to the Hindu Chola kingdom, a maritime trade empire. With its vassal states including parts of the modern-day Maldives and Sri Lanka in the south, Chola dominated trade in the nearby portion of the Indian Ocean from about 970 to 1300. Crucially important to its dominance was control of the Palk Strait between Sri Lanka and southern India. The strait acted as a choke point where vessels had to stop to pay taxes, usually a portion of their cargo. Many of these vessels were known as *dhows* and carried twelve to twenty-four sailors (Figure 12.19).

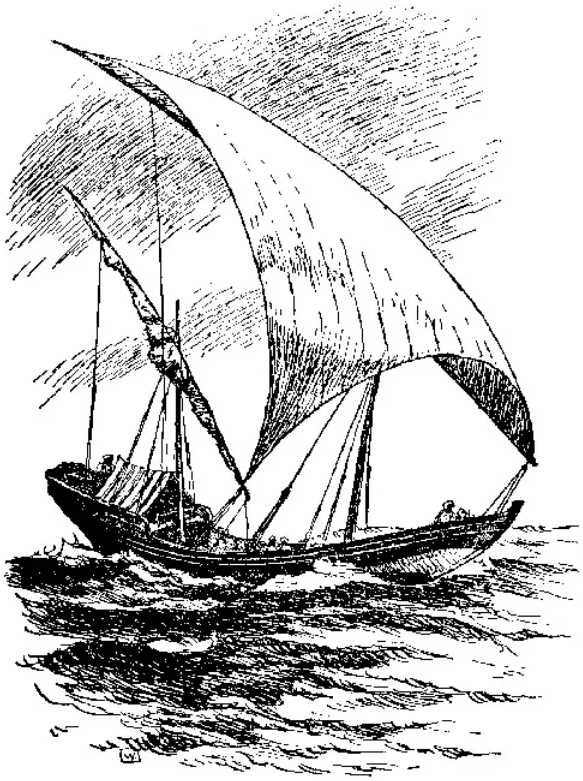


Figure 12.19 An Arab *Dhow*. This is an image of a ship called a *dhow*, with lashed and stitched hull construction and a lateen (triangular) rigged sail, such as Arab merchants used en route to India. (credit: “Arab Dhow” by The New Gresham Encyclopedia, Vol IV, Part 1/Project Gutenberg, Public Domain)

Secondary trading also occurred, in which authorized middle merchants conducted exchanges between these larger ships and smaller port cities, a system known as cabotage. In the eleventh century, the Chola were trying to extend and consolidate their control over regional trade. To this end, Rajendra I, the “Victor of the Ganges” (1019–1021), sailed up east India’s Coromandel coast and seized ports with the goal of deepening commercial ties with China, where trade in items such as ivory and glassware were common.

The Chola enjoyed an artistic, architectural, and literary flowering during the tenth and eleventh centuries. This “Imperial Golden Age” saw an explosion in the construction of monumental temples, like the one at Thanjavur on the southeastern coast, in the so-called Chola style—identifiable by such elements as high surrounding walls and stepped, pyramidal towers (Figure 12.20). Many of these sites housed intricately ornamented bronze statues of deities commissioned by the rulers, signifying their prominence, wealth, and devoutness. The golden age of the Chola is also known as the greatest epoch in South Indian literary tradition. One notable work of this tradition is the *Ramavataram*, a twelfth century Tamil epic written by the poet Kambar that was based on the *Ramayana*, the Sanskrit epic that told of the exploits of Prince Rama. All of this is a clear reminder that throughout world history, art and architecture tend to flourish when there is economic and political stability to support and sustain those efforts.



Figure 12.20 Chola Architecture of the Golden Age. This Hindu temple dating from the Chola dynasty's golden age represents the distinctive stepped-pyramidal shape that was a common feature of Chola architecture. (credit: "A Surya temple from Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi era" by G.N. Subrahmanyam/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Their golden age would not have been possible had the Chola not controlled trade through the Palk Strait, which generated enormous revenues. The monopolization of choke points was essential to anyone wishing to profit from maritime trade, as the founders of the Srivijaya Empire discovered with their command of the Malacca Strait. Traders sailing from the eastern Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia had to travel through this strait, between today's Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago and Malaysia (Figure 12.21). From around 650, Srivijaya profited by managing and taxing the lucrative trade that passed through the strait.



Figure 12.21 Srivijaya Trade Routes. This map shows the maritime trade route of the Srivijaya Empire, which went through the Strait of Malacca, the narrow stretch of water between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra. For a time, Srivijaya, with its capital at Palembang, controlled most of Southeast Asia's waterborne trade. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

During its early history, Srivijaya was highly influenced by both Buddhist and Hindu traders coming from India. For example, in the Srivijaya capital of Palembang in southern Sumatra stands a magnificent Buddha statue dating from the seventh or eighth century. Sculpted in the highly ornate and detailed Amaravati style still popular in contemporary India and named after the southeastern region where it originally developed, this work attests to the role of trade in spreading art, culture, and ideology. Hindu shrines and temples that still stand also show the depth to which Hinduism penetrated Srivijayan culture and society during this formative period.

By the tenth century, Srivijaya controlled all trade between the Indian Ocean and China. Alarmed by the exorbitant taxes on trade and the threat of piracy the Srivijaya posed, however, the Cholas sent a maritime expedition against them in 1025, crushing their major ports including Palembang and reducing Srivijaya's power and influence for a time. Although Srivijaya managed to recover somewhat, its grip on maritime trade soon weakened permanently. By the thirteenth century, it had largely been displaced by the port of Malacca, which came to dominate a region that included modern-day Singapore.

The thirteenth century marks a time of considerable Islamic expansion into Southeast Asia; the Acehnese peoples on the northern tip of Sumatra were the first to embrace the religion. Many merchants in particular converted to Islam, which ensured the safe movement of their goods and protections against loss, especially in the states on the northeast coast of Sumatra such as Perlak and Aru, followed by Pasai in the north, and Malacca, the new maritime center. A further stream of Islamization came with Sufi missionaries. Sufism, a branch of Sunni Islam, blended Islam with local religious traditions, encouraging non-merchants to convert. Over time, Islam came to dominate much of the Malay Peninsula as well as Sumatra and, particularly in the fifteenth century, northern Java.

Hinduism, like Islam, grew in Southeast Asia during the later Middle Ages. In the twelfth century, for example, construction began on the great temple complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Dedicated to Vishnu, Angkor Wat was meant to serve as the state temple, funerary complex, and capital city of the reigning monarch Suryavarman II. Hindu motifs decorated the exterior of the structure in bas relief form, featuring images of the gods and scenes from the epic Indian poem *Mahabharata*, while the temple's five towers

were meant to represent Mount Meru, the dwelling place of the gods in Hindu religion. By the end of the twelfth century, however, the complex had been transformed into a Buddhist center of worship.

Link to Learning

This illustrated magazine article discusses how Indonesia became one of the largest Muslim countries in the world.

East Africa and the Indian Ocean Trade

East Africa played a large role in the Indian Ocean trade network that connected it with the Middle East, China, and East and Southeast Asia. Trade in East Africa first centered on the Red Sea. After all, Egypt had been a Hellenistic and then a Roman-controlled territory, making exchange with Greece and Rome especially important and lucrative. Luxury goods such as ivory, furs, and spices like frankincense and myrrh were traded with the Roman Empire. However, following the Roman Empire's collapse, other groups from areas such as Arabia began to take over this trade. As trading ports sprang up farther down the east coast of Africa and as Bantu-speaking Africans moved into the region, a new and sophisticated culture arose on the Swahili coast, expanding its role in the Indian Ocean trade network, establishing powerful city-states, and connecting with the African interior via trade.

Aksum and Ethiopia in the Middle Ages

During the period of the Roman Empire, trade between Rome and China crossed central Asia on the Silk Roads. However, there was also a demand for goods from the Indian Ocean, Arabia, and Africa. The route for this trade centered on the Red Sea for a time and was controlled by the Kingdom of Aksum (Figure 12.22).



Figure 12.22 The Kingdom of Aksum. This map shows the Kingdom of Aksum at its greatest extent in the early sixth century CE. Though it appears to separate Africa and Arabia, the Red Sea was in fact a conduit of regular cultural exchange and movement of goods and people throughout the premodern period. For most of Aksum's existence, however, the kingdom did not control the fertile lands of southern Arabia, which today form part of Yemen. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Sassanid Empire just before the Arab conquest of Iran" by "DieBuche"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Red Sea connects the Gulf of Suez and the Sinai Peninsula with the Indian Ocean. In the third century CE, traders from Saba, the Yemeni area of the Arabian Peninsula, crossed the Red Sea to the coast of Eritrea. They began focusing much of their trade in the city of Adulis, which became the most important port of the Kingdom of Aksum. The city of Aksum, the capital of the kingdom, was eight days' journey south from Adulis, over a mountain range to the Ethiopian plateau.

The Kingdom of Aksum owed its power to this Red Sea trade, particularly in the fourth century CE. Traded goods included gold, silver, iron tools, cotton cloth, tortoise shells, and, above all, ivory and spices such as frankincense and myrrh. The fourth-century king Ezna expanded the kingdom to its farthest extent through conquering peoples south of Egypt and north of Ethiopia. In 350, toward the end of his reign, Ezna was converted to Christianity by the Syrian missionary Frumentius. Frumentius was later appointed bishop of Aksum by the patriarch in Alexandria, which meant the kingdom followed an Egyptian Coptic form of Christianity that held that Jesus had only a divine and not a mortal body.

During the reign of Ezna, caravans traveled from the interior to take part in the trade at Adulis, creating a constant stream into and out of the port city. The Kingdom of Aksum became increasingly wealthy and powerful. However, in the sixth and seventh centuries, all began to change. In 528, the Aksumites expanded their control as far as Yemen and were said to have reached the gates of Mecca in 571. However, they had evidently overextended themselves. With the help of the Sasanids from Persia, the king in the region of Yemen, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, rose up and pushed the Aksumites out of the peninsula.

In the seventh century, the Sasanids were in turn conquered by the Arab Muslim population, particularly the Umayyads. Arabs quickly expanded their control over the peninsula and into North Africa, especially Egypt, and thus access to the Red Sea naturally came into their hands. Particularly as Islam expanded to the Sindh region of northern India, the Persian Gulf became increasingly important for oceangoing vessels, which began bypassing the Aksumite port of Adulis.

Simultaneously, internal problems, some of them environmental, racked the Aksumite Kingdom. For centuries, if not longer, trees had been chopped down and agricultural fields planted, and the land was becoming increasingly barren due to soil erosion. Given this threat to the food supply and the decline in Red Sea trade, which is evidenced in the archaeological record by the reduced number of Aksumite coins used in this period, groups in the interior such as the Beja peoples began to rebel. The Aksumite Kingdom quickly collapsed into a smaller entity centered on the capital city of Aksum. Slowly the Kingdom of Ethiopia incorporated this area, and Aksum became an agricultural community ruled by a landed aristocracy.

Culturally, Ethiopia combined traditional pre-Islamic Jewish traditions with polytheistic ones and, as of the fourth century CE, with Christianity. Owing to its important location and support of long-distance trade, East Africa would prove to be a thriving cultural hub with proud heritage and history that linked them to the many peoples who traveled to and through the region. The legendary Christian kingdom led by Prester John was said to be hidden there, for example. And, until the 1970s, tradition held that Ethiopia's rulers were descendants of both the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem and had even brought the treasured Ark of the Covenant to Aksum. Thus, while the economic power of the region may have declined, its cultural significance continued well into the modern era.

The Swahili Coast and Indian Ocean Trade

Following the decline of the Kingdom of Aksum, the Indian Ocean trade shifted in part to the East African states. Factors that helped elevate the role of maritime trade in this region included improved shipbuilding, the rise of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, the decline of the Tang dynasty—which disrupted overland trade—and even environmental changes such as desertification that made some areas of Africa uninhabitable.

While the Kingdom of Aksum was in decline, the internal migration of Bantu peoples was making its way from Africa's northwest to its east and southeast. The Bantu brought their language, their cultural traditions, and especially the technology of ironmongering. Many began settling in coastal communities in East Africa, where they displaced or mixed with the Khoisan and other indigenous African peoples, particularly on the coasts of modern Tanzania and Kenya. They also traveled south, establishing many fishing and trading villages. These exported ivory, hides, quartz, and gems in return for cotton, glass, jewelry, and other items the Bantu people were unable to make themselves. Port towns such as Shang and Manda began growing into major port centers. Soon Arab merchants began living among the Bantu peoples to participate in the newly developing trade (Figure 12.23).

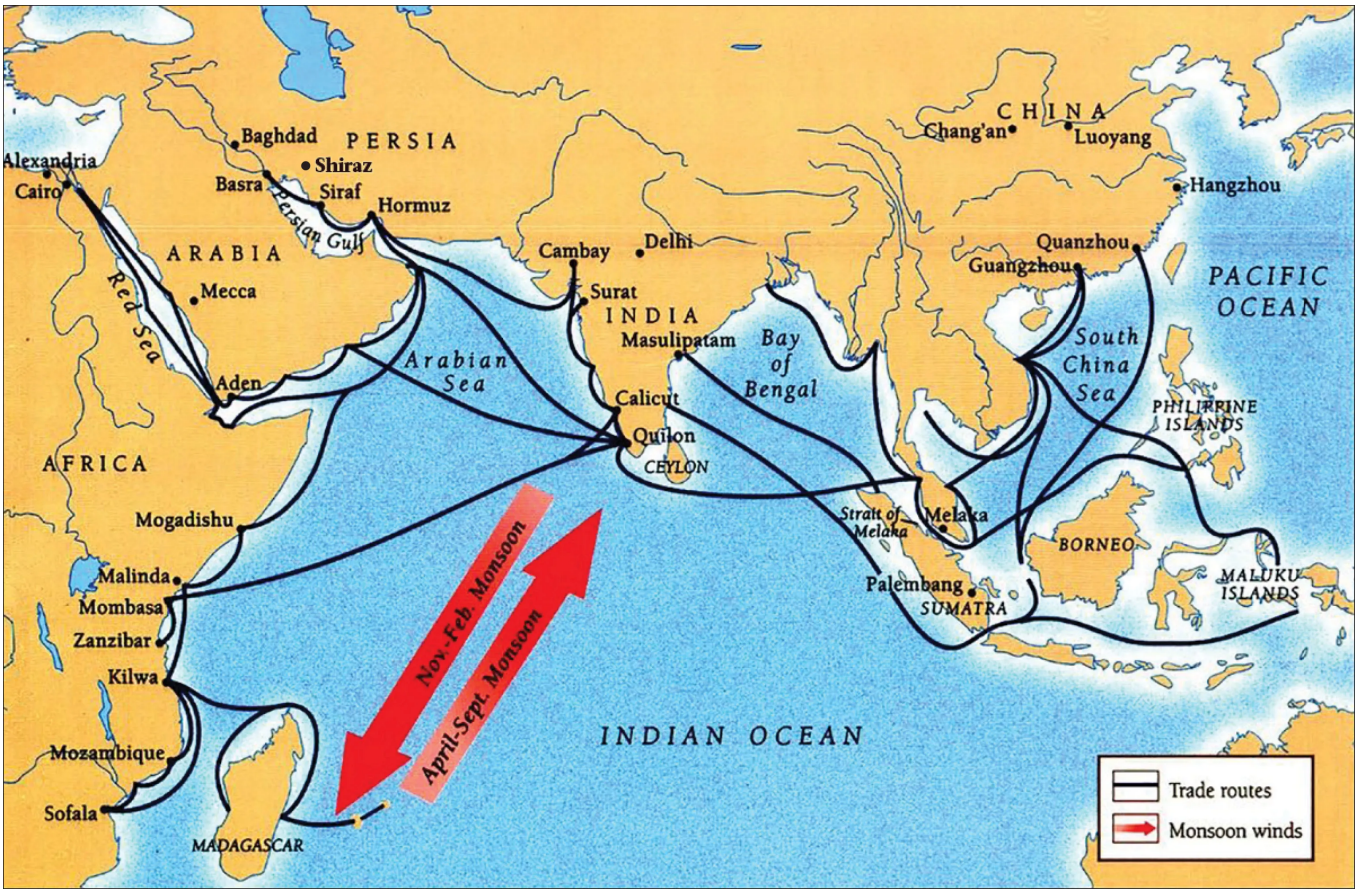


Figure 12.23 The Swahili Coast. Key cities along the Swahili coast included Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Kilwa. They were in the path of the monsoon winds and therefore ideally placed to participate in the Indian Ocean trade. (credit: modification of work "Muslim countries Trade" by Muslim countries/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Yemeni traders began arriving along the coast in East Africa in the eighth century and settled in such important areas as Mogadishu (in modern-day Somalia) and the island of Zanzibar. Some of the earliest of these traders were the Kharijites, dissidents from Arabia who held very different opinions from the mainstream on the role of the caliph and the centralization of Muslim society. Many settled in Oman; there and in eastern Africa they developed complex networks of exchange with merchant families and villages and towns along the coast. Over time, the Muslim traders married into these families, mixing cultures and languages, particularly those of Arabs, Persians, and the Bantu-speakers of East Africa, and produced the Swahili (from the Arabic for "of the coast") civilization.

Thanks to expanding trade with the Muslim world, coastal African traders and port cities from Mogadishu in the north to Sofala in the south adapted to long-distance trade and to Islamic civilization. This adaptation shaped what is known as the Swahili coast, a region of the East African coast dotted by dozens of city-states such as Zanzibar that date from the Middle Ages and served as centers of exchange, particularly of luxury goods.

After 1050, a new wave of Muslim immigrants arrived from the Iranian capital city of Shiraz and pushed many of the previous settlers farther south along the coast. They retained their Islamic cultural heritage and adopted much of the Bantu language, adding Arabic words and creating the language of Kiswahili, which is today a main language of modern Tanzania. The newcomers were eager to trace their Persian heritage as a means of legitimating themselves in the eyes of the peoples of the area, to which end some even claimed descent from the prophet Muhammad himself. In time, these Shirazi Muslims came to dominate trade along the coast, such as at Mombasa, Malinda, Lamu, and Sofala. Many chose to move onto the islands of the coast, particularly Pemba, Mafia, and Zanzibar. Those who dominated trade and claimed descent from the Middle East were known as patricians.

About forty new Muslim towns formed, many of them city-states independently ruled by their own sultans. A council of other patricians often served as advisors or sometimes simply ran the town without a sultan. In either case they formed an elite, hereditary merchant class, speaking Arabic or Kiswahili and trading with Africans in the interior for such items as ivory, furs, and

gold. Gold came from Sofala, the southernmost settled point at that time, and was shipped to the northern part of the Swahili coast, where it was traded to the city-states and from there to the Indian Ocean trade network. The merchants of the city-state of Kilwa sought to bypass intermediaries and purchase gold directly. They therefore established the trading colony of Sofala in the region of the same name. Mostly due to its domination of the gold trade, Kilwa became the most important of the Swahili towns, although Zanzibar proved nearly as powerful. For periods in the fourteenth century, in fact, Kilwa ruled over many other towns.

The development of the Swahili city-states also had the effect of connecting the interior of central southern Africa with the wider trade of the Indian Ocean basin. Merchants from city-states such as Sofala, for example, traveled up the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers to the great fairs that took place on the Zimbabwean plateau, a region dominated by the Bantu peoples of Great Zimbabwe (Figure 12.24). There they exchanged shells, ceramics, and coins from the East African coast for such high-value luxury goods as gold and ivory. Archaeologists have found everything from ancient Indian coins to fourteenth-century Longquan Chinese ceramics in the region of the Zimbabwean plateau, testifying to the reach of Swahili-borne oceanic trade in the African interior.



Figure 12.24 Great Zimbabwe. Great Zimbabwe was an advanced trade-based civilization established by Bantu speakers between the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers in the south-central African interior. Shown here are the remains of the one of the walls of Great Zimbabwe. (credit: “Inside of the Great Enclosure which is part of the Great Zimbabwe ruins” by Jan Derk/Wikimedia commons, Public Domain)

The Bantu societies of eastern and south-central Africa tended to be more matrilineal than Arabic or Persian societies were. Many Middle Eastern immigrants cemented their power by marrying the daughters of local ruling elites. But eventually a culture began to form in which women in the city-states veiled themselves and lived in separate quarters. Even the smallest city-state had a mosque, and many of these can still be seen today. Many of the more powerful city-states, such as Kilwa, began to mint their own money in the form of copper and silver coins. Generally not used internationally, these coins were nonetheless useful among the coastal people themselves.

If the merchant ruling class were the elite and upper class, the second class comprised the townspeople, the artisans, clerks, and other non-elite workers. They were generally non-elite because they could not trace their genealogy in a line of descent from Shirazi Muslims. Many non-Muslims also resided in the towns and were even lower in social status, such as servants or other manual laborers.

The lowest class of all were the enslaved, people purchased from the mainland who performed much, if not all, the necessary agricultural labor. Slavery played as much of a role in East Africa at this time as it did in the Atlantic world later, following European colonization of the Americas. Enslaved people also became a key trade item in the Indian Ocean trade route and remained long after the arrival of Portuguese sailors and other Europeans in the sixteenth century. Merchants purchased enslaved Bantu peoples from the interior through African intermediaries; they then shipped them to southern Iraq. During the ninth century, these enslaved people, whom the Muslims called *Zanj*, labored to drain the swamps near the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and to grow sugarcane and rice. But one of the greatest uprisings of enslaved people in history began in 868 when the Zanj rebelled against their enslavers. Although it was eventually crushed in 883, this unrest effectively ended much of the large-scale slave trade between the Swahili coast and the Persian Gulf in this period. The trade in enslaved people continued throughout the Indian Ocean networks, but this form of slavery never again took hold in the Persian Gulf.

By the twelfth century, East Africa had become a key center of Indian Ocean trade. The combination of monsoon winds that allowed ships to sail toward India in the summer and toward Africa in the winter facilitated the spread of Islam and the unifying culture it created among the merchant classes. Trade-based societies developed along the great arc of land that encircled the Indian Ocean basin. The ivory, animals, skins, rhinoceros' horns, and gold that played such a large role in this trade came from East Africa to be exchanged for luxuries such as silks, glassware, and tools.

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10.4: Border States- Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the rise of the kingdoms of Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan
- Explain how long-distance trade along the Silk Roads influenced the growth of border states like Sogdiana
- Describe the cultural influence of China on the states of Korea and Japan

Sogdiana, in modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, traded both with the Chinese and, increasingly in its long history, with other nomadic peoples such as the Turks. The Chinese, in turn, influenced both Korea and Japan. Both already participated in oceanic trade, but the additional benefits of the Silk Roads' interchange of ideas came to Korea and Japan through the Chinese as Koreans studied writing, Confucianism, and Buddhism in China and brought back the ideas and methods that suited them best. These innovations and ideas then spread to Japan, especially Buddhism.

Sogdiana and Silk Road Trade

East of the Sasanian Empire and west of Tang China, in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, lay the region of Sogdiana, a territory whose documented history stretches back to the fifth century BCE. Inhabited primarily by nomadic groups, Sogdiana was subject to the rule of a succession of empires and kingdoms throughout antiquity, from the Achaemenid Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Hellenistic successor kingdoms to the Kushan Empire. As a result, the region became a cultural melting pot. Indeed, under first the Seleucids and then the breakaway kingdoms of the Bactrian and Sogdian rulers, Greek learning flourished in Sogdiana, prompting later Islamic rulers to recruit scholars from the area. The Kushan Empire in central Asia was key to stabilizing the heartland that connected the eastern and western ends of the Silk Roads. After Kushan's fall in 375 CE, the Sogdians came to control an array of vital oasis towns, including Bukhara and Samarkand (both in modern-day Uzbekistan), from which they dominated regional trade for hundreds of years.

Although Sogdiana was never unified into a single polity and was almost always ruled by larger states, its long exposure to so many different cultures produced a multilingual population of merchants and skilled craftspeople. The Sogdians were able to use these traits to dominate their portion of the Silk Roads from their city-states such as Panjikent (in Tajikistan). So effective was their control that Sogdiana became the richest country in central Asia. Archaeological excavations of the palace complex at Panjikent have revealed large and elaborate buildings with interiors bearing frescoes of armored cavalry engaged in combat, clearly showing the influence on Sogdian culture of the warrior aristocracy of the Sasanids (Figure 12.25).



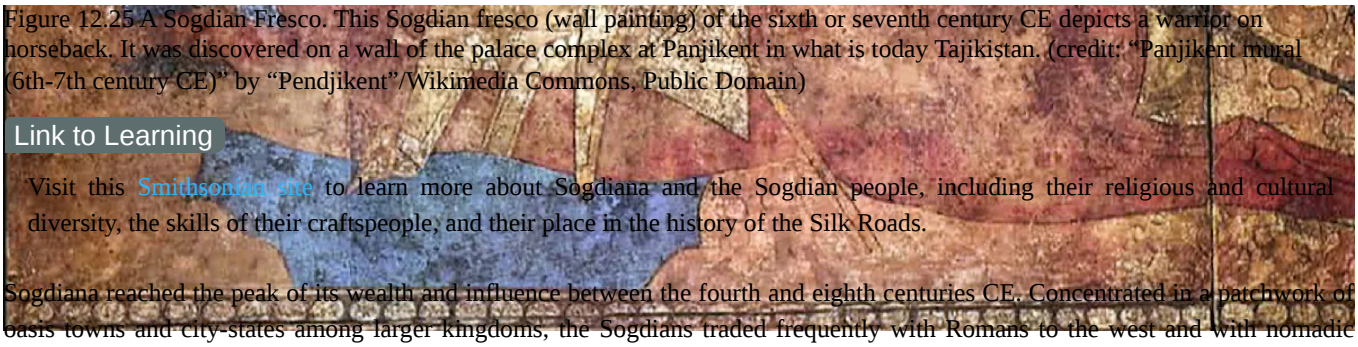


Figure 12.25 A Sogdian Fresco. This Sogdian fresco (wall painting) of the sixth or seventh century CE depicts a warrior on horseback. It was discovered on a wall of the palace complex at Panjikent in what is today Tajikistan. (credit: "Panjikent mural (6th-7th century CE)" by "Pendjikent"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Visit this Smithsonian site to learn more about Sogdiana and the Sogdian people, including their religious and cultural diversity, the skills of their craftspeople, and their place in the history of the Silk Roads.

Sogdiana reached the peak of its wealth and influence between the fourth and eighth centuries CE. Concentrated in a patchwork of oasis towns and city-states among larger kingdoms, the Sogdians traded frequently with Romans to the west and with nomadic peoples of the steppes and the Chinese to the east. Sogdian communities that exchanged leather and animal products for Chinese silk and manufactured goods were also found in thriving Chinese river ports like Dunhuang and Chang'an.

The Sogdians were also keen agents of cultural transmission throughout this period. As early as the fourth century, for example, Sogdian merchants and traders helped spread Buddhism beyond the borders of South Asia. By the sixth century, Sogdians had followed the Silk Roads into Europe, bringing Nestorianism, the branch of Christianity from Asia Minor and Syria that believed Jesus had two separate natures. Sogdians also brought Manichaeism, a dualistic philosophy of good versus evil that emerged in the Sasanid Empire and blended Persian Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Manichaeism was the chief competitor of Catholic Christianity in Late Antiquity until the arrival of Islam.

Sogdian traders also established alliances with some of the peoples they encountered in the west, including groups of nomadic Turks who adopted not only Manicheanism but also Sogdian, which was the language of the Silk Roads until the seventh century when it was replaced by Persian. By the eighth century, however, parts of Sogdiana including Samarkand were ruled by the expanding Islamic caliphate, which saw the potential in monopolizing the central Asian corridor of the Silk Roads. The diffusion of Muslim culture into Sogdiana prompted many Sogdian merchants and traders to convert, seeing benefits that included reliable contracts among believers to safeguard goods moving along the Silk Roads. By the middle of the century, the revolutionary Abbasid caliphs who overthrew their Umayyad predecessors had extended their Muslim empire all the way to Tang China, against whose forces they engaged in the Battle of Talas River in 751. For all its significance in ending Abbasid expansion eastward, the battle is also noteworthy in the story of Sogdiana for one unexpected reason: the response of the rebellious Tang general An Lushan.

Although An's biological parentage is shrouded in mystery, the record suggests he was adopted by a Turkic-speaking mother and a Sogdian father and swiftly rose to prominence in the Tang army as an interpreter in the military markets along the Silk Roads. His aggressive nature endeared him to no one, but by the 730s, An had come to the attention of Emperor Xuanzong and ingratiated himself into court politics. He and the emperor became fast friends, but An's fears about his future should the emperor die led him to rebel against the Tang state following its defeat at Talas River. An Lushan's rebellion decided the fate of the Tang presence in central Asia, for it prompted the Tang to withdraw from the region. The story of An reminds us yet again of the interconnected nature of the premodern world.

By the end of the eighth century, much of Sogdiana was ruled by the Abbasid Caliphate, and Sogdian communities abroad gradually assimilated, as in China, for example. Still, Arab, Byzantine, Chinese, and Armenian sources refer to Sogdians as the "great traders of Inner Asia," while caravanners' graffiti in India and the presence of Sogdian loanwords in the Turkish vocabulary testify to the intensity and durability of their commercial interactions long after their absorption into the Islamic world.

The dual Muslim/Chinese control of the Silk Roads that began in the eighth century was shaken by the coming of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Chinggis Khan's second son Chagatai and his descendants controlled central Asia as the Chagatai Khanate from the mid-thirteenth century onward, until the Turkic warlord Timur (Tamerlane) took over in 1363 and made his capital at Samarkand, the old Sogdian center of the Silk Roads.

Early Korea

The Korean peninsula is a mere six hundred miles long, from the Yalu River in the north to the Korean Strait in the south. Manchuria is located north of it and has historically been home to many nomadic peoples; at times it was part of the kingdoms that made up the lands of Korea. Situated so close to China and at the crossroads of much oceangoing traffic in East Asia, Korea and

Manchuria have been influenced a great deal by Chinese culture, from landscape painting techniques to city planning, as well as by ideas such as Confucianism and Buddhism.

Before the common era, an early Korean state was established in the northwest portion of the peninsula and part of Manchuria. This was the state of Gojoseon, and its people founded their capital at the site of Pyongyang, the current capital of North Korea. During the period of the Han in China (220 BCE–220 CE), three separate kingdoms formed in the peninsula: Goguryeo in the north (37 BCE–668 CE), and in the south Baekje (18 BCE–660 CE) and Silla (57 BCE–935 CE). The northern kingdom of Goguryeo had been overrun by the Han, but in 313 CE it was able to throw off the Chinese and reestablish independence. A fourth state, the confederacy of Gaya (42–532 CE), was also established in this period, but it remained relatively weak and in 532 CE was absorbed by the kingdom of Silla (Figure 12.26).



Figure 12.26 The Three Kingdoms. This map shows Korea during the Three Kingdoms period. Note the locations of the three—Baekje, Silla, and Goguryeo—which all vied to unify Korea under their own rule. Eventually the Kingdom of Silla absorbed the confederacy of Gaya in 532 and allied with the Tang to defeat Baekje in 660, and then Goguryeo in 668. (credit: modification of work “Map of Goguryeo (476)” by “solicitatia”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

It was during this Three Kingdoms period that cultural influences such as Buddhism were being spread along the Silk Roads. One of the Chinese dynasties to succeed the Han, the Jin, sent Buddhist missionaries into Goguryeo in 372. Many elites soon converted, and the kingdoms of Baekje and Silla followed suit. Other cultural innovations that influenced the three kingdoms were Confucian teachings and Chinese writing; Chinese became the official governmental language. The three kingdoms soon fell to quarreling

among themselves, however. The southern two allied against Goguryeo in 550, though their victory was delayed for quite some time.

When the Sui reunified China in 589, they also sought to regain control of Korea, finding themselves in conflict with Goguryeo but repeatedly defeated. In 612, for example, when the Sui attacked with 300,000 soldiers, only 2,700 were reported to have survived. This and other failed attempts to conquer Korea weakened the Sui and were among the key reasons for the dynasty's collapse and replacement by the Tang in 618.

The second Tang emperor, Taizong, also attacked Goguryeo and was likewise defeated. The Tang therefore allied with the Kingdom of Silla in their bid to dominate the peninsula. Together they defeated Baekje in 660, and then Goguryeo in 668. By 668, Silla was the sole remaining kingdom in Korea. In exchange for victory, however, Korea was now a tributary state of the Tang, although it extended only as far as the city of Pyongyang.

The new capital of Silla was located at Geumseong. Basing their city on the Tang capital of Chang'an, the Silla built many Confucian schools, and many Koreans traveled to China to acquire a solid Confucian education and learn more about Buddhism. The ideas of Confucianism and Buddhism slowly influenced and altered Korean culture. For example, Korea had been relatively matrilocal, with the husband joining the wife's family after marriage. But thanks to the influence of Confucianism and its patriarchal traditions, the opposite now began to occur.

The Koreans did not adopt Chinese values wholesale. Although they accepted aspects of China's examination system for filling the state bureaucracy based on merit, for instance, aristocratic control remained strong. High aristocrats were often given entire villages to govern and directly chose the local governing officers, and many of these nobles did what they could to protect their indigenous identities. And although China had few enslaved people, Korea had many.

In 780, an uprising occurred in which the king of Silla was killed. This event marked the beginning of the kingdom's decline, and a number of additional revolts occurred over the following century. A general named Wang Geon overthrew the kingdom in 935 and established the Goryeo dynasty (from which modern Korea derives its name). The new capital was located where the city of Kaesong now stands, and its administration was based largely on the former Tang governmental system; examination systems and Confucian education increased in importance. To guard against northern nomadic invaders, the Goryeo dynasty built a wall just south of the Yalu River, based on China's Great Wall.

The new Korean state persisted for some two centuries until a military coup in 1170. Although the Goryeo dynasty remained on the throne, successor kings were figureheads; the army generals held real power and maintained a powerful hold on the military establishment. In the early thirteenth century, however, the Korean capital in Kaesong was besieged by the Mongols, and in 1231 the government was forced to flee southward. The Mongols overran the state itself in 1258, bringing this formative period of Korean history to an end.

Early Japan

East of Korea and Manchuria lie the four major islands and thousands of smaller islands that make up modern Japan (Figure 12.27). The early history of Japan probably began as long as fifteen thousand years ago, when the islands are thought to have physically separated from Korea at the end of the last ice age. But archaeological research in Japan has uncovered artifacts such as arrowheads and spearpoints made from bone and antlers that date from even earlier, closer to 16,500 years ago. This early time is known as the Jōmon period, which lasted until the fourth century BCE.



Figure 12.27 Japan, Korea, and China in Context. This modern map of Japan and Korea shows their proximity to each other and to China. Their closeness explains how Buddhism and other cultural elements such as writing were able to spread from China to Korea and then to Japan in the premodern period. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The centuries from about 300 BCE to roughly 300 CE marked a new agricultural era in Japan known as the Yayoi period. Crops such as millet and rice began to be cultivated, both probably from Korea and China. After around 300 CE, we have evidence of a complex urban culture, such as burial mounds of a large new ruling class. These *kofun*, meaning "old mounds," give this era of Japanese history its name, the Kofun period. Lasting until the sixth century CE, this time saw an intensification of cultural exchange and foreign relations between Japan and Korea. In either 538 or 552, for example, King Seong of Baekje in western Korea sent emissaries to Japan along with Buddhist scriptures and a statue of the Buddha, marking the introduction of Buddhism into the country. About a century later, intense warfare on the Korean Peninsula prompted the migration of countless Koreans to Japan, most of whom were welcomed there. In fact, Emperor Tenji employed many skilled Korean technicians and craftspeople to build fortresses along his coastline.

During the Kofun period of the late third to sixth centuries, the arrival of Buddhism in Japan coincided with the rule of the Yamato clan, a group said to have descended from the goddess Amaterasu. The Yamato began to dominate the island of Honshu, one of the four large islands of Japan where another aristocratic clan, the Nakatomi, supervised the court's religious ceremonies at the imperial palace. The indigenous religion of Japan, Shintoism, held that many gods and spirits must be revered and honored, such as the spirits of trees, rocks, mountains, streams, and former rulers and chieftains. Amaterasu, for example, was the Shinto goddess of the sun. The Nakatomi clan, along with the Mononobe clan, opposed any religion, particularly foreign, that might threaten the dominance of tradition. However, the Soga clan chose to support Buddhism, in opposition to the other two clans.

In the seventh century, the ruler of Japan was Empress Suiko, the daughter of a Soga mother who came to power in 593 after the assassination of her brother King Sushun. For the next three decades, she ruled with her nephew and adviser, Prince Shotoku. In 594, early in her rule, Buddhism became a state religion. This was not the end of Shintoism, but it began a parallel system that

continued to the present. In short, by the end of the sixth century, both Shintoism and Buddhism were influencing the cultural makeup of Japan.

In keeping with the ancient East Asian tradition of embracing and borrowing from Chinese culture, the Soga rulers of Japan, like the Koreans in the sixth century, sent envoys to China. These envoys brought back Confucianism, which soon became a way to govern based on principles of appropriate and ethical behavior, as happened in China and Korea. An unusual feature of government in Japan at this time, however, was the adoption of a cap-rank system, which marked an official's rank by the color of cap worn; purple was the most prestigious.

In 604, Prince Shotoku wrote a statement of seventeen articles of government, sometimes referred to as Japan's first constitution. The state was then under great stress, divided among semiautonomous clan-based units. Not surprisingly, the constitution emphasized the Chinese Confucian precepts of a unified state ruled by one sovereign, the meritocratic rather than hereditary system of civil service, and the rights and obligations of the rulers and the ruled.

The Soga clan came to a violent end in 645, marking the rise of the Nakatomi family and the Fujiwara clan. Agitation and civil war persisted until 672, when King Temmu and Jito, his wife and later successor, came to the throne and initiated the Taika Reforms. Seeking to adopt the centralization instituted by the Tang, who came to power in China in 618 CE, Temmu and Jito started to build a capital at Fujiwara-kyo in 694. When it burned down a few years later, they built another at Nara to resemble the Tang capital of Chang'an, inaugurating the Nara period in Japanese history, which lasted until 794. Other reforms included a system of taxation, conscription, and labor service that came to be known as the Taihoo Code (701). An administrative and penal code system based on that of Tang China was established in 718.

After the death of Emperor Shomu in the mid-750s, conflict characterized the remainder of the century. In 794, Emperor Kammu moved his capital about twenty miles north to Heian-kyo, the site of today's Kyoto, ending the Nara period. Heian-kyo remained the capital of Japan until 1868. This larger city symbolized Japan's increasing power over all the major islands, with the exception of the northern island of Hokkaido. Emperor Kammu took his Fujiwara patron with him to the new capital. Throughout the ninth century, Fujiwara advisers became increasingly powerful at the expense of the emperors, many serving as regents and even as emperors themselves.

Gender roles became more rigidly defined during this period, and many non-elites were officially categorized as peasant, artisan, or merchant. Even the system of writing changed. Chinese script had been the traditional writing style, particularly among scholars. However, many words in Japanese were pronounced differently than Chinese writing allowed. Thus a new script called kana began to develop, to more accurately depict the way the words were pronounced in Japanese.

The most famous work written in kana is *The Tale of Genji*, the story of the romantic escapades of Hikaru Genji, a fictional emperor's son. Genji is removed from the line of succession for political reasons, and now a commoner, he decides to pursue a career as an imperial officer. Along the way, he has various romantic entanglements, secret love affairs that produce offspring believed to be the emperor's, and something like a midlife crisis, a reflection of the Buddhist belief in the transience of life. Widely considered the world's first novel, *Genji* was composed in the eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, a noblewoman and lady-in-waiting in the Heian Court. It skillfully portrays the forms of entertainment, manner of dress, daily routines, and moral code of the Heian nobility at the height of the Fujiwara clan's power. While the facts surrounding much of Murasaki's life and the composition of her magnum opus are not known, what is not disputed is *Genji's* critically important place in the literary canon of world literature, with the work often considered one of the world's oldest complete novels and a master class of Japanese literature. What is also not in dispute is that the work was composed by a woman from a powerful family at a time when the role of women around the world was still secondary to their male counterparts. It leaves us to wonder how much powerful and influential literature could have been composed by other women should they have been given the opportunity and resources that Murasaki was able to leverage during her career.

Beyond the Book

The Tale of Genji and Japanese High Society during the Heian Period

Composed in the eleventh century and attributed to female writer Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* opens a unique window into the culture of Japan during the late Heian Period from the eighth to twelfth centuries. The story reveals many aspects of

aristocratic life at court, from the styles of clothes worn to the musical instruments played and the mores and values that guided interpersonal and public relationships.

The scenes and events described in *The Tale of Genji* have been depicted in paintings and drawings over the centuries, weaving the story more deeply into Japanese identity by bringing to vivid life the setting for this ancient tale. One of the central themes in the story is of love and unrequited love. Genji finds his ideal woman in the form of Lady Fujitsubo, who is his stepmother, and therefore his love for her is forbidden. At one point in the story, he kidnaps a young girl (Murasaki), who he discovers is actually Lady Fujitsubo's niece. To satisfy his desire for Lady Fujitsubo, he educates the young Murasaki to be like his womanly ideal before finally marrying her (Figure 12.28).



Figure 12.28 Scene from *The Tale of Genji*. This scene from a seventeenth-century paper album rendered on paper and consisting of twenty-four album leaves shows the young female servants playing in the snow as Genji and Murasaki watch from their veranda. This scene of childish play was likely intended by the artist to emphasize the youthfulness of Murasaki. (credit: "The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari)" by Gift of Mary L. Cassilly, 1894/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Many of the illustrations that accompanied the novel's texts provide exquisite detail on the novel's content and reveal both a close reading of the text as well an intimate knowledge of imperial customs. Consider this mid-seventeenth-century handscroll fragment showing the funeral of Lady Aoi, Genji's first wife (Figure 12.29).



Figure 12.29 The Funeral of Lady Aoi. This funeral scene from chapter nine of *The Tale of Genji* dates to the mid-seventeenth century CE and was rendered on a paper handscroll in ink and gold. Here we see a high-ranking Tendai monk wearing orange and performing rituals in front of an ornamented altar as many priests from various temples gather around. The attending monks are arranged hierarchically and are recognizable by their elaborate clothing. (credit: "'Leaves of Wild Ginger' (Aoi), from the Phantom Genji Scrolls (Maboroshi no Genji monogatari emaki)" by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The story of Genji was enormously popular in Japan and illustrations of him and about the story continue to be made. In the nineteenth century, artists using woodblock printing often elaborated on the themes in the story by putting Genji in more modern scenes (Figure 12.30).



Figure 12.30 Modern Illustrations from *The Tale of Genji*. In this colorful three-panel woodblock print, Genji (left) is shown entering the Gankiro Teahouse, one of the most famous brothels in nineteenth-century Yokohama. Here the artist, Utagawa Kunisada, is likely blending the sensual imagery in the story of Genji with the sensual atmosphere of the teahouse. (credit: "Prince Genji Visits the Gankirō Tea House" by Bequest of William S. Lieberman, 2005/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

- What do the images suggest to you about gender and social relations during the Heian period?
- The details in many of the images, like the preceding funeral scene, are sometimes more elaborate than the story itself. What does this suggest about the way the story had become an important part of Japanese culture over time?

Throughout the Heian period, the court supported obscure forms of Buddhism such as Tendai (Tiantai in China) and Shingon. Shintoism retained its status as a key religious tradition (Figure 12.31), but so did these forms of Buddhism. Emperor Shomu had encouraged the spread of Buddhism by ordering a temple to be built in every province and block printings of Buddhist scriptures to be disseminated to the general populace.



Figure 12.31 The Itsukushima Shrine. Originally built in the twelfth century, the Itsukushima Shrine pictured here is an important Shinto symbol of the indigenous religion of Japan and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The prominence of shrines such as this shows that the religion is still a vibrant aspect of cultural life in Japan today. (credit: "The torii gate at the Itsukushima Shrine in Miyajima" by Balon Greyjoy/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Link to Learning

One of the key religious traditions of Japan is Shintoism. Read this article, particularly the first section, "What is Shinto?" and consider why early people like the Japanese might have developed such a keen connection to nature and the environment. What other religious traditions beyond those of Japan uphold the importance of nature?

During the late eleventh century, a unique facet of Japanese government developed called *insei*, or cloistered rule, in which the emperor retired from public life to live in a monastery but continued to rule behind the scenes. Initially, at least, this practice was meant to establish a regency of sorts; that is, the cloistered emperor could direct the affairs of state until his son came of age to rule in his own right. In time, however, cloistered rule became unwieldy and prompted chaos in the Japanese state. Often there were several retired emperors at the same time, each with their own troops, who exerted (or attempted to exert) control through cloistered rule. At this time, Heian-kyo began to be called Kyoto, meaning "the capital city."

An upsurge of violence began in the late 1150s when two families, the Taira and the Minamoto, vied for power. In 1160, the Taira were ascendant, but a generation later, in the uprising known as the Genpei War, the Minamoto triumphed, winning the naval Battle of Dannoura in 1185. The Kamakura period of Japan's history then began and lasted until 1333. In this period, the imperial capital remained at Heian-kyo, but the warrior families, first the Minamoto and then the Hojo, were headquartered in Kamakura.

From 1180 to 1185, with the help of the samurai, the warrior aristocracy of Japan, Yoritomo, the heir of the Minamoto clan, successfully wiped out all rivals, even eradicating the northern branch of the Fujiwara in 1189. In 1192, he gave himself the title of shogun, or commander in chief. From then on, the military shogun exercised the power of state, while the emperor was little more than a figurehead. Regional lords also had samurai retainers. Samurai adhered to a strict code of behavior called *bushi*, or "way of the warrior." One of the expected behaviors was disdain for capture, leading to ritual suicide known as *seppuku*.

Dueling Voices

Origins and Evolution of the Samurai Class: A Historical Debate

Historians seeking to understand the changing nature of armed force and military organization in early Japan and the origin of the samurai look at the ways in which Japanese society, culture, and economy were influenced by military matters before the eighth century and how this influence prompted the emergence of a new class of warrior-administrators.

The prevailing view today is that the samurai emerged in the mid- to late-Heian period as the result of a weakened imperial system. The imperial court had modeled its administration on institutions imported from Tang China, which included a governing ideology based on Confucianism and a military establishment that depended on a peasant-conscript army. This system proved ineffective in Japan, however, resulting in an inept central government that failed amid warfare and regional rebellion beginning in the early tenth century. The subsequent breakdown in public order prompted people in the countryside to take matters into their own hands. Provincial families armed themselves to defend and advance their private interests, allowing them to reclaim land and gain influence at the Heian Court by acting as regional warlords who could impose stability and security over rebellion. By 1100, therefore, samurai organized in regional bands were emerging as a major force in Japan's military and political arenas.

Other historians argue that the Heian Court was not inept or inactive and that the growth of private regional armies was well underway by the Heian period rather than being a product of it. This development too, they believe, was a return to familial authority patterns already deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Finally, these scholars contend that the rise of provincial warrior families and emergence of the samurai class was nothing more than the outcome of their being coopted by the central imperial authority, which sought to use them to perform essential military service.

The debate surrounding the origins and evolution of the samurai class may never be resolved. With that in mind, watch the following video of *The Evolution of Samurai through Japanese History* and then answer the questions that follow.

Click to view content

- According to the video, what were the origins of the samurai?
- How does this explanation fit into the discussion of the origins and development of the samurai in this feature box?
- The video talks about some of the cultural influences that led to the development of the samurai. What were they?
- What were the symbols of the samurai class? What was the preferred philosophy of the samurai?

In 1268, envoys arrived in Kamakura on behalf of some new rulers in Asia, the Mongols. Though they declared friendly intentions, these emissaries were ignored by the court. In response the Mongols sailed to Japan and invaded in 1274, only to be repelled when a storm arose following bitter fighting (Figure 12.32). Knowing they would return, the ruling Hojo clan built several land- and sea-based fortifications to halt any future invasion. When the Mongols did reappear in 1281, there was no clear victor, but a typhoon arose and scattered the Mongol ships, convincing many that divine winds, or *kamikaze*, were being sent by the gods to protect Japan.

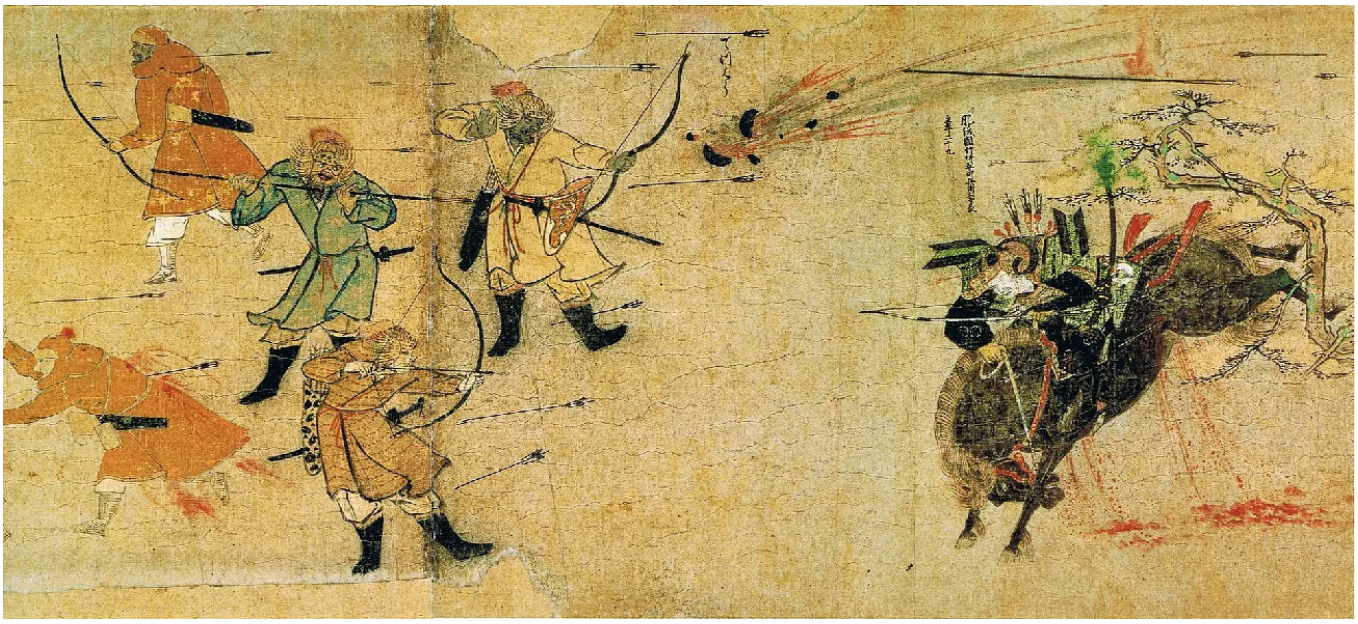


Figure 12.32 The First Mongol Invasion of Japan. This scene from an illustrated scroll called *Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba* from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century shows the first Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274. It depicts the combatants using arrows as well as bombs. (credit: “Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba 2” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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10.5: Key Terms

cabotage
a system wherein groups or individuals are granted the right to trade in another’s territory

caravansary
an inn funded by the state or wealthy individuals where travelers could spend the night and store their goods securely

Chan Buddhism
a form of Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes meditation; it is widely practiced in Japan where it is known as Zen Buddhism

dharma
the Hindu concept of the right way of living as defined by cosmic law

moksha
the release from samsara and the karmic cycle together with the attainment of a complete understanding of the world

Pure Land Buddhism
a branch of Mahayana Buddhism holding that all believers can be reborn into a place of salvation, the Pure Land

samurai
a member of the elite warrior class of Japan, governed by a strict code of behavior

shogun
a Japanese military commander-in-chief

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10.6: Section Summary

12.1 The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages

The new religion of Islam came into India with waves of invaders, from Turkic speakers of central Asia to Arabs from the distant west. In the process, northeastern India became increasingly Muslim and influenced by Islamic culture owing to the arrival of these Turkic peoples. An Islamic state was established at Delhi—the Delhi Sultanate—which lasted more than three hundred years and became the center of Islamic India. However, because the minority Muslim rulers did not enforce cultural homogeneity, the invasions strengthened the cultural diversity that was already a hallmark of Indian social order. Despite Muslims beginning to engage in the Indian Ocean trade soon after their arrival in northern India, carrying goods and ideas with them throughout the subcontinent, the south remained Hindu in its cultural beliefs and ideas.

East Asia, particularly China, was affected by all this trade. Buddhism also began to take hold along the overland routes of the Silk Roads, particularly those linking India with China. The Sui dynasty not only adopted Buddhism but also expanded and strengthened trade across central Asia. Overextending themselves, however, the Sui were replaced by the Tang, who strengthened trade routes and ties with Buddhism even further. The An Lushan rebellion weakened the Tang, however, and eventually the Tang fell.

12.2 East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages

The Silk Roads originated in the Han dynasty's trade with nomadic peoples from the Inner Asian Steppe and grew into a vast network that crisscrossed much of central Asia, linking China with the West. Beyond the obvious economic benefits, trade along the Silk Roads also facilitated cultural exchange, such as Buddhism's spread from India to China and onward. Beginning in the seventh century, Arab expansion led to the conquest of Sasanid-controlled portions of the route, and much of southwest Asia was unified by an Islamic caliphate, putting large portions of the network in the hands of a single empire. In the east, the powerful Tang dynasty ensured protection of trade on the Silk Roads. But in 751, the Tang and Abbasid empires clashed at the Talas River, marking the end of expansion in central Asia for both. However, both Hinduism and Islam grew in Southeast Asia during the later Middle Ages, playing a large role in the Indian Ocean trade.

East Africa connected the Indian Ocean trade network of the Middle East to China, India, and Southeast Asia. From the seventh century onward, Islamized Arab traders were vital in bringing the regional trade that characterized the East African Aksumite economy into the wider maritime trade of the Indian Ocean basin, a feat accomplished through linkages between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and beyond. In the seventh century, the Swahili culture blossomed along the East African coast. Arab traders from North Africa and Iran intermingled with local Bantu populations and built a thriving trade-based civilization along the coastline between Mogadishu in modern Somalia and Sofala in Mozambique. The city-states there deepened trade connections with the Middle East and East and Southeast Asia, bringing cultures and goods from as far away as China to the African interior and sending gold, ivory, and rare animals from southern Africa to China.

12.3 Border States: Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan

Sogdiana was vital to the operation of the Silk Roads beginning in the fourth century CE. Over the course of some four hundred years, Sogdian city-states like Samarkand and Panjikent grew into key markets, and Sogdian trading communities were established in China. At its height, Sogdiana was the wealthiest region in central Asia.

Like many other states in East Asia, Korea was greatly influenced by Chinese civilization. Korean students were educated in Confucian schools, and Korean culture took on the patriarchal character and traditions favored by Confucianism. China's meritocratic civil service system was incorporated into Korea's bureaucratic state system, and the Korean capital built by the Silla dynasty at Geumseong was modeled on the Tang capital at Chang'an.

China likewise influesnced ancient Japan, though less directly. In the sixth and seventh centuries, countless Korean artisans and craftspeople emigrated to Japan, where their knowledge was put to use. Foreign relations with Korea introduced Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century, and Japanese contact with China brought Confucianism to the island chain, as well as Chinese-influenced written language. Still, unique cultural traditions emerged in Japan, from Shintoism and the development of obscure forms of Buddhism to the institutions of *insei*, the samurai, and the shogun.

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10.7: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What group of people originated the Hindu caste system?

a. Aryans
b. Kshatriya
c. monks
d. Vedic Brahmans

2.
The ultimate goal of the Hindu caste system was to attain what?

a. dharma
b. karma
c. moksha
d. samsara

3.
The rulers of the Delhi Sultanate in India were followers of what religious tradition?

a. Christianity
b. Buddhism
c. Hinduism
d. Islam

4.
Yang Jian, founder of the Sui dynasty, was an adherent of what religious tradition?

a. Christianity
b. Buddhism
c. Hinduism
d. Islam

5.
What was the likely reason the aristocracy opposed the rule of Empress Wu Zetian?

a. She was female.
b. She was a peasant.
c. She was Hindu.
d. She opposed Confucian teachings.

6.
Why did Tang emperor Wuzong persecute Buddhist monks and nuns?

a. Buddhism was illegal under the Tang.
b. Wuzong believed Buddhism threatened the Confucian state and the imperial order.
c. Buddhist monks and nuns routinely protested the religious intolerance of the Tang.
d. Many civil servants in the bureaucracy were Buddhist, which threatened Tang control.

7.
Sumptuary laws enacted under the Tang emperor Gaozong were meant to achieve what purpose?

a. restrict the foods women could eat at the Tang Court
b. enshrine legal proscriptions on women scholars
c. tighten laws governing the types of clothes women could wear
d. censor the language used by female courtesans in the poetry they wrote

8.
Who were the successors to the Umayyads?

a. the Abbasids

b. the Sasanids
c. the Parthians
d. the Tang

9.
What was a key result of the Battle of Talas River?

a. the conquest of the Tang by the Abbasids
b. the end of Abbasid expansion into China
c. the spread of Hinduism
d. the conquest of the Abbasids by the Tang

10.
During the reign of what king did Aksum's trade with the African interior expand considerably, making the kingdom wealthy and powerful?

a. Prester John
b. Solomon
c. Ezna
d. Frumentius

11.
What was a key export from East Africa?

a. ivory
b. cotton
c. glassware
d. silk

12.
During the Middle Ages, what was a patrician in East Africa?

a. an African living in Arabia
b. a Muslim who could trace their Middle Eastern descent
c. a pagan who could trace their Middle Eastern descent
d. a settler on the east coast of Africa

13.
What kingdom succeeded because of its ability to monopolize trade through the Palk Strait?

a. Srivijaya
b. Chola
c. Swahili
d. Delhi Sultanate

14.
What group replaced the Sasanid Empire?

a. Tang
b. Umayyads
c. Abbasids
d. Byzantines

15.
What two religious traditions were practiced in Japan during the Yamato period?

a. Buddhism and Catholicism
b. Catholicism and Hinduism
c. Hinduism and Shintoism
d. Buddhism and Shintoism

16.
What Asian country did *not* adopt Chinese writing?

a. China
b. Japan
c. Korea
d. Sogdiana

17.
What was the language of the Silk Roads until the seventh century CE?

a. Chinese
b. Japanese
c. Sogdian
d. Korean

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10.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
In what ways did the Muslim rulers of the Delhi Sultanate embrace other cultures?
2.
How did the Grand Canal lead to greater centralization in China?
3.
In what ways did women thrive in Tang China?
4.
How did the Silk Roads help in the diffusion of culture?
5.
What were some of the risks faced by travelers along the Silk Roads? Why do you think these travelers would be willing to face these risks?
6.
How did the Kingdom of Aksum enhance trade in Africa during the early Middle Ages?
7.
How did trade along the Swahili coast connect the cultures of the African interior with those of East Asia?
8.
What cultural influences did China have on both Korea and Japan?
9.
How did the Silk Roads encourage the growth of Sogdiana?
10.
Why did Chinese culture spread to Japan by way of Korea?

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10.9: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
Why did the Indian subcontinent remain largely segmented and decentralized from the eighth through the tenth centuries, while many neighboring states (such as China) became increasingly centralized?
2.
Consider the role the internet now plays in international commerce. What are some of the similarities and differences between the internet and historic trade networks?
3.
How do the luxury goods of the late Middle Ages compare with our luxury goods today? If the Silk Roads still existed, what might be the most important goods traded along this route?
4.
Did the interactions between the Tang and Abbasid states positively affect one, both, or neither? Why?
5.
How did the arrival of Islam in South and Southeast Asia affect the indigenous populations there?
6.
In what ways did the cultural blending on the Swahili coast make it an ideal region of exchange between the east and the peoples of Africa?
7.
How did their relative openness to foreign innovation and culture affect the development of border states like Sogdiana, Japan, and Korea?
8.
How did states like Japan and Korea benefit from having common cultural traits in this era?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement

11.1: Introduction
11.2: The Post-Roman West in the Early Middle Ages
11.3: The Seljuk Migration and the Call from the East
11.4: Patriarch and Papacy- The Church and the Call to Crusade
11.5: The Crusading Movement
11.6: Key Terms
11.7: Section Summary
11.8: Review Questions
11.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
11.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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11.1: Introduction



Figure 13.1 *Harun al-Rashid Receiving a Delegation of Charlemagne*. The nineteenth-century German artist Julius Köckert painted this imaginary scene in which representatives of the Frankish Christian ruler Charlemagne (on horseback) meet with the Islamic ruler Harun al-Rashid (seated at left). Both leaders helped shape the history of western Afro-Eurasia in the post-Roman world. (credit: modification of work "Harun al-Rashid receiving a delegation of Charlemagne in Baghdad" by Maximilianeum Foundation/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

13.1 The Post-Roman West in the Early Middle Ages
13.2 The Seljuk Migration and the Call from the East
13.3 Patriarch and Papacy: The Church and the Call to Crusade
13.4 The Crusading Movement

Western Afro-Eurasia faced a number of challenges in the early Middle Ages, the period from about 500 to 1000 CE. With the collapse of Roman authority came a time of political instability and insecurity. Cities declined, and institutions of learning weakened. Western Europe became increasingly rural. Because there was no longer a strong centralized state to develop and police the roads, travel became more difficult and more dangerous, harming commerce. However, this is not the whole story. Trade and urban life flourished in the early Islamic kingdoms, which eventually extended from Spain to India. The Byzantine Greeks maintained some classical traditions, and their capital in Constantinople was a center of global trade for centuries. Germanic kings sought to form new alliances with Christian leaders and participate in world trade and diplomacy.

Perhaps no figure better exemplifies the merging of cultures in western Europe than Charlemagne, a Germanic ruler who reigned from 768 to 814. Charlemagne dreamed of reviving the Roman world in terms of territory, education, and art. Despite his belief in spreading Christianity through conquest, he sent embassies to Muslim leaders and even received the sumptuous gift of an elephant from the Abbasid ruler Harun al-Rashid in 802 (Figure 13.1). It might be tempting to see this period as one of just conflict, but as Charlemagne's reign demonstrates, it was also a dynamic time of merging cultures and social transformation.

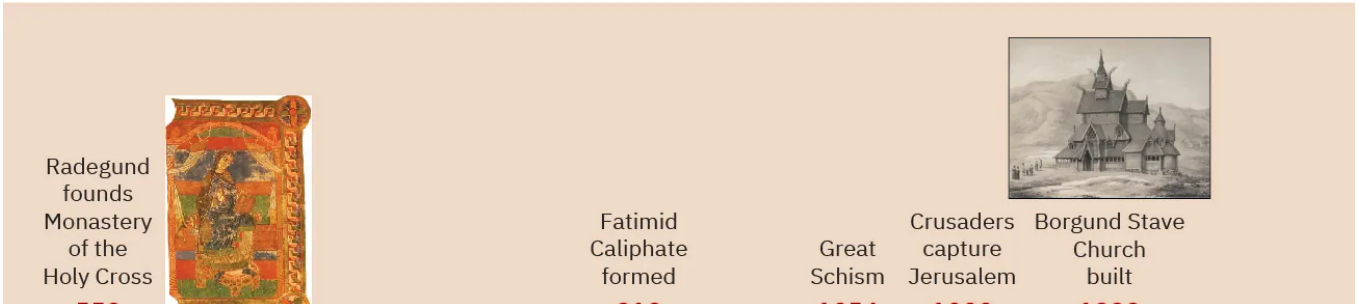


Figure 13.2 Timeline: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement. (credit "552": modification of work "Saint Radegonde" by Poitiers Municipal Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "800": modification of work "Emperor Charlemagne and Emperor Sigismund" by Germanisches Nationalmuseum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "910": modification of work Consécration de Cluny III par Urbain II" by Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1095": modification of work "Peter the Hermit Preaching the First Crusade" by Cassell's History of England, Vol. 1 (of 8)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1200": modification of work "Franz Wilhelm Schiertz Borgunds Kirke i Lærdal i Sogn" by Norge fremstillet i Tegninger fra Digitalarkivet/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

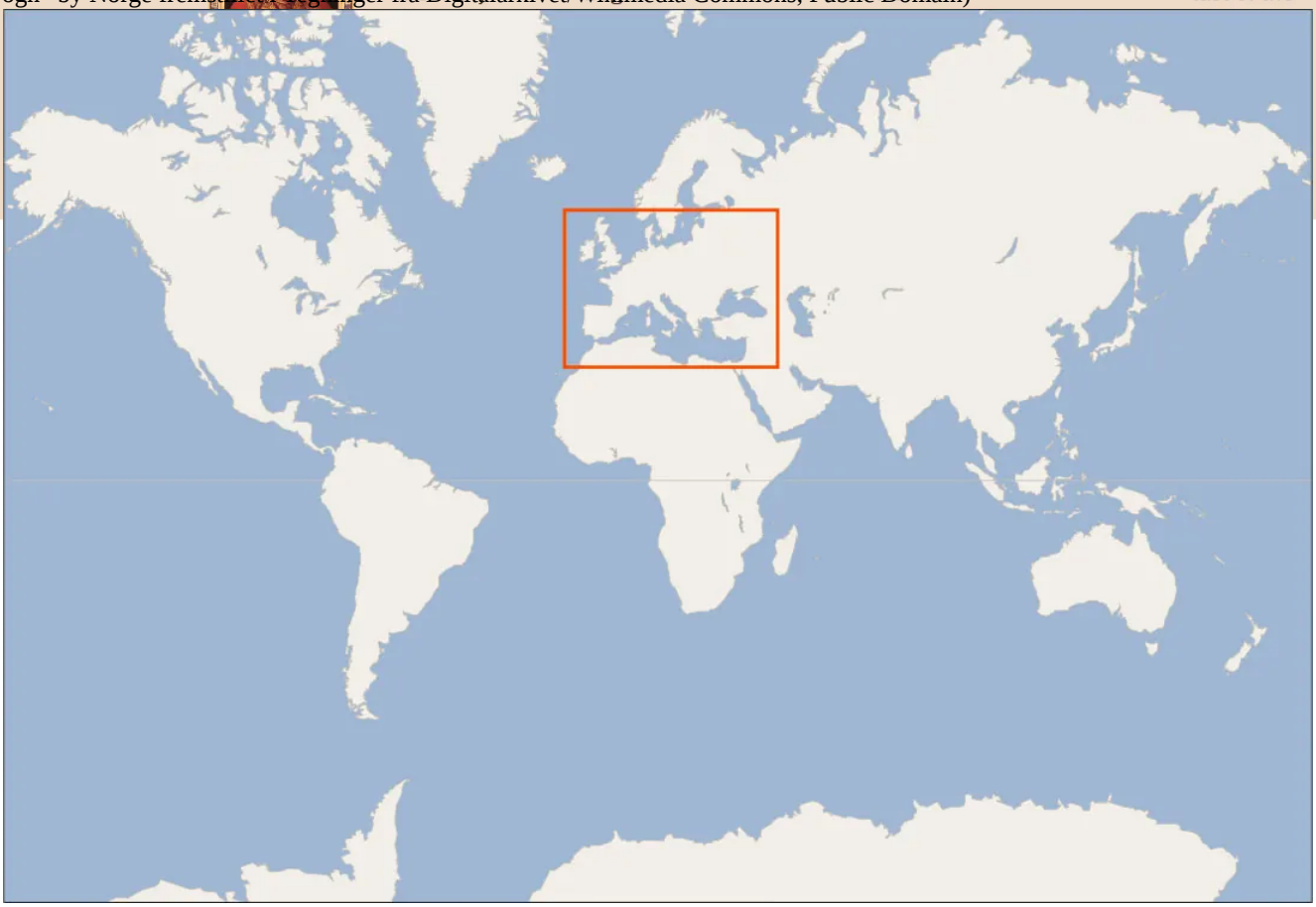


Figure 13.3 Locator Map: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement. (credit: modification of work "World map blank shorelines" by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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11.2: The Post-Roman West in the Early Middle Ages

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Analyze the foundations of medieval society that emerged in the post-Roman world
- Define feudalism in western Europe
- Describe the role of religion in medieval European culture and society
- Discuss the establishment of Muslim rule in western Europe and the religiously diverse society in Spain

Of all the regions in the post-Roman world, western Europe experienced arguably the most dramatic change. Its political order fragmented under Germanic warlords empowered mainly by their ability to provide loot for their followers. In this world of soldiers, the Roman church, directed by the pope, worked to secure military assistance from kings and convert various groups to Christianity. The church's goal was to ensure that its vision of Christian beliefs and practices eclipsed those of other sects such as the Arians, Christians who questioned the Roman church's basic tenet that Jesus was divine. The merging of these two antithetical cultures—the religious and the military—helped prepare the ground for a new civilization we call the medieval culture, which emerged between the end of Rome and the rise of the modern world.

Europe after the Roman Empire

There was no exact date when the Roman Empire fell, and the eastern half of the empire did not collapse until the fifteenth century. In fact, the Germanic peoples who settled in the former Roman Empire were not hostile to its culture, so in some places, Roman culture lasted longer than Roman political authority. Latin remained the language of the educated, for example, and Germanic peoples gradually adopted the Latin alphabet for their own languages, including English. Traditionally, though, the end of the empire is fixed at 476, when a German general named Odoacer deposed the emperor Romulus Augustulus and established himself not as a Roman emperor but as King of Italy. Even that date may be arbitrary, but by the late fifth century, traditional Roman authority had ceased to be the basis of political power in much of western Europe.

German Successor States

What replaced Roman political authority was the authority of the successor kingdoms (Figure 13.4). The Germanic peoples and the Roman population they conquered were able to create a new society by blending cultural traditions—a process called *acculturation*—in three ways. First, conversion to Christianity helped reduce differences between the two groups. Second, the Christian Church and the Roman aristocracy offered a useful example of bureaucratic organization and diplomacy that the successor kingdoms adopted. Finally, the erosion of Roman society enabled a new society to emerge in the Middle Ages. Although other Germanic kingdoms existed, those established by the Franks, Ostrogoths, and Visigoths demonstrate these three forms of acculturation most vividly.



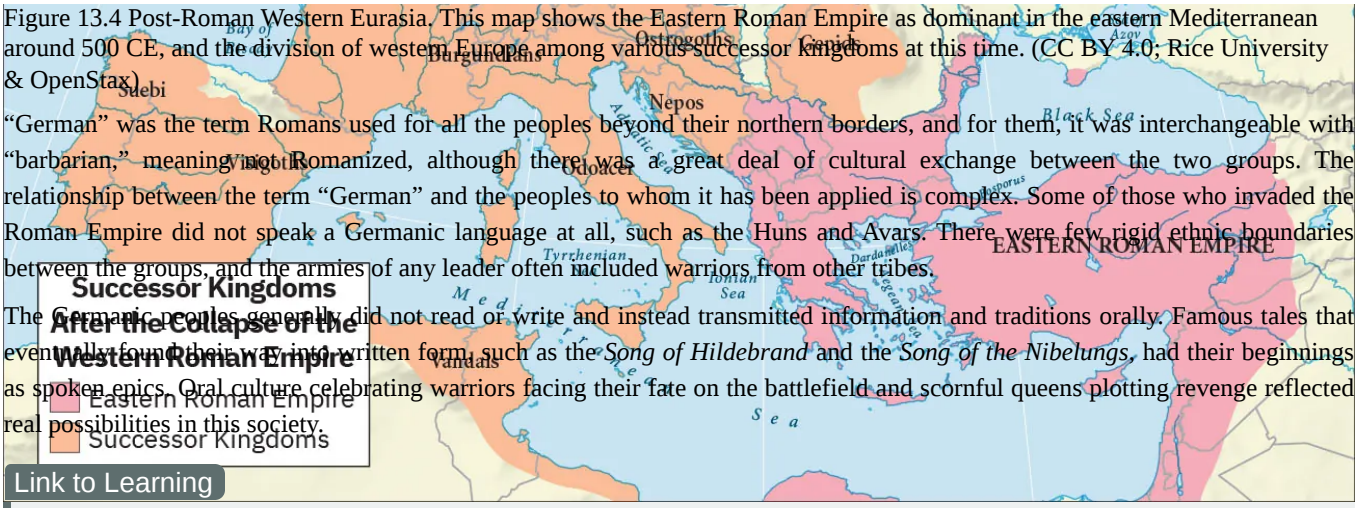


Figure 13.4 Post-Roman Western Eurasia. This map shows the Eastern Roman Empire as dominant in the eastern Mediterranean around 500 CE, and the division of western Europe among various successor kingdoms at this time. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

"German" was the term Romans used for all the peoples beyond their northern borders, and for them, it was interchangeable with "barbarian," meaning not Romanized, although there was a great deal of cultural exchange between the two groups. The relationship between the term "German" and the peoples to whom it has been applied is complex. Some of those who invaded the Roman Empire did not speak a Germanic language at all, such as the Huns and Avars. There were few rigid ethnic boundaries between the groups, and the armies of any leader often included warriors from other tribes.

The Germanic peoples generally did not read or write and instead transmitted information and traditions orally. Famous tales that eventually found their way into written form, such as the *Song of Hildebrand* and the *Song of the Nibelungs*, had their beginnings as spoken epics. Oral culture celebrating warriors facing their fate on the battlefield and scornful queens plotting revenge reflected real possibilities in this society.

Link to Learning

The Anglo-Saxon peoples who settled in the British Isles, a mix of many cultures including Germanic, are famous for their literary output, both in Latin and in their own language, now called Old English. In particular, they loved riddles. The following links present an Anglo-Saxon riddle 1 and riddle 2 related to food. Can you guess the answers?

Across all Germanic societies, warfare was an important tool for building social prestige. There were no formal hierarchies, so advancement was possible for any willing to serve a powerful chieftain or king. In return, leaders promised loot and the chance to do great deeds. A king who could not ensure material or social resources would lose followers and could not expect to be obeyed. While gold and glory motivated fighters and kings alike, Germanic law and custom tried to limit the destructive cycles of violence by instituting a "blood price" or *wergild*, under which the injured were compensated according to their social status. These laws tell us much about Germanic society. Chieftains and men of fighting age carried a higher blood price than older men, for example, and women of childbearing age were valued more than older women.

Women were often responsible for running the household and doing the bulk of the farming work, especially when men were called to fight or travel. Men might hunt, but their contributions were often the spoils of war, including enslaved people captured in battle who then worked in the household. Germanic society was fully patriarchal, and tribes like the Alemanni beat women whose clothes were deemed immodest (showing the leg above the knee). Germans were also often polygynous; men might have multiple wives at once and be able to divorce at will, while women's options were severely limited.

The Germans were polytheistic, worshipping various deities such as Wodan, a god of war, wisdom, and death, and his consort Frigg, a goddess of motherhood, marriage, and magic. By the third century, individual Germans were already converting to Christianity. Many, like the Goths and Vandals, adopted Arian Christianity, adhering to the teaching that Jesus and the Father were not identical entities. Once within the Roman Empire, they encountered competing forms of the faith that could become a source of further conflict with Christians and non-Christians alike.

As an example of acculturation, Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, was one of the most dynamic leaders of the post-Roman world. When he became King of Italy in 493, he relied on Roman aristocrats to administer his kingdom, such as the scholar and writer Cassiodorus and the historian and philosopher Boethius. Theodoric also rebuilt Roman infrastructure, including repairing aqueducts and city walls in his kingdom. He used diplomacy to secure alliances with other German kings, often through marriages. To form an alliance with the Franks, for instance, he himself wed Audofleda, the sister of Clovis I, king of the Franks, and he gave his daughters in marriage to other Germanic kings. Envisioning himself as the heir to Roman rule in the west, he maintained ties with the eastern Roman emperors and strove to revive trade with the eastern Mediterranean world. Despite the struggle to maintain order, most rulers attempted to connect with distant civilizations and learned from the peoples around them.

To create common bonds between Romans and Germans, Theodoric settled the Ostrogoths among the Roman population, although religious differences kept them from fully integrating. Toleration was possible and even desired in the early Middle Ages, but distrust between religious groups could spark outright violence and persecution. While he was an Arian Christian, Theodoric tolerated the Catholic population of Italy and attempted to mitigate conflict between the two groups until late in his reign, when his

distrust of Catholics led him to persecute them. After his death in 526, the Ostrogoths struggled in Italy, and invasion by both the Byzantines and new invaders called the Lombards left the land devastated and divided.

The most successful Germanic kingdom was that of the Franks. Clovis I, a member of the Merovingian dynasty, founded the kingdom in the early sixth century and offers a striking contrast to Theodoric. Ruthless and violent, Clovis was nevertheless a cunning leader who saw the advantages of diplomacy and the support of the Catholic Church and who was tolerant of religious differences until his conversion to Catholicism. He also worked with Gallo-Roman aristocrats and clergy to strengthen the administration of his kingdom and ensure that Roman institutions continued where they could. Shortly before his death, he convened the first council of Catholic bishops at Orleans, whose proclamations were binding on both the Gallo-Roman population and the Franks. In this case, religion helped unite the two groups.

Over time, the Merovingian rulers fell to violent infighting, leaving their sons or nephews as young and often ineffective successors. A chief source of conflict was the practice of partible inheritance, whereby each son received an equal share of his father's estate. Estates thus became smaller with each successive generation unless new lands were conquered, often by being taken from siblings, in-laws, or cousins. Kings without land and resources to offer as reward lost the ability to attract fighters. Real power lay with the aristocrats, and eventually a new dynasty called the Carolingians took control of the Frankish kingdom. With the support of the pope, Pépin le Bref (Pippin the Short) became the first Carolingian king of the Franks, deposing his Merovingian rival. In return, he confirmed a grant of lands in Italy to the pope. This grant, known as the Donation of Pepin, provided the legal basis for the establishment of the Papal States and helped ensure that the papacy, the set of administrative structures associated with the government of the Catholic Church, was not just a religious institution but also a territorial power (Figure 13.5).



Figure 13.5 The Donation of Pepin. An artist's rendering of the Donation of Pepin in 754, in which the pope granted legitimacy to Pépin le Bref as the first Carolingian king of the Franks in exchange for a grant of lands in Italy that would ensure the territorial power of the Papal States in the centuries to come. (credit: "The donation of Pepin the Short to Pope Stephen II (or Treaty of Quierzy)" by États pontificaux/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Their alliance with the popes allowed the Carolingian rulers to work independently of the Byzantine Empire, which became an important factor in their desire to conquer new territory and revive the idea of empire. It also indicates that even in the chaotic period after the collapse of Roman authority, diplomacy, religious movements, conflict, and opportunity still connected the Mediterranean world and western Europe.

Pépin's son Charles, known as Charlemagne ("Charles the Great"), was the most influential ruler in the early European Middle Ages and one of its best-known figures. Charlemagne was fortunate, as his father had been, in that he did not need to fight his siblings for control of the kingdom. He was tall and energetic and had a profound belief in his role as a Christian ruler, with a will to conquer others and convert them to Catholic Christianity. He campaigned nearly every year of his reign, conquering land and subjugating peoples across central Europe. He reorganized his government and attempted to revive learning, reform the church, and extend his influence beyond his own realm. His vast empire eventually extended from modern France to Germany, northern Italy, and parts of northern Spain and central Europe, uniting western Europe for the first time since the collapse of Roman authority. On Christmas Day in the year 800, Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III. This coronation angered Byzantine rulers and set the stage for conflict between east and west in their quest for prestige and territory. It also enabled both cooperation and conflict between popes and emperors, because each saw an advantage in working together to fight mutual enemies.

In Their Own Words

Charlemagne Receives an Elephant

This excerpt from *Vita Karoli Magni*, or *The Life of Charles the Great*, describes how the Abbasid ruler Harun al-Rashid sent Charlemagne an elephant as a gift. The writer is the scholar Einhard, who knew Charlemagne personally, served in his administration, and considered Charlemagne a great king, often excusing his faults and praising his accomplishments.

> *It added to the glory of his reign by gaining the good will of several kings and nations; so close, indeed, was the alliance that he contracted with Alfonso [II 791–842] King of Galicia and Asturias, that the latter, when sending letters or ambassadors to Charles, invariably styled himself his man. His munificence won the kings of the Scots also to pay such deference to his wishes that they never gave him any other title than lord or themselves than subjects and slaves: there are letters from them extant in which these feelings in his regard are expressed. His relations with Aaron [Harun al-Rashid, 786–809], King of the Persians, who ruled over almost the whole of the East, India excepted, were so friendly that this prince preferred his favor to that of all the kings and potentates of the earth, and considered that to him alone marks of honor and munificence were due. Accordingly, when the ambassadors sent by Charles to visit the most holy sepulcher and place of resurrection of our Lord and Savior presented themselves before him with gifts, and made known their master's wishes, he not only granted what was asked, but gave possession of that holy and blessed spot. When they returned, he dispatched his ambassadors with them, and sent magnificent gifts, besides stuffs, perfumes, and other rich products of the Eastern lands. A few years before this, Charles had asked him for an elephant, and he sent the only one that he had. The Emperors of Constantinople, Nicephorus [I 802–811], Michael [I, 811–813], and Leo [V, 813–820], made advances to Charles, and sought friendship and alliance with him by several embassies; and even when the Greeks suspected him of designing*

> *to wrest the empire from them, because of his assumption of the title Emperor, they made a close alliance with him, that he might have no cause of offense. In fact, the power of the Franks was always viewed by the Greeks and Romans with a jealous eye, whence the Greek proverb 'Have the Frank for your friend, but not for your neighbor.'*
>
> *—"Einhard: The Life of Charlemagne," translated by Samuel Epes Turner*

- How distant are the territories Einhard mentions? What does this suggest about medieval communication?
- Why might Einhard emphasize that Harun al-Rashid favored Charlemagne above all others? What does the gift of the elephant signify?
- Why were the Greek rulers anxious about Charlemagne?

Like Theodoric, Charlemagne was more than a conqueror. He hoped to revive Roman institutions, reform the church, and convert people to Christianity. The period of intellectual activity and reorganization of educational and religious institutions that began in his reign is often called the Carolingian Renaissance, meaning a "rebirth" of culture and learning (and "Carolingian" being a reference to Charlemagne). The Carolingian aristocracy supported the building of new palaces and monasteries and promoted artists to decorate these buildings as well as to illustrate (or "illuminate") books, and the increased emphasis on learning was a way to ensure that the court of the Carolingians was filled with highly educated advisers and associates (Figure 13.6).



Figure 13.6 *In Praise of the Holy Cross*. This page from the ninth-century poetry collection *In Praise of the Holy Cross* shows its author, the Frankish monk and teacher Rabanus Maurus (left), presenting the book to Otgar, archbishop of Mainz (seated at right). The connection between books, clergy, and art is a hallmark of cultural works from the Carolingian era. (credit: "Raban Maur (left), supported by Alcuin (middle), dedicates his work to Archbishop Otgar of Mainz (Right)" by De laudibus sanctae crucis/ Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Intellectuals and monks flocked to Charlemagne's court, where they put their talents to use copying the classical works of ancient Greek and Roman authors and serving in the emperor's administration. One of the most important of these scholars was Alcuin of

York, an Anglo-Saxon who perfected the Carolingian minuscule script. This standard form of handwriting was clearer and easier to read than earlier Roman and Merovingian forms. Carolingian scholars also popularized punctuation marks, like the sentence-ending period. These innovations made it easier for people to learn Latin and contributed to the revival of classical education.

Charlemagne was also a globally minded ruler. He corresponded with the Byzantine rulers, received gifts from the Abbasid caliph, and facilitated the trade of enslaved people taken on his eastern frontier with Al-Andalus (modern Spain).

The Collapse of the Carolingian Empire and the Rise of Feudal Society

Charlemagne's empire did not last. The emperor was succeeded by his son Louis the Pious, who continued the revival of learning and was deeply involved in church reform. Members of the church's hierarchy, like the monk Benedict of Aniane, believed that both spiritual and administrative matters had declined, so Louis gave Benedict authority to reform all monasteries in the Frankish empire by promoting the strict observance of rules about what monks could eat and when and how they should work and pray. Carolingian reformers took inspiration from the monks of Ireland, who brought with them both their ascetic style of religious practice and their handsomely copied books of classical literature. The reform of the monasteries thus helped to preserve Carolingian cultural developments and classical learning.

Louis's religious and intellectual projects were influential, but the weaknesses of the Carolingian state worked against him. He was not viewed as the imposing warrior his father had been, so soldiers looked elsewhere for glory and loot. And his sons, impatient to rule, rebelled against him in his lifetime. They eventually forced him to abdicate, and under the principle of partible inheritance, in 843 they divided the empire among them in an agreement called the Treaty of Verdun.

The Frankish empire became three territories: the Kingdom of the West Franks (west of the Rhine River), the Kingdom of the East Franks (east of the Rhine), and a middle region called Lotharingia that included Italy. None of Louis's sons found the settlement acceptable, and their need for more land to reward their supporters ensured further conflict. When they died, their own sons faced diminished holdings, and an ever-increasing need to wage war ensured that the stability of the kingdoms weakened. Thus, Charlemagne and Louis's efforts to resurrect the Roman Empire as a Christian state guided by Germanic leaders crumbled.

These internal problems were worsened by external ones, especially new invaders emboldened by the collapse of Carolingian strength. From the east came nomadic raiders, the Magyars, a non-Germanic people who migrated from the steppes of central Asia. At the end of the ninth century, they settled in what is today Hungary, and from there they launched devastating raids for plunder into Germany. Only in 955 did the German king Otto the Great manage to break the power of the Magyars at the Battle of Lechfeld. From the south, the fragmentation of Islamic political unity led petty rulers to raid the now-weakened coasts of Christian Europe. North African dynasties like the Aghlabids pushed into Sicily in the ninth century, and by 846, Islamic raiders had sacked churches on the outskirts of Rome.

Perhaps more famous today than the Magyars and Islamic raiders were the Norse who raided northern Europe from Scandinavia, called the Vikings. The peoples of Scandinavia, who spoke Germanic languages, had a culture similar to that of the Germanic peoples who settled in the Roman Empire. For example, Scandinavians were polytheistic, worshipping gods like Odin and Freyja who were similar to earlier Germanic deities like Wodan and Frigg. The aristocracy practiced polygyny (having many wives), and local chieftains rewarded their followers with lands and gifts. The growth of the population in the eighth century and the relative lack of arable land in Scandinavia compelled groups of Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes to travel in search of plunder. Some went eastward, using their shallow-drought ships (ships that could navigate rivers), and made trading connections along the Dnieper River, establishing settlements at Kiev that eventually became one of the first Russian states. They reached Constantinople, and some served as the personal bodyguard to the Byzantine ruler. These Vikings were known as Varangians, and they settled in eastern Europe. Although violent, they were also traders, interested in paving the way for new settlements and connections beyond western Europe.

In the west, the arrival of the Norse raiders was less benign. They attacked in small groups that could travel far upriver and surprise settlements, destroy them, and be gone before resistance could be organized. They specifically targeted churches and monasteries, not only for their loot but also because they lacked defenses. Vikings destroyed the monastery of Lindisfarne in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, which had been a celebrated center of learning. Their reputation for ferocity may have been exaggerated by clerical authors, but the sudden nature of the violent raids, and the inability of Frankish or Anglo-Saxon armies to defeat them, instilled fear in the population of western Europe.

Eventually, the Norse raiders began to settle in regions rather than just raid them. In 865, a substantial army of Vikings invaded Britain and destroyed most of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms except for Wessex. In 911, they settled in northern France, establishing the duchy of Normandy. By the end of the tenth century, Vikings had also established settlements throughout the British Isles, including Ireland and Scotland, farther west in Iceland and Greenland, and even (though briefly) in North America. Not just raiders, they promoted trade throughout northern Europe and beyond, extending their trading routes to the Byzantine Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate. Like the earlier Germanic peoples, they eventually converted to Roman Christianity, and their kings began to build more centralized kingdoms that enabled them to curb the violence of the raiders. Their conversion did not mean a wholesale abandonment of their existing culture and tradition. Early Scandinavian churches were decorated with images of heroes and villains from Norse mythology. This overlap of tradition and innovation reflects the persistence of cultural exchange between Germanic peoples and Greek and Roman cultures that created the foundation for medieval society.

Beyond the Book

Norse Art and Christian Architecture

Stave churches were Christian churches built in Scandinavia early in the period of conversion to Christianity. Their interior and exterior decoration often depicted themes and images from the pre-Christian era, such as heroes from the sagas of the Vikings. The Borgund Stave Church, built around 1200 in Norway, is adorned with four dragon heads on the top ridges of the roof (Figure 13.7).



Figure 13.7 Borgund Stave Church. This nineteenth-century rendering of Borgund Stave Church was made by the Norwegian author Christian Tønsberg. (credit: “Franz Wilhelm Schiertz Borgunds Kirke i Lærdal i Sogn” by Norge fremstillet i Tegninger fra Digitalarkivet/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- Why would people converting to Christianity want to keep art and imagery from their earlier history?
- Why would Christian clergy accept pre-Christian images to decorate their churches?
- What appeal and use would such imagery have for both the religious authorities and the patrons who designed medieval churches? What about for the newly converted?

In the ashes of the Carolingian world, medieval Europe embraced a social system called feudalism that emerged from the basic need for security and was defined by unequal relationships. Looking to protect their territories and their peasants, lords began to grant lands to fighters as their *fiefs*, whose produce the warriors could enjoy so long as they served the lord. For their part, fighters

became *vassals* of the lord, sworn to perform service in exchange for the land. This service was chiefly military in nature, but it could also include other obligations like advising the lord and attending his court when called. Bishoprics and monasteries behaved the same way; abbots and abbesses could be lords who were owed service and also owed service to greater lords.

While feudalism was not a political system, warriors owed service to lords who owed service to the king, who in theory was the largest landowner in the kingdom and the guarantor of rights and privileges. For example, the late Carolingian king Charles the Simple granted the Duchy of Normandy to the Viking leader Rollo, so long as Rollo protected northern France from other Vikings. However, the need to placate their feudal lords ensured that kings gave away lands and privileges, often weakening them and driving them to look for ways to maximize their resources. They might consider advantageous marriages, for example, in which women were expected to bring a dowery of property or money. In other cases, crushing rebellious vassals was a way of taking back needed land.

On their fiefs, the warriors oversaw the work of agricultural laborers. Some laborers might own their own land and be self-directed, but most in western Europe were unfree, servile laborers called serfs who were tied to the land. They were not enslaved and could not be bought or sold, but they occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder, could be physically abused by the lord, were forced to provide labor and goods for the lord, and rarely had any rights a lord was obligated to acknowledge. All these limitations existed despite the serfs' being the largest class of people in European society at the time (Figure 13.8).



Figure 13.8 Medieval European Society. This illuminated initial letter from a thirteenth-century French manuscript shows the key members of the medieval European social order: a member of the clergy, a warrior, and a laborer (left to right). (credit: "Cleric-Knight-Workman/MS Sloane 2435, folio 85" by British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The lord was required to protect the serfs, resolve their disputes, and administer their work. Serfs owed their lord a set number of days of service a year (these were many) and could not leave the land, marry, or undertake other work without the lord's permission. Under manorialism or the manor system, named for the manor house occupied by the lord, serfs (or other varieties of servile, unfree workers) were brought together into villages where their labor could be cooperative. They tended both their own and their lord's land, sharing draft animals and farm implements to undertake the planting and harvesting of crops. Women tended smaller livestock and vegetable gardens near their homes. Although cities on the coast often maintained commercial or networking

ties with each other, society in western Europe was overwhelmingly rural, and production was largely at the subsistence level. People produced what they were going to consume, and surplus went to the lord or the church as a mandatory tax, usually 10 percent, called the *tithe*.

This system of social obligations and ties between the serfs and their lords, and the lords and the kings, framed the economic and political world of the Middle Ages. By the tenth century, the old Roman Empire was largely forgotten by the general population, while medieval kings and nobles had reimaged and transformed the idea of the Roman Empire to serve and legitimize their own purposes. A new society began to emerge based on a combination of Roman, Christian, and Germanic traditions.

Religion and Society in Medieval Europe

While Christianity had developed in an atmosphere of antagonism to the Roman state, by the fifth century, the church had become the preserver of classical Greek and Roman law, literature, and philosophical ideas. Language and cultural differences existed between the eastern and western churches, and in the eighth century, their political and theological ties became strained. One dispute was over the use of images in Christian worship, which the popes supported but some emperors rejected. The popes had also been building up an argument for their supremacy over the church, based partly in scripture and partly in tradition. Early medieval popes like Leo I laid the groundwork for the power of the Bishops of Rome, a power the eastern churches largely rejected or ignored. Once they had made an alliance with the Frankish kings, however, the popes looked to western Europe for the church's future.

The papacy was not the only church institution in Europe; local traditions and needs shaped a variety of Christian beliefs and practices in the early Middle Ages. There were three ways in which the church helped transform the old Roman world into the new. First, the institutional church, often under the guidance of the popes, worked to convert the Germanic peoples to Christianity. Second, it helped to preserve the classical tradition. Finally, it worked with the new rulers to help legitimize their rule and Christianize their populations.

Missionary work was undertaken by men and women devoted to Christian beliefs and intent on incorporating new peoples into the society of Christian nations. Pope Gregory (also known as Gregory the Great) commissioned monks from Italy, led by Augustine of Canterbury, to convert the Anglo-Saxons. (Monks are men who do not marry, often live in community with each other, and devote their lives to serving God. Their female counterparts are called nuns.) The laity (nonclergy) often engaged in missionary work, and the wives of kings were especially influential in promoting widespread conversion to Christianity. Contemporaries noted the success of Clothilde's persuasion in the conversion of her husband King Clovis, and Bertha, the wife of King Ethelbert of Kent, likewise encouraged her husband to convert. Both supported the efforts of the missionary (and later bishop) Augustine of Canterbury. Missionaries often worked closely with Christian rulers, whose conversion could be critical in expanding the frontiers of Catholic Christianity.

Monasticism (the way monks live and their communal institutions) had developed in the Mediterranean world and flourished in western Europe among religious men and women. The most influential monastic leader was Benedict of Nursia, who composed a guidebook or "rule" for monastic life that stressed moderation, a balance between prayer and useful work, the self-sufficiency of communities, and enough education for monks to copy out books in Latin. Many communities were "double monasteries," containing a community of men and a community of women and often operating under the regulation of an abbess. Monasticism gave women a role in society that was not based on their relationship to a father or husband, and some women enjoyed considerable influence as abbesses. Radegund was a Frankish queen who fled the court when her husband murdered her brother. She became famous as the founder and abbess of the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Poitiers and was widely venerated as a saint after her death. Women like Radegund found religious life preferable to the intrigue of the court and the whims of a violent husband (Figure 13.9).



Figure 13.9 Queen Radegund. This eleventh-century image shows Radegund, queen of the Franks and later founder of a monastery, seated with a book, demonstrating her learning and piety. Religious women like Radegund were influential in the Middle Ages. (credit: “Saint Radegonde” by Poitiers Municipal Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Monastic communities were often critical to the preservation of learning in the post-Roman world. There, monks copied out books by hand to foster the work of missionaries and preserve knowledge they thought was useful from the ancient world. Monasteries also served as refuges in times of crisis and could become valued centers of administration and nodes in communications networks. They were often the only place for the training of priests to serve newly converted peoples. While bishops were the undisputed authorities, especially the bishop of Rome (the pope), monasticism was equally crucial for both missionary work and the development of a Christian population.

Finally, Christianity helped legitimize new rulers. Germanic kings could better integrate themselves with their Roman population once they converted to the Catholic Christianity their subjects practiced. Bishops could serve as administrators, and monasteries were places of education for the new elite. One issue raised by the career of Charlemagne, though, was the relationship between rulers and the papacy. Leo III had crowned Charlemagne, and clergy often performed an anointing ceremony when a king was invested with the symbols of office.

Aside from the rivalry between the eastern and western churches, an important non-Christian religion was present in the form of Judaism, which was given latitude by the Romans on account of its antiquity. With the collapse of Rome and the growing dominion of Catholic Christianity, however, Jewish communities faced new challenges as clergy and kings instituted restrictions on their behavior and practices. Christians often viewed Jewish people as outsiders no matter how long they may have lived in a given area. The mistaken belief that Jewish people were to blame for the death of Jesus led to rumors that they wanted to harm Christians. In some cases, as in Visigothic Spain, Jewish residents faced the threat of either converting to Christianity or being expelled from the kingdom. Hostility was never uniform, however, and kings like Louis the Pious granted Jewish people considerable freedoms. Rulers might also feel compelled to protect Jewish communities because of their connections, especially trade connections, to other communities across the Mediterranean. Still, the position of Jewish communities in the Middle Ages was often precarious.

The Iberian Peninsula and the World of Al-Andalus

Like the Ostrogoths, Visigoth rulers attempted to emulate Roman institutions in Spain by creating written law codes, but their relationship with their Hispano-Roman subjects was largely uneasy, and unlike Theodoric and Clovis, they tended to remain apart from them. The Visigoths were Arian Christians who tolerated their non-Arian subjects, but the need to better integrate themselves with the population eventually compelled King Recared to convert to Catholicism and gain the support of the church. In 711, however, the armies of the Umayyad Caliphate crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and overran the kingdom.

The Umayyad armies that invaded Spain never succeeded in controlling the entire peninsula, just as the Visigoths had not. Christian kingdoms persisted in the north, though they were weak and often fought with each other. Another reason was that non-Arabic soldiers, like the North African Amazigh (Berbers), always felt shortchanged when Arab leaders divided the spoils of conquest. This ethnic and regional conflict played an important role in the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty, but it also led an offshoot of it to take root in Spain.

The Muslims called the region Al-Andalus, and it was governed by members of the Umayyad dynasty who had fled the collapse of their power when the Abbasid dynasty overthrew them. Abd al-Rahman I, fleeing the destruction of his family in Syria, capitalized on the discontent felt by non-Arab soldiers following the conquest of Spain. With their help, he was able to build alliances and defeat his enemies to become the ruler of Al-Andalus. He established his capital at the city of Cordoba and began to form a new society, based on Islamic law and dedicated to expanding into Christian territory. Abd al-Rahman and his successors created a remarkable community that was multireligious and multiethnic and that sustained diplomatic and commercial ties throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, a testament to the global context of the early Middle Ages. Soon Cordoba rivaled Constantinople and Baghdad as a center of trade, learning, and the arts. Connections to North Africa and the Middle East ensured the revival of trade and, consequently, the revival of urban life (Figure 13.10).

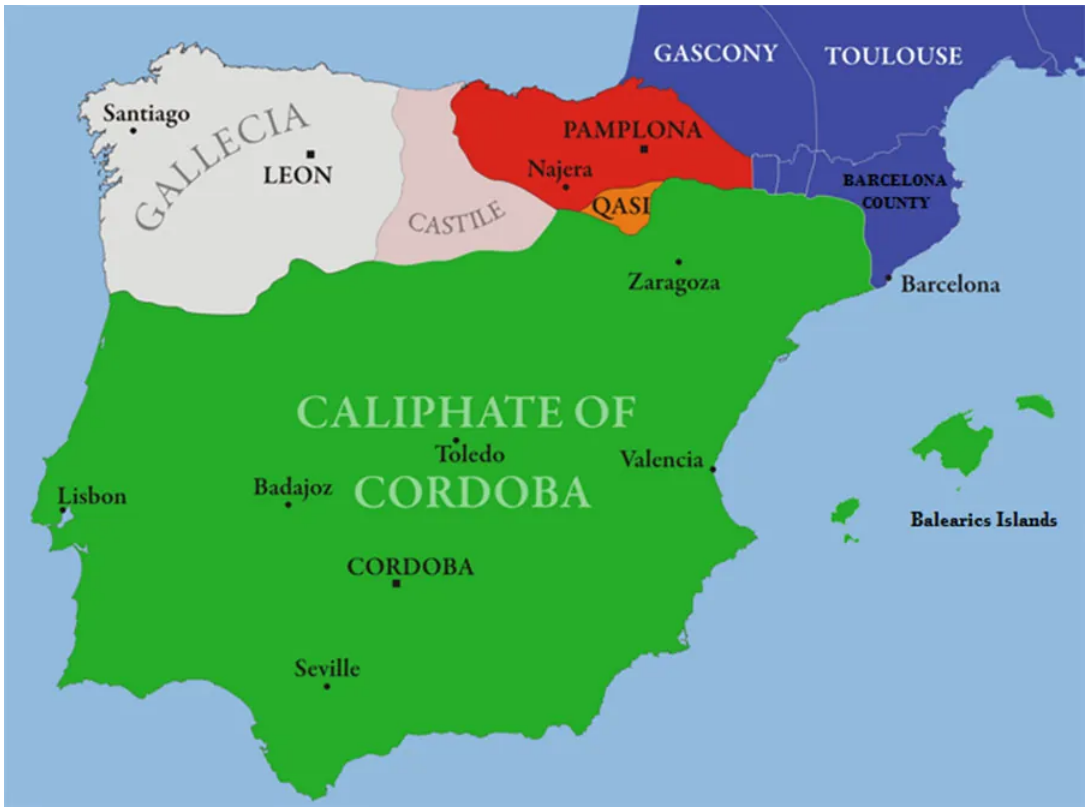


Figure 13.10 Medieval Cordoba. This map shows (in green) the extent of the Caliphate of Cordoba in Iberia at its height in the tenth century, but with Christian kingdoms still controlling the north. (credit: "Al Andalus & Christian Kingdoms" by Alexandre Vigo/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Many Christians there, whether they converted or not, adopted Islamic culture by speaking Arabic, dressing as their Amazigh and Arab rulers did, and adopting their practices. For this reason, they are called "Mozarabs." In some ways, this period, in which Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people lived and worked in proximity, is a good example of medieval toleration, but violence by the dominant group, as we have seen in the conflict between Arians and Catholics, was always possible.

Al-Andalus reached its peak in the tenth century. It was a dynamic society whose population prospered and created its own hybrid culture from the ways of the ethnic and religious peoples who lived in the Iberian Peninsula. Under Abd al-Rahman III, trade expanded into sub-Saharan Africa and across the Mediterranean. This link to the broader Mediterranean world enabled contacts that were often absent from the Germanic kingdoms and brought new agricultural goods like citrus fruit, sugar, and cotton to the peninsula from as far away as India. Cordoba became famed for its orange, lime, and lemon groves.

The growth of trade and commerce also encouraged the revival of cities, another difference from the Germanic kingdoms. By the year 1000, for example, Cordoba had nearly 100,000 inhabitants, making it one of the most populous cities in Europe. Its close connections to the Mediterranean world brought scholars, craftspeople, merchants, and emigrants in greater numbers than to the Germanic north. Even so, Germanic merchants and traders also made connections with Spanish states, those ruled by Christians and by Muslims.

The caliphs established schools of Islamic jurisprudence and hired scholars and linguists to help administer the kingdom. These scholars scoured Spain for older Greek and Latin manuscripts to translate. Jewish and Christian scholars also found the caliphate a place of learning, and a flowering of Jewish religious thought and poetry developed. Under Islamic law, Christians and Jewish people were considered "protected." This meant that because they also believed in one God, they could not be compelled to convert so long as they did not challenge the beliefs of Muslims. Some historians have viewed this period of toleration, now called *convivencia* ("living together"), as a particular example of coexistence and nonviolent interaction among people of different faiths. The antagonism of the Christian kingdoms in the north, however, and the growth of zealous Islamic leaders in North Africa show that once again, while toleration was always possible, it depended on the presence of willing leaders for whom peace was desirable. When conflict between Christians and Muslins was exacerbated, religious tensions could make toleration less desirable. Islamic

dynasties and Christian rulers who found religious identity a source of inspiration for warriors, for instance, whittled away at *convivencia*.

Dueling Voices

Convivencia and the Memory of Al-Andalus

Convivencia describes the time during the early Middle Ages in which different faiths in Al-Andalus experienced a peaceful coexistence. The name was developed in the early twentieth century and is associated with the Spanish historian Américo Castro, who believed the toleration he saw in the medieval world could serve as a contrast to the political and ethnic problems in his own time. For example, rulers like the famous Rodrigo "El Cid" de Vivar found it wise to keep both Muslim and Christian allies in order to consolidate their control over territory. Muslim rulers also found it difficult to simply wipe out Christian kingdoms in the north, so compromises were made between religious goals and political realities that permitted toleration to exist between Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people. Seen in this light, medieval Spain offered an example of people of different ethnicities and religions living in harmony.

When the last Muslim kingdom fell in 1492, Christian rulers reversed course and instituted policies of intolerance to ensure that Catholicism became a central part of Spanish identity. For this reason, the history of Spain could be written in terms of the triumph of Spanish Christians over non-Christian communities. Some historians instead point to Al-Andalus as a period of general toleration between groups, of *convivencia*, as a new way of framing Spain's history. Still others believe this is a romanticized view of a period when religious hostility contributed to armed conflict and violence. The legacy of Al-Andalus and *convivencia* is still being shaped by modern conversations about religion, toleration, community identity, and the past.

- What conditions favored religious toleration in the early medieval examples you have encountered so far? What conditions tended to push rulers to demand greater religious conformity?
- Why would religion be so important to identity in the medieval world?

Despite the ongoing toleration that rulers of one faith could show to subjects of another, conflicts between rulers of different faiths persisted. The Islamic rulers of Al-Andalus succeeded in disrupting the Christian kingdoms in the north of the peninsula until the eleventh century. For example, in the 990s, the powerful general al-Mansur sacked Barcelona on the eastern coast and Leon in the northwest, both important centers of Christian political power. Despite its successes in the north, however, the Caliphate of Cordoba collapsed due to infighting after the death of al-Mansur, and regional aristocrats broke up the unity of Al-Andalus, creating smaller successor states that often fought as much against each other (and in alliance with Christian fighters) as against Christianity. The conflicts in the eleventh century were still largely about knights, fast-moving heavily armored soldiers on horseback, winning plunder and fame, but the stage was set for wars of cultural conquest and the struggle for religious supremacy. The destruction of the Christian states in Spain had gained the attention of the popes, and this helped shape the church's promotion of a religiously sanctioned fight against Islam.

Link to Learning

Use this link to hear a journalist interview people about the legacy of toleration during the period of Muslim rule in Spain, when it was called Al-Andalus. Note how the issues of toleration and acceptance shape the way people view the past.

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11.3: The Seljuk Migration and the Call from the East

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain why the Islamic world began to fragment along political and religious lines
- Contrast the Fatimids and Seljuks with other Islamic states
- Discuss the challenges the Byzantine Empire faced prior to the First Crusade

The Abbasid Caliphate was a remarkable state that increased both the wealth of Islam and Muslims communities' contacts with peoples across Afro-Eurasia, from China to sub-Saharan Africa. Wealthy, cosmopolitan, and deeply influenced by Persian culture, the Abbasid caliphs invested heavily in reviving science and literature. However, the complications of ruling a large empire ensured that challengers from within the empire and beyond would eventually wear them down. The Abbasids, their Islamic competitors, and a powerful new Turkic empire set the stage for conflict with the Byzantine Empire and the Christian kingdoms of Europe.

The Breakdown of Abbasid Authority and the Turkic Migration

Having overthrown the Umayyad caliphs, the Abbasid rulers moved east, establishing a capital at Baghdad. There the ruling elite were able to foster a time of immense creativity and intellectual achievement that allowed cultures, languages, and ethnicities to blend in the course of building an empire.

The Abbasid Caliphate kept intact the Persian and Byzantine administrative apparatus, which ensured wealth for the elite and promoted the revival of cities and trade. While Arabic continued as the language of administration and religion, Persian language and literary forms also began to influence Arabic and helped to create a rich tradition of both secular and religious works, housed at the Great Library of Baghdad. The caliphate became cosmopolitan. Syriac Christians translated Greek works into Arabic, Persians served as administrators, and Jewish people and Christians alike were bankers and physicians. Wealth flowed in from the trading routes that connected the Mediterranean with India and China, and Baghdad became the center of the empire, a cosmopolitan city with a reputation as a place of learning, commerce, and trade. (Figure 13.11)



Figure 13.11 The Abbasid Caliphate. This map shows the Abbasid Caliphate in 850, with areas listed either by their regional name in Arabic or by the ruling dynasty. The caliphate stretched from the territory in North Africa held by the Aghlabids in the west to the region of Transoxiana in the east. The heartland was in Iraq in the center. (credit: modification of work "Abbasid Caliphate 850AD" by "Cattette"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

The early Abbasid caliphs were successful in establishing a centralized administration and easing some of the ethnic tension that had undone the Umayyad dynasty. Other problems went unresolved, however, and new ones arose that the Abbasid rulers struggled to manage. To create an army that was loyal solely to the Abbasid ruler, early ninth-century caliphs began to use enslaved men of Turkic origins. These soldiers, called mamluks, were often young boys taken from their homes, converted to Islam, and trained as soldiers. Their education was provided and their social status assured; in return, they were expected to be loyal to the caliph alone.

The mamluks were initially useful for quelling rebellions, attacking Byzantine rivals, and enabling caliphs such as al-Mutasim to gain some security against hostile aristocrats. Al-Mutasim's predecessors had tried to strike a balance between Persian and Arab elites, but his own power rested on the militaristic force of the mamluks. The wealth and favor shown the military, however, and especially to these Turkic soldiers, only served to erode the caliph's position with the traditional elite. To solve this problem, al-Mutasim moved his capital from Baghdad to Samarra in northern Mesopotamia in order to segregate the Turkic soldiers from the rest of the population. After his death, the mamluks supported different successors in a vicious civil war that lasted nearly ten years. Their power and influence had become a permanent fixture in the Abbasid heartland.

The Abbasid rulers also faced religious divisions and criticism, even as the cosmopolitan nature of the caliphate sparked the growth of speculative philosophy and rationalizing thought. For example, philosophers like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina delved deeply into the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, including their systems of logic and medicine. They promoted new ways of approaching philosophy and made contributions to science, law, and theology that later influenced the thought of Christian philosophers in Europe. These Islamic scholars translated ancient philosophical texts into Arabic that Christian scholars later translated into Latin. However, the fact that these two leading figures were not Arabs, and that they applied human reason to the truths of Islam, antagonized religious conservatives and fostered discontent with the worldly caliphs. The Abbasid cultural renaissance was a remarkable achievement, but the Abbasid leadership was not celebrated by all.

One of the most important and enduring religious developments in the Abbasid period was the growth of a mystical form of Islam known as Sufism. Sufism was organized into "brotherhoods," each of which followed the teachings and practices of its founders in the pursuit of heartfelt and personal worship of God. Sufis behaved like monks in other religions, renouncing the artificial performance of religious duties, as well as luxury and worldliness, to embrace a life dedicated to mystical union with God. Some Sufis also rejected the rationalization of religion and criticized the incorporation of Greek philosophy into Islamic theology. Though Sufism was not a political movement, its search for spiritual purity and rejection of classical philosophy weakened the position of the Abbasids.

In Their Own Words

Poetry from the Abbasid Period

Omar Khayyam was a mathematician, philosopher, and poet who lived during the transition from Abbasid rule to the rise of the Seljuk Turks. He is famous for writing poetry that was often controversial in its day, so much so that he was accused of being irreligious at the Seljuk court. For example, drinking wine was forbidden by the Quran, but Khayyam often refers to drinking wine in terms that seem both literal and metaphorical. Other contemporaries viewed his poetry as reflecting the Sufi value of moving beyond external religious conformity to a more personal spirituality.

Following are excerpts from his most famous work, *The Rubaiyat*. Khayyam uses imagery related to drinking to express both the joy of life and its fleeting nature. He also considers life experience more precious than formal education, showing a disdain for the teachings of sages and scholars. (Note: The word *sans* is French for "without," and a *muezzin* is the person who makes the call to prayer five times a day at a mosque.)

> *XXI*
> *Lo! some we loved, the loveliest and best*
> *That Time and Fate or all their Vintage pressed,*
> *Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,*

And one by one crept silently to rest.
XXII
And we, that now make merry in the Room
They left, and Summer dresses in new bloom,
Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth
Descend- ourselves to make a Couch- for whom?
XXIII
Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and- sans End!
XXIV
Alike for those who TO-DAY prepare
And those that after some TO-MORROW stare,
A Muzzein from the Tower of Darkness cries,
"Fools, your Reward is neither Here nor There"
XXV
Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss'd
Of the Two Worlds so wisely- they are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth, their Words to Scorn
Are scatter'd, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

—Omar Khayyam, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, translated by Edmund Fitzgerald

- What does Khayyam mean when he speaks of the "Couch of Earth" in XXII?
- In the lines of XXV, why does he chide "Saints and Sages?" What might be his issue with these wise or holy men?

As the Abbasid rulers struggled to maintain control over the heartland in Mesopotamia and Persia, the political and cultural unity of the Islamic world began to decline. Dynasties that viewed the Abbasids as too corrupt or too distant began to splinter off. In Spain and North Africa, the Amazigh Idrisid dynasty in Morocco and the Aghlabids in Algeria drifted away from Abbasid control. On the eastern fringes, Persian and Turkic dynasties openly contested the authority of the Abbasid Caliphate without formally dissolving it. This process of growing disunity is called political devolution, in which powers once assumed by a centralized state are taken over by local authorities.

The worldliness of the Abbasid culture offended religious conservatives. For example, the scholar al-Ghazali criticized the incorporation of Greek speculative thought when speaking of Islamic beliefs. The caliphs' support for Persian culture and literature, as well as the power given to Persian families and scholars, alienated the Arab elites. An entrenched and powerful bureaucracy, as well as the use of the mamluks, made the Abbasid government look corrupt and weak. The most significant blow to Abbasid power was the ability of rivals to establish their own states and claim the title of caliph, as well as the arrival of powerful Turkic tribes like the Seljuks in the Abbasid heartland.

The Fatimid Caliphate and the Seljuk Sultanate

The Abbasids had overthrown the Umayyads with support from non-Arabs who felt cheated of the spoils of conquest, and from Shia Muslims who were opposed to the Umayyads for religious and political reasons. The Abbasids then worked to address the grievances held by different sections of Islamic society. Despite their best efforts, however, the size and complexity of the empire and the various political, ethnic, and religious tensions within it blunted the caliphs' effectiveness. Power often rested in the hands of local governors, who exploited regional tensions or weaknesses to establish their own dynasties and even their own rival caliphates, as in Al-Andalus. In Persia and on the eastern frontiers, dynasties close to Baghdad threatened the Abbasids themselves.

This process of political devolution became critical in the rise of rivals who seized Abbasid territory. Muslim factions also sought to wrest power from the caliphs or replace them altogether. Two of the most important rivals for control were the Fatimids and the Seljuk Turks.

The Fatimid Caliphate

Observing the challenges the Abbasids faced on the eastern frontier, and the success of the Umayyad Caliphate in Spain, the early tenth-century Shia leader Abu Muhammad Abdullah declared himself the proper leader of the Shia and successor to Muhammad's son-in-law Ali. Not all Shia agreed; Abdullah's claims to be descended from Ali were questionable. His leadership and charisma, however, along with the support of dedicated Amazigh soldiers, helped him establish the first and only Shia caliphate in North Africa in 910, which challenged the political power of the Abbasids and their religious influence.

The state Abu Muhammad Abdullah established is called the Fatimid Caliphate because his dynasty claimed descent through Ali's wife and the Islamic prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima. The Fatimid caliphs also claimed to be imams, Shia with spiritual authority over Muslims, based on either their biological descent from Ali or their manifestation of God's will on earth. In 969, the Fatimids conquered Egypt, which became the center of a powerful state that controlled most of North Africa. Then they began to threaten the Abbasid heartland by taking Syria and parts of the Arabian Peninsula, including the holy city of Mecca (Figure 13.12).



Figure 13.12 The Fatimid Caliphate. The tenth-century Fatimid Caliphate (in pink) was based in North Africa with its capital of Cairo in Egypt, but it managed to take control of the holy city of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Shia believed their caliphs held not just secular authority but also spiritual power and insight as imams. This concept was different from the Abbasid view in which the caliph was meant to lead the faithful but was not a spiritual guide. Thus, in the Fatimid Caliphate, the ruler's religious view could lead to arbitrary (or eccentric) leadership. For example, Abu Muhammad Abdallah encouraged the Fatimid concept of caliph by taking the title of al-Mahdi, denoting an apocalyptic figure who would vanquish evil and usher in the end of time. Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah intensified preaching against the Sunnis and instituted restrictive measures on Christians and Jewish people. Rumors persisted that he considered himself divine, and his sudden disappearance at age thirty-five added to his religious mystique. Despite their religious view of the caliph, the Shi'ites were tolerant of other faiths, and Christians and Jewish people occupied important administrative posts (Figure 13.13).



Figure 13.13 A Fatimid Gold Coin. This tenth-century gold coin from the rule of Abu Muhammad Abdullah was issued under his royal name of al-Mahdi. Coins were an important way of ensuring his subjects understood his claims to spiritual authority. (credit: "Calif al Mahdi Kairouan 912 CE" by "PHGCOM"/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

As a powerful state and religious rival, the Fatimid Caliphate posed an existential threat to the Abbasids. Seeing how powerless the Abbasids were to prevent the loss of North Africa, the Umayyad emir of Al-Andalus declared himself to be caliph of a third state, the Caliphate of Cordoba.

The Seljuk Empire

The devolution of Abbasid authority under the Fatimids and the Umayyads at Cordoba is striking because both dynasties had rival claimants to the title of caliph, and the Fatimids established a state that threatened Sunni Islam. This breakdown of central authority was not limited to distant regions, however. By the late ninth century, the Abbasids permitted, or were forced to accept, the establishment of emirs within their territory. A dynasty called the Samanids controlled the regions of eastern Persia called Khorasan and Transoxiana, and the Buyid dynasty took control of Abbasid territories in Persia and Mesopotamia in the early tenth century. Although they did not claim the title of caliph for themselves, they paid only minimal homage to the Abbasid state and forced its rulers to recognize their independent authority. The dynasty that benefited most from this chaos was an outside group called the Seljuks.

The Seljuk Turks were a branch of the Oghuz Turks, a confederation of Turkic clans. These seminomadic clans could form larger confederations or leave them at will, a type of organization much like that of the Mongols. The Oghuz had migrated from central Asia after surviving conflicts with other Turkic confederations in the eighth century and displacing various pastoral groups. Like many steppe peoples, they practiced a polytheistic religion, with a hierarchy of gods and spirits headed by Tengri the sky god. Specialists called shamans were believed to possess powers to negotiate for favor and fortune with these deities.

The initial contact between the Oghuz and the world of Islam was not peaceful. Raids between the two became the source of enslaved men who served the Abbasids as mamluks. The Seljuk dynasty is named for the clan leader Saljuq, who moved south from the Oghuz state in the tenth century and came into contact, often violent, with other Turkic peoples and Abbasid emirs. The leaders of the Seljuks converted to Islam, a development that may have been a source of conflict with the Oghuz but drew them into the orbit of the Abbasids. Under leaders like Tughril, they began to establish their own state within and beyond the Abbasid domains in the eleventh century. They drove off other Turkic peoples in Afghanistan, pushing them toward India. They fought successfully against the Byzantine Empire and some of its client states, especially the Kingdom of Georgia. Under Alp Arslan, they seized Anatolia from the Byzantines and posed an existential threat to Constantinople. By the middle of the eleventh century, the Seljuks had created an empire through conquest that extended from India to the Mediterranean (Figure 13.14).



Figure 13.14 The Seljuk Empire. The Seljuk Empire (in green) extended from India to Anatolia, taking territory away from the Byzantine Empire and ruling over Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, and much of Anatolia." (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Seljuk leaders did not take the title of caliph from the Abbasids but instead adopted the name sultan, meaning “the authority.” Because they were new converts to Islam who were not Arabs and had no connection to the family of Muhammad, the title of caliph seemed out of their reach. They acknowledged the position of the caliph, but real authority was in their own hands. Eager to show their zeal by fighting against Christians and Fatimids, the Seljuks now controlled the heart of the Islamic civilization, and considerable Byzantine territory.

The Seljuks built their legitimacy by defending Sunni Islam and investing in cultural and artistic projects. They built mosques and supported the work of religious scholars and missionaries. The famous philosopher al-Ghazali served in the courts of Seljuk sultans. Despite his opposition to the way Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) had applied Greek logic to matters of faith, he nevertheless worked in natural sciences and mathematics. Like the Abbasids before them, the Seljuks patronized the arts and built mosques, madrasas, and palaces. They supported the work of scholars like the mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam. Like the earlier Arab conquerors, they also adopted Persian as a literary language and embraced urban living.

They participated in the exchange of culture, and the promotion of Islamic cultural institutions revolved around the courts of the aristocracy, mosques, and madrasas. The Seljuks also stand out as promoters of the caravansaries, inns along the trade routes that had long offered a safe place to stay for those traveling long distances.

Link to Learning

Caravansaries were an important element of travel and trade in the medieval world, serving merchants, diplomats, and pilgrims as hubs for news and rest. In this video, more information about caravansaries is presented, including their architecture and the services they offered.

Strict Sunnis, the sultans pushed back the Shia Fatimids and took control of Jerusalem and eventually Mecca. While they were still generally tolerant of other religions like Judaism and Christianity, they ensured that Sunni Islam was dominant by insisting on

regular payments from non-Muslim communities and by refusing to permit Shia in high offices. The Seljuks' success in fighting against Christian states fueled claims of religious oppression in western Europe.

In many ways, the arrival of the Turkic peoples and their conversion to Islam helped to revive the fortunes of Sunni Islam and the fight against Christian states. Despite the victories of leaders like Alp Arslan, however, by the end of the eleventh century, conflicts over the succession were taking their toll. Members of the dynasty began to fight each other and break the empire into smaller states. One of the most important successor states was established in Anatolia, near the Byzantine Empire, and was called the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum, a name that reflects the region's past as part of the Roman and then the Byzantine Empires.

The infighting among the Seljuks, their conflict with the Fatimids, and the rival caliphate in Spain fragmented the Islamic world. Attempts by the Abbasids to take effective control of their empire led to more complications for Seljuk rule. Fatimid power was threatened by internal instability when the caliphs incorporated Turkic cavalry, alienating traditional Amazigh cavalry. The Islamic world continued to produce brilliant scholars and poets who engaged with Persian, ancient Greek, and Indian ideas. Politically, however, the Islamic kingdoms were divided and weak. This fragmentation enabled Christians from western Europe to establish their own colonies in the Islamic world by means of the Crusades.

The Battle of Manzikert and the Call from the East

While the Islamic world was undergoing the devolution of Abbasid power, the Byzantine Empire could not take advantage of its weakness. The Byzantines had experienced an earlier period of cultural and military dominance under the powerful Macedonian dynasty (867–1025), whose warrior-emperors had been able to push back against Muslims to the east and Slavic peoples to the west. The resulting stability had brought a period of cultural production and innovation sometimes called the Macedonian Renaissance. Its artwork later influenced Italian art and anticipated developments in the Italian Renaissance (Figure 13.15).



Figure 13.15 The Macedonian Renaissance. This image is from a tenth-century illuminated manuscript made in Constantinople and called the Paris Psalter (for its current location). It depicts the biblical King David (seated with harp) composing psalms or sacred songs. The realism of the setting and the individualized faces and postures were innovations of the art of the Macedonian era. (credit: "Paris Psalter" by Bibliothèque nationale de France/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

At the end of the Macedonian period, the Byzantine emperor's ability to navigate the economic and military situation deteriorated. Ineffective rulers and conflict over successors to the Macedonian dynasty rendered the empire less militarily capable. The Byzantines also lost control of their overseas territories, especially southern Italy and Sicily, which had been sources of trade and revenue. Islamic and Italian navies began to dominate trade in the Mediterranean. As direct trade between the Christian West and the Islamic world increased, the economic position of the Byzantine Empire as an intermediary began to decline. Byzantine rulers attempted to establish marriage alliances with Slavic rulers and even Norman adventurers who were active in Sicily and southern Italy. Although such allies were eager to associate themselves with the prestige of the Byzantine Empire, they were just as likely to gain it by attacking the empire and carving out a state for themselves. All around them, the Byzantine emperors saw inconstant allies and ferocious enemies.

The challenges the Byzantine Empire faced were not limited to external rivals. Its rulers faced the same problem as the Abbasid caliphs: powerful actors within their own empire who sought to exploit the weaknesses of the rule to enrich their families.

Macedonian emperors such as Basil II had issued legislation to curb the power of these elites, called the *dynatoi*, by ensuring they were taxed heavily, and their massive estates were broken up and distributed to the peasants who served in the armies. Basil was succeeded by less competent or less secure emperors who were compelled to rely on the *dynatoi* for support and reversed his policies. This harmed the peasant backbone of the army and emboldened the elite, who rewarded the patronage of the emperors with schemes to control or replace them. Like the Abbasids, the rulers then had to balance external threats and challenges with internal ones in a complex search for stability.

One of the *dynatoi* became Emperor Romanos IV in 1068. Romanos was a capable general who wanted to reverse the empire's losses to the Seljuks. The neglect of the army by previous emperors meant that he had to rely on foreign mercenaries, who did not get along with each other and who plundered Byzantine territory if they were not paid on time. Romanos had some earlier successes against the Seljuks, whose raids under Alp Arslan had become bloody and bitter affairs. He hoped to take back strategic areas in eastern Anatolia while Alp Arslan was fighting the Fatimids.

Alp Arslan was not as far away as Romanos had hoped, however, and the armies met near the town of Manzikert. Some of Romanos's mercenaries abandoned him before the battle, and at a decisive moment, he was betrayed by his own aristocratic rivals who failed to protect the army during a retreat. Romanos was then captured by the Seljuks, and instead of executing him—the typical fate for one considered a dangerous foe—to humiliate him, Alp Arslan spared the emperor's life and set him free, after he agreed to concede territory and pay a hefty ransom.

The military defeat might not have been disastrous, but problems within the empire exacerbated the loss. Romanos was deposed and killed by his own aristocracy, and for the next twenty years, the Byzantine rulers struggled to restore order to their empire. One of Romanos's successors, Alexios I, called on the popes for assistance against the Seljuks. He was expecting a mercenary force, but instead Pope Urban II framed the conflict between Byzantine and Seljuk as a fight between religions, culminating in the crusading movement.

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11.4: Patriarch and Papacy- The Church and the Call to Crusade

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the East-West schism within the Christian Church
- Explain why Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade
- Discuss the concept of religiously motivated warfare in Christianity and Islam
- Identify the reasons western Christians traveled to the Middle East as crusaders

The image of holy war has often colored the history of the Middle Ages. We can view it either positively in terms of warriors engaged in an altruistic struggle, or in a more negative light as a conflict rooted in bigotry and ignorance. The factors that justified holy war existed in Christianity well before the Crusades, but the Crusades helped shape specific ideals that sanctioned armed conflict based on religious beliefs. These ideals were both internal to Christian Europe and reactions to developments in the Islamic world.

The East-West Schism

The chaotic aftermath of the collapse of the Carolingian Empire led to a complicated situation between secular rulers and the Christian Church. According to German law, lords had the right to control everything on their land, including churches and monasteries. This control even extended to the appointment of officeholders to church positions such as abbot or bishop. To ensure they had the loyalty of church officials, lords staffed these offices with their family members or even sold them to the highest bidder. The consequence was that those without religious vocations, or even familiarity with Christian doctrine, could be installed into church leadership. Even the position of the pope, the bishop of Rome, could come up for sale.

Revulsion at this treatment of religious office led to a reform movement intended to remove the influence of secular lords from the management of the church. The movement is often associated with the monastery of Cluny in France, which managed to get independence from the local aristocrat. Other monasteries around France flocked to be included in the rights and privileges that Cluny had earned, creating a movement called the Cluniac reform. The Cluniac movement eventually drew in other clergy who wanted the church to control the election of bishops, independent of secular influence. This desire for independence finally reached the top of the Catholic Church and the office of the bishop of Rome (Figure 13.16).



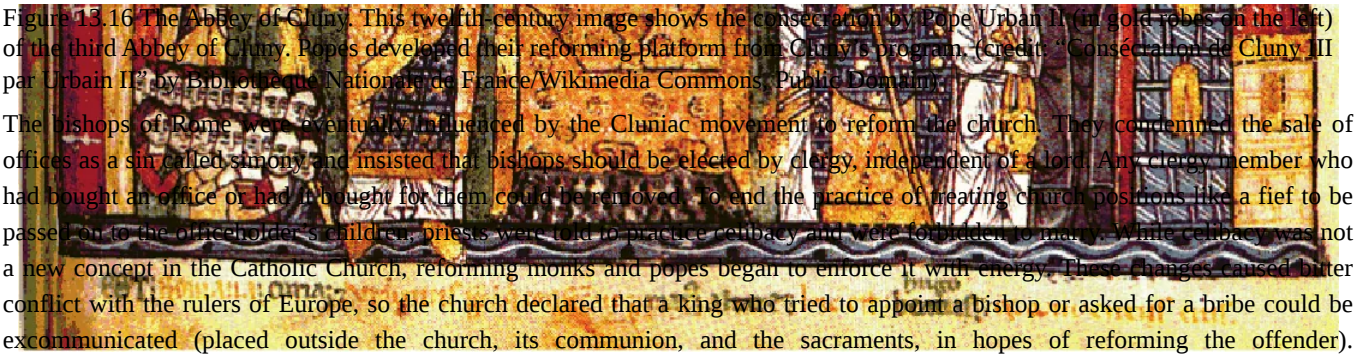


Figure 13.16 The Abbey of Cluny. This twelfth-century image shows the consecration by Pope Urban II (in gold robes on the left) of the third Abbey of Cluny. Popes developed their reforming platform from Cluny's program. (credit: "Consécration de Cluny III par Urbain II" by Bibliotheque Nationale de France/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The bishops of Rome were eventually influenced by the Cluniac movement to reform the church. They condemned the sale of offices as a sin called simony and insisted that bishops should be elected by clergy, independent of a lord. Any clergy member who had bought an office or had it bought for them could be removed. To end the practice of treating church positions like a fief to be passed on to the officeholder's children, priests were told to practice celibacy and were forbidden to marry. While celibacy was not a new concept in the Catholic Church, reforming monks and popes began to enforce it with energy. These changes caused bitter conflict with the rulers of Europe, so the church declared that a king who tried to appoint a bishop or asked for a bribe could be excommunicated (placed outside the church, its communion, and the sacraments, in hopes of reforming the offender). Excommunication could threaten the king's position and lead to rebellions.

The reformers were also interested in creating a thoroughly Christianized society by distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate warfare. The church argued that Christian soldiers, especially knights, should obey a code of conduct that reflected the church's values. For example, they should not loot monasteries or hold clergy for ransom. They should protect the church as well as women and the defenseless. They should observe periods of publicly declared truces and not fight on religiously significant days like Easter. These principles contributed to the ideals of chivalry, a code of conduct that was meant to Christianize knightly violence and behavior. Although it was never successful at curbing violence, the idea of Christianized warfare was only one strand of a broader, secular interest in a newly defined chivalric culture of knighthood, and images of Christian knights helped popes justify their directing the military classes of Europe to act against peoples deemed to be enemies of the church, and therefore also of God.

The reform movement gained the church some moral prestige, but the growing power of the pope also worsened the relationship between the eastern and western halves of the faith. By the time of the Middle Ages, five ancient seats of Christianity were recognized as the most prestigious: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. Each was led by a bishop with the honorary title of "patriarch." In the tenth century, only Rome and Constantinople were in territory not controlled by Muslims.

While the pope in Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople believed many of the same things, linguistic and cultural differences helped drive a wedge between them. For example, the church in the west operated in Latin, insisted on a celibate clergy, and elevated the pope as the final authority for all matters regarding the church everywhere. The church in the east used Greek, permitted priests to marry (although tradition held that bishops should be unmarried), and believed other patriarchs were just as authoritative as the pope. The reform movement unintentionally made divisions sharper.

In 1054, the pope sent representatives to the patriarch of Constantinople to discuss the differences between the two halves of the church. The pope's chief representative felt the patriarch was not cooperating with or even recognizing the embassy, so he issued a letter excommunicating the patriarch and his followers. Soon after, the patriarch issued his own letter excommunicating the pope's representatives. Following this Great Schism of 1054, the eastern church became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the western half the Catholic Church.

The Great Schism was not the only cause of their division, given that tensions and disagreements had been growing over time. But it did help to highlight the way Christianity was being shaped by different forces in different parts of Europe. From this time on, the popes hoped to reunite the two halves under their authority and impose their vision of a reformed church on the Orthodox Church. While Orthodox bishops might accept the pope as "first among equals," the papacy insisted on being the supreme authority in the church.

Pope Urban II and the Council of Claremont

In 1095, facing invasion on all sides, the Byzantine ruler Alexios I sent ambassadors to plead for help from the pope and an opportunity for a reconciliation between the two churches. Pope Urban II was a supporter of church reform, and that put him at odds with German emperors like Henry IV, who insisted on his own right to appoint bishops, even the bishop of Rome. To avoid being in Italy when Henry was, Urban traveled throughout western Europe, preaching repentance from sins and obedience to the church. He answered the Byzantine emperor's call for aid, but in a way Alexios was probably not expecting.

Urban II presented his idea of religious war in response to the Byzantine request for aid at a council in Clermont, France, in 1095. While the council was ostensibly about reform, Urban also issued a call for Christians from all walks of life to undertake an "armed

pilgrimage" to liberate the Christian Holy Land (the lands of the eastern Mediterranean associated with the life of Jesus and the biblical prophets, including Jerusalem) from "Turkic" control. Urban's goal at this point was to free the Holy Land from non-Christian rulers in defense of the Christians living there; it was not a blanket endorsement of violence against Muslims. These limitations were later eased, however, as the popes discovered the power of calling repeated crusades to promote the reforming goals of the church and to compete with political rivals in Europe, like the German emperors.

While the Byzantine emperor wanted aid for his realm, Urban instead sent the crusaders to Jerusalem. Urban's directive to "liberate Jerusalem" and support the Christians in the Middle East was clever. Few Europeans knew or cared about the problems of Constantinople, but the church's reforming and educational efforts had made the life of Jesus in Jerusalem and the early Christian community there a focal point in people's imaginations. Catholics prized relics of saints as a means of fostering their devotion and bringing them closer to the divine, and Jerusalem was in effect an enormous relic, a gateway to heaven itself. Preachers like Peter the Hermit whipped up crowds of men and women with the idea of a glorious pilgrimage to the most sacred of cities (Figure 13.17). The call to crusade stirred western Christians into action, soldiers and knights as well as poor peasants and zealots.



Figure 13.17 *Peter the Hermit Preaching the First Crusade*. This painted illustration from a world history published in the early twentieth century imagines Peter the Hermit giving a rousing speech to attract men and women to go on crusade. In many ways, it is representative of a modern perception of the popularity (and virtue) of the crusading movement from the perspective of western Christian society of the period. The reality, however, was much more nuanced. (credit: "Peter the Hermit Preaching the First Crusade" by Cassell's History of England, Vol. 1 (of 8)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Urban also hoped to restore unity to the church by offering help to the Byzantine Empire. What we know of his speeches shows how he tied this effort together with his reform program. Freeing Jerusalem from "the wicked" would mirror the rallying cries to free the church from aristocratic control. After all, the reason Urban called for the crusade while in France was that he had to contend with a rival pope, supported by the German emperor, who had occupied Rome since before Urban became pope. Urban

was also likely concerned about guarding the frontiers of Christianity, which compelled him to insist that Spanish Christians should not go on this pilgrimage because they were needed at home in the persistent struggle against Islam in the Iberian Peninsula.

Finally, Urban's ability to inspire the people of Europe signaled the influence he wielded over Christians at large. The popes had no armies, and they often had to depend on the unreliable aristocracy for protection when disagreements over church policy resulted in armed conflict with the princes of Europe. If they were to maintain their control over the church in contests with kings and emperors, it would be useful to see what happened when a pope rallied common Christians to a religious cause as a test of faith. Thousands were willing to stitch a cross onto their clothes, a sign that they were on this special pilgrimage and the source of the word "crusade."

The Rhetoric of Holy War

The use of religion to justify war was not new in Christianity, or in human history. For Christian theologians, however, acts of violence put believers in the difficult position of committing a grave sin and endangering their soul. Most Christian thinkers, like Augustine of Hippo (354–430), had argued that some forms of violence had to be tolerated for the good of the community, such as punishing criminals and defending against invasion. Above all, a recognized public authority like a king was needed to publicly call for war. From this point of view, Christians had tried to identify what would be an acceptable or "just war," but the idea of a "holy war" did not exist until the crusading period. A crusade, then, was a "just war" called by the pope, who offered spiritual rewards.

This technical definition of crusade does not mean that Christian rulers had always sought the pope's blessing before attacking their non-Christian enemies. Very little prevented earlier rulers from claiming God supported their military efforts, especially against non-Christians, or from believing God condoned specific acts of violence. Charlemagne claimed as much in his wars against non-Christian peoples, forcing Saxons to convert to Christianity when he was victorious. But the idea of fighting a war against other religions was outside the boundaries of classical Christian thinking. The Christian view of violence was that it should be as limited as possible and justified as defensive. The Crusades made that technical definition problematic, and the earlier notion of crusade expanded to include Muslim kingdoms in Spain or elsewhere, non-Christian settlements in Europe, and even the domains of the pope's political enemies in Europe. The result of the Crusades was a belief that warfare on behalf of God, even if it was neither defensive nor approved by the people, was a "just war."

The images conjured by Urban, Peter the Hermit, and others implied that the Muslim occupation of the Holy Land was unjust and oppressed the Christian community. This idea of Christian suffering was linked to the earliest days of the church when, as members of an underground religion, Christians were persecuted by Rome.

Dueling Voices

The Rhetoric of Holy War

There were no newspapers, radio, television, billboards, or social media to promote the Crusades. Preachers needed to speak over and over to multiple crowds and stir the individuals in them to join. To do so, they relied on several tactics to inspire anger, fear, or fervor.

We do not have an exact copy of Urban's speech in Clermont that launched the First Crusade, but others grafted their own ideas onto what they had heard, what others said they had heard, or what some people thought Urban should have said. We do not know how accurate any of these texts are. One version, the earliest, has Urban emphasizing that the crusade will be good for the souls of those who go to Jerusalem. In another, written by Robert the Monk, Urban tries to stir his audience with tales of persecution, saying Christians are being forced to accept circumcision and "blood of the circumcision they [the Seljuk Turks] either spread upon the altars or pour into the vases of the baptismal font." He tries to inspire them with tales of Charlemagne and other kings, who in their time "have destroyed the kingdoms of the pagans and have extended in these lands the territory of the holy church." Finally, he deplores the violent tendencies of the aristocracy by pointing out "that you murder one another, that you wage war, and that frequently you perish by mutual wounds." Pity for the victims, hunger to revive glorious deeds, and a call for unity are all employed to inspire warriors to go on crusade.

- Although we cannot definitively know the content of Urban's speech, what rationales did commentators offer for going on crusade in the years following the call in 1095?
- In what ways do modern public speakers rely on these same methods of persuasion to change people's minds?

Link to Learning

You can read the exact texts of the speeches attributed to Urban II by various authors to see the way they attempt to persuade the audience to answer the call to crusade. You can also read the arguments made by a Muslim scholar Ali ibn Tahir Al-Sulami, and compare his approach to persuading rulers and warriors to fight against the Christians.

Although some historians have speculated that it was only the younger sons of aristocrats, those who could not hope to inherit anything from their fathers, who fervently joined the crusade, the reality was more complicated. Commoners (even poor ones), women, the sick, and the elderly all joined alongside knights, and powerful nobles also answered the call. Many sacrificed their own land and property to gain the resources needed to join the crusading movement. The trek to Constantinople alone was arduous, with few amenities or roads to guide the way. Some may have hoped to gain land if they remained in the Holy Land, and others were motivated simply to see the earthly Jerusalem as a way of experiencing the heavenly Jerusalem that awaited them when they died, and then returned home.

Others had less altruistic motives. The rhetoric preached about non-Christians made Jewish communities, like those in the Rhineland, vulnerable to attack by crusaders seeking plunder, who extorted bribes from Jewish communities to leave them in peace. Even those whose motivations were clearly religious, like Peter the Hermit, compelled German Jewish people to render supplies for their crusading bands. Although the church condemned violence, the Crusades mark the beginning of precarious times for Jewish communities in Christian Europe, when they were subject to abuse, expulsion, and sudden violence.

Unlike classical Christianity, Islam from its earliest days had a concept of holy war called jihad. Jihad, meaning “struggle” in Arabic, can have different meanings or uses. For the Sufi mystics, the struggle against internal doubt and weakness could be a form of jihad. In other circumstances, the struggle was against evil, in which Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people could participate as allies. Defining jihad is similar to the problem of defining crusade and distinguishing it from other conflicts. In the Quran, Muslims were enjoined to avoid conflict with Christians and Jewish people unless they provoked Muslims in some way. Like the notion of “crusade,” jihad had to be called by a proper authority, such as the caliph or a high-ranking Muslim cleric. In some ways, then, jihad is similar to the idea of a “just war” for Christianity. In practice, however, Muslim rulers, like Christian rulers, could certainly wage war against their nonbelieving neighbors without a formal declaration of jihad, while still claiming their actions were for the benefit of Islam and supported by Allah.

According to Islam, Jewish people and Christians should be tolerated because they are monotheistic. In most instances, though, the idea of endeavoring to realize the will of God meant that armed conflict and conquest were also options. A ruler who was not concerned with striving against non-Muslims was viewed as failing in his duties. Similar ideas began to color Christian views of their own conflicts with Islam, especially in places like Spain. One such thought was that territories that had once been Christian should always belong to Christians, and this was considered particularly true of the Holy Land, even though the area was significant to Muslims and Jewish people as well. It was difficult to find nuance when attempting to carry out the will of God.

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11.5: The Crusading Movement

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the centrality of the city of Jerusalem to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
- Explain how the Crusader States in the Middle East complicated the relationships between the Christian churches of the east and west
- Discuss the Muslim and indigenous Middle Eastern reaction to the crusading movement
- Explain how the crusading movement developed after the First Crusade

The call to crusade had profound consequences for Islamic and Christian societies. The military fortunes of the crusaders were watched carefully by Muslims and Christians alike, and while the success of the First Crusade was shocking to everyone, to Christians it was also a clear sign of God's favor. The flaws in the crusading movement grew or became better known over time, however. Fewer Christians joined later crusades, even though the legend and romance of the venture became more popular in the European imagination.

Jerusalem and the Holy Land

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have a concept of pilgrimage. Sacred journeys can be undertaken to enhance a person's connection with God, as an act of penance, or in gratitude. In many ways, they are meant to be transformative.

Jerusalem drew pilgrims from the three monotheistic religions. Pilgrimage had been obligatory for Jewish people until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, but even after that time, the city continued to play a special role in Jewish life. In the earliest decades of the first century, it had also become the location for some of the most dramatic and important scenes in the life of Jesus and the early Christian community. In the time of Constantine, a church had been built over the site of what was believed to be Jesus's tomb, called the Holy Sepulchre. As the place where it is believed Jesus was crucified and resurrected, Jerusalem was bound up with the most essential Christian beliefs. Even in the ancient world, Christians undertook pilgrimages to this holiest of cities (Figure 13.18).



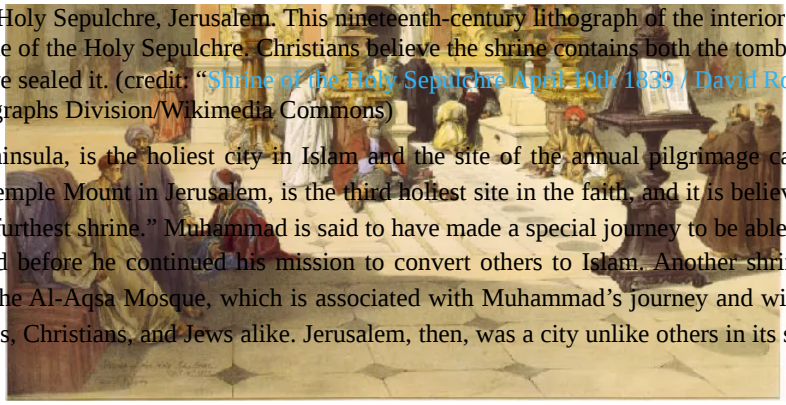


Figure 13.18 Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem. This nineteenth-century lithograph of the interior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre depicts the Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre. Christians believe the shrine contains both the tomb in which Jesus was buried and the rock thought to have sealed it. (credit: "Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre April 10th 1839 / David Roberts" by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division/Wikimedia Commons)

Mecca, in the Arabian Peninsula, is the holiest city in Islam and the site of the annual pilgrimage called the *hajj*. The Al-Aqsa Mosque, built on the old Temple Mount in Jerusalem, is the third holiest site in the faith, and it is believed to be mentioned several times in the Quran as "the furthest shrine." Muhammad is said to have made a special journey to be able to pray in Jerusalem and to be allowed to glimpse God before he continued his mission to convert others to Islam. Another shrine, called the Dome of the Rock, was also built near the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is associated with Muhammad's journey and with the biblical Abraham, an important figure to Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. Jerusalem, then, was a city unlike others in its spiritual appeal to people of different faiths.

In Christian Europe, the reforms of the church emphasized the earthly life of Jesus, and the idea of being able to see and touch the physical land where he walked filled the imagination of both the clergy and the laity. The image of heaven as a "heavenly Jerusalem" in the writing of monks and nuns heightened the common desire to see the earthly Jerusalem. The report that the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim had destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre outraged Christians, even though his son permitted its rebuilding. It is no coincidence, then, that the term medieval people most often associated with the crusading movement (before the term "crusade" was coined) was pilgrimage, or more specifically, armed pilgrimage.

The First, Second, and Third Crusades

Historians have categorized the different crusades and given them numbers for convenience and to distinguish between various developments within the crusading movement (Figure 13.19). The Crusades were rarely well organized, however, and one of the challenges they all faced was trying to move people from one end of Europe to the other. For example, during the First Crusade, the followers of Peter the Hermit arrived in Constantinople first. They did not wait for other groups to arrive and were ferried over to Anatolia (the Asian part of today's Turkey) by Alexios, the Byzantine ruler. The Turks destroyed this army, and very few survived to return to Constantinople. Later crusaders understood that gathering intelligence in Constantinople was crucial to avoiding Peter's fate.

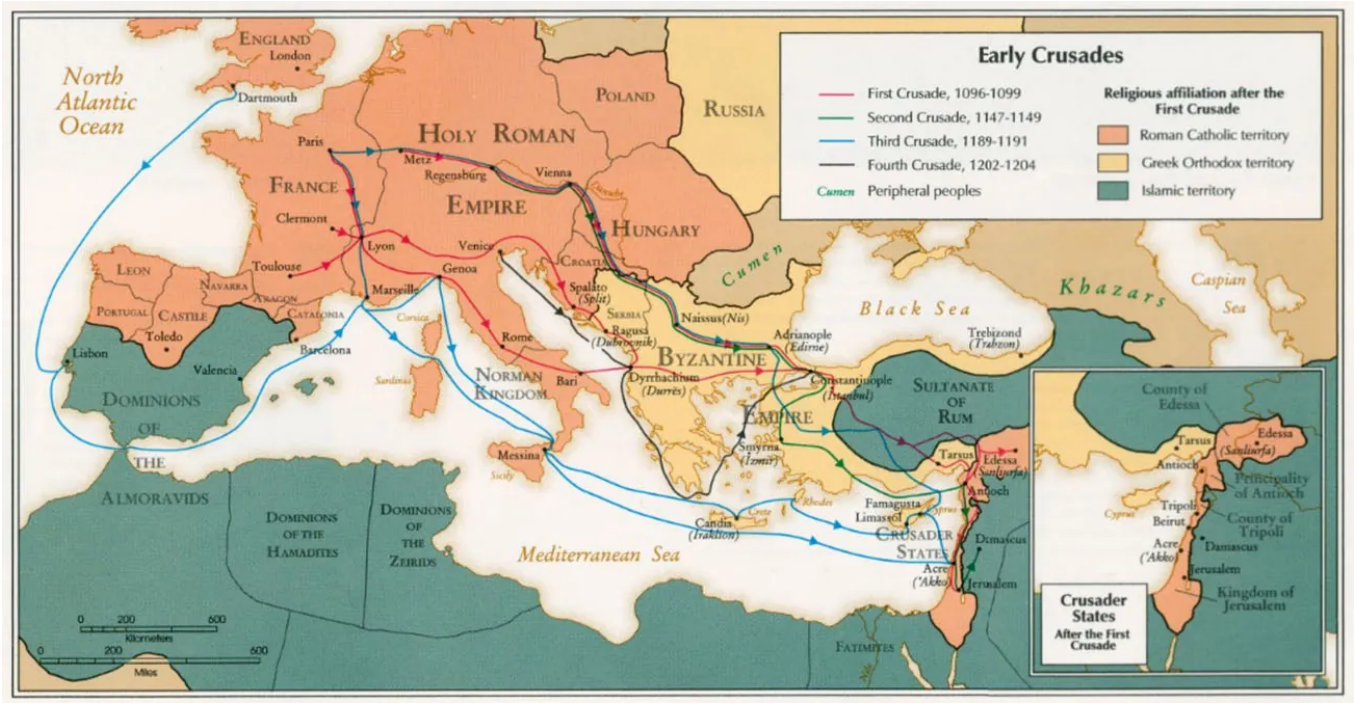


Figure 13.19 Routes of the Early Crusades. The First through Fourth Crusades all faced logistic and other challenges and met with varying degrees of success. (credit: "Early Crusades" by United States. Central Intelligence Agency/Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Collection at the Boston Public Library)

The bulk of the First Crusade was directed by powerful aristocrats whose armies were better organized and prepared to fight than Peter's, even if most of its participants were not the most senior nobles of Western society. Alexios promised them aid in exchange for the return of Byzantine territory held by Muslims, which most initially agreed to. The crusaders crossed Anatolia and, after laying a bloody siege with little help from the Byzantines, took control of the port of Antioch, an ancient seat of Christianity in the Holy Land. After their victory, they felt Alexios was undeserving of either the city or their fidelity. The city was thus given to a Norman crusader who had no intention of delivering it to Alexios, straining the relationships between the crusaders and the Byzantine Empire.

The First Crusade finally reached Jerusalem in the summer of 1099. Before attacking the city, the crusaders fasted and walked around its walls as penitents, an act that shows the blending of pilgrimage with armed conflict. The crusaders then took the city, and in an act that shocked Muslims and Christians alike, they massacred the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. The crusading armies then took other important cities in the area, and to secure their control they established the four Crusader States: the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem. These Crusader States were also called Outremer (literally "overseas") by the French, and they claimed Jerusalem as their capital (Figure 13.20). Of all the Crusades, this was the only one that accomplished its objective.

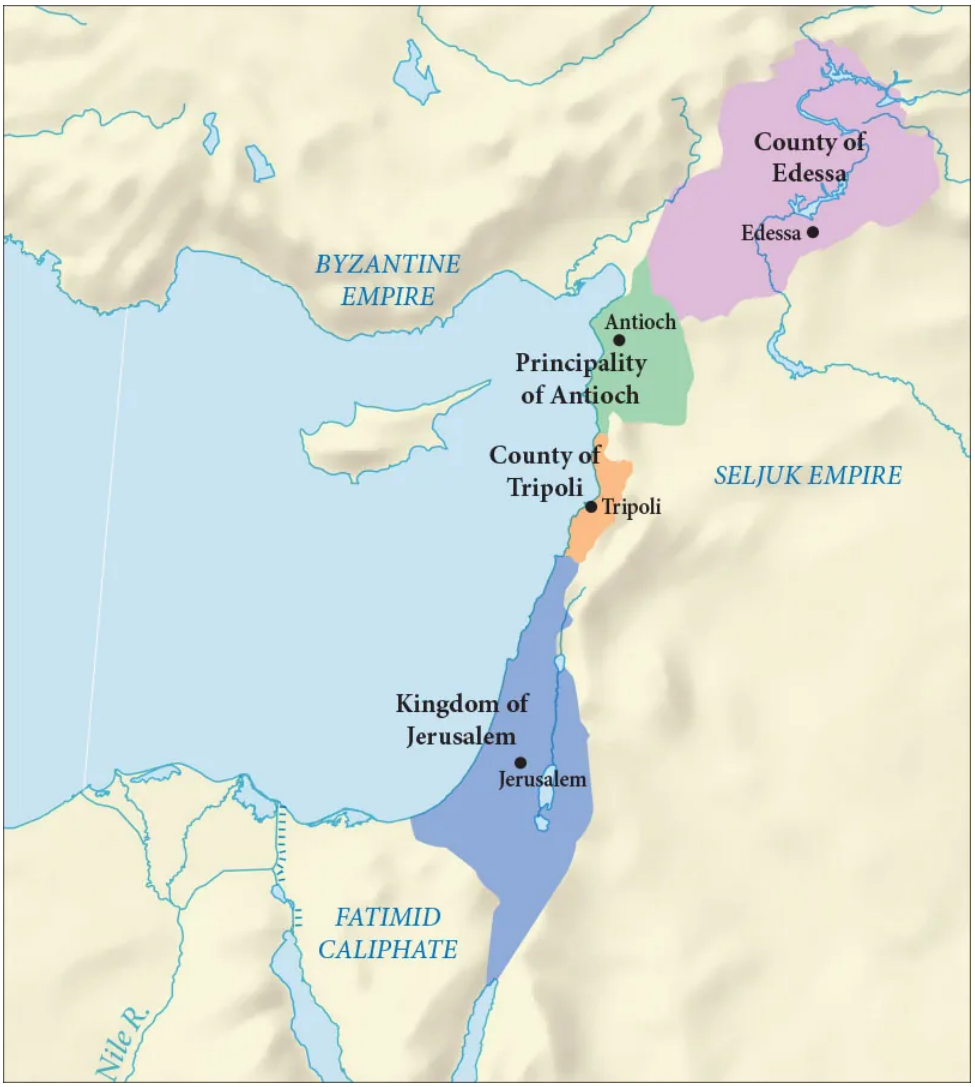


Figure 13.20 The Crusader States. The four Crusader States, or Outremer, were the territories seized by members of the First Crusade: the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Despite the surprising success of the First Crusade, Outremer suffered some critical problems from the beginning. The crusaders had alienated the Byzantine Empire by not returning to it important cities like Antioch or lands in the Middle East as they had promised. The European aristocrats and knights were eager to acquire lands for themselves, which meant they often fought with each other even when faced with a common enemy. And while there was always at least a trickle of warriors who made it to Outremer, the elite remained in desperate need of soldiers to defend their new territories.

Link to Learning

Recent media representations have tried to portray a realistic view of the Crusades that includes their internal factionalism and intolerance, but realism often gives way to a filmmaker's need for a more compelling character, a more stylish scene, or the inclusion of inappropriately modern sentiments. Follow the link to read a historian's review of the 2005 Ridley Scott crusader film *Kingdom of Heaven*.

The Muslims' confusion about the nature and goals of the crusaders, as well as internal conflicts among them, initially dampened their political and military response. The Muslims adapted quickly, however, especially the Seljuks who prevented many of the newly arriving knights from ever reaching Outremer. A Turkic aristocrat named Imad al-Din Zengi began to cultivate the image of a holy warrior opposing the crusaders. While he spent most of his career ruthlessly scheming against other Muslim rulers, he managed to take the city of Edessa, in the northernmost of the Crusader States. He was praised as a defender of Islam, but he was assassinated before he could continue his campaign against the crusaders. The loss of Edessa posed a serious threat to the remaining Crusader States, however, and prompted the pope to call the Second Crusade.

The Second Crusade, from 1147 to 1149, was heralded by a new generation of preachers like Bernard of Clairvaux who inspired believers to "take up the cross." Bernard also wrote the rules for the Knights Templar, one of the new crusading orders, religious orders of monks devoted to protecting Christian pilgrims and fighting to support Outremer. This crusade was led by powerful rulers, including King Louis VII of France and King Conrad III of Germany (Figure 13.21). The armies of the Second Crusade were defeated in Anatolia in separate battles, and few soldiers reached the Holy Land. The kings accomplished very little, and many blamed the Byzantine emperor, who had learned to be distrustful of European armies. Bernard of Clairvaux was humiliated and apologized to the pope, claiming the sins of the crusaders had caused the defeat. It was a disaster that seemed as complete as the First Crusade had looked miraculous.



Figure 13.21 King Louis VII on Crusade. This illustration from a fifteenth-century chronicle of the Crusades shows King Louis VII, in blue and wearing a gold crown, being welcomed to Antioch during the Second Crusade. (credit: "Raymond Of Poitiers Welcoming Louis VII in Antioch" by Passages d'Outremer/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

After this loss, the situation for Outremer only became more dire. Imad al-Din Zengi's successors were well liked, even by crusaders, and they strove to unite the Muslim princes in jihad. The most famous of these successors was Salah al-Din, or Saladin in the Christian world. He was known for being humane, fair-minded, and, in Christians terms, chivalrous. He expanded his territory from Syria into Egypt and founded a new dynasty called the Ayyubids from the ashes of the Shia Fatimid Caliphate. He also took up his religious calling to wage jihad against the crusaders. In 1187, after years of gathering allies and eroding the military power of Outremer, he destroyed the crusaders at the Battle of the Horns of Hattin (in today's Israel). Within months, Jerusalem fell to Saladin.

The Christians' response was the Third Crusade (1189–1192). This crusade was prompted both by the fear that Outremer was about to be wiped off the map and by the desire to retake Jerusalem. Kings from England, the Holy Roman Empire, and France as well as other powerful princes answered the call. When they arrived in the last remaining Christian outposts in the Middle East, they quickly fell to squabbling with each other and the aristocracy of Outremer. As a result, the Christians were able to conquer the island of Cyprus and the coastline of the Holy Land but were unable to move farther inland. Eventually, Richard I of England, known in popular stories as Richard the Lionhearted, negotiated a treaty with Saladin that left Jerusalem under Muslim control but

allowed Christian pilgrims to freely visit the city. Both Saladin and Richard were praised as examples of chivalric virtue in Europe and heroes of their respective religions. But this was one of the last successes the crusaders were to have in the Holy Land.

Experiencing the Crusades

Despite the relatively brief existence of the Crusader States, they offered an example of Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people living and working together in a Christian kingdom surrounded by hostile states. Initially, however, the ignorance and religious bigotry of the crusaders led them to expel populations of Muslims or Jewish people from holy sites or places of strategic importance. In several cases, they perpetrated violent expulsions, killing civilians.

European Catholics also found in the conquered areas native Christian populations with a variety of different creeds. In most cases, these Christians were permitted to stay, but eventually, conflict over religious authority developed as Catholic bishops were named (by the pope or by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem) as heads of communities with few Catholics. The Christians of the Middle East had also been acculturated by centuries of living under Muslim rule, which meant the Christianity of the east looked very different from that practiced in Europe. In some communities, Christians spoke Arabic, dressed like their Muslim neighbors, and worshipped in ways different from those of Catholics in Europe. The Greek Orthodox Byzantines were unhappy with the establishment of a well-organized religious rival in the Holy Land. Many native communities distrusted the crusaders not because they were of a different religion but because they arrived with brutality and did not share the cultural practices of the area.

Despite the initial violence by crusaders that scarred and scattered some Jewish and Muslim communities, policies of toleration and protection emerged. These had less to do with the crusaders' growing familiarity with the religious and ethnic groups in Outremer and more to do with the lack of settlers from Europe. Lords needed workers, and if they could not be had, then native communities had to be preserved, not brutalized. Even when Europeans began to adopt local cultural habits and grew familiar with Islamic practices, distrust of the unfamiliar remained common on all sides. The Islamic poet and warrior Usama ibn Munqidh, for example, could count Christians among his friends, but he admonished his readers never to trust the "Franks," or the newly arrived crusaders, whose ignorance he highlighted in his writing.

In Their Own Words

A Muslim View of the Crusades

Usama ibn Munqidh was a Muslim poet and warrior who fought during the Crusades. Like many Muslims, he believed the crusaders were barbarians and invaders, but he came to know some of them very well. He understood that they were different from the Christians of the Middle East, who shared common cultural traits with Muslims. In the following passage, Usama records his experiences in Jerusalem when he tried to pray facing Mecca and was accosted by a Christian who tried to make him face east, as a Christian would.

> *Everyone who is a fresh emigrant from the Frankish lands is ruder than those who have become acclimated and have held long association with the Moslems. Whenever I visited Jerusalem I always entered the Aqsa Mosque, beside which stood a small mosque which the Franks had converted into a church. When I used to enter the Aqsa Mosque, which was occupied by the Templars, who were my friends, the Templars would evacuate the little adjoining mosque so that I might pray. One day I entered this mosque . . . and stood up in the act of praying, upon which one of the Franks rushed upon me, got hold of me and turned my face eastward saying 'This is the way thou shouldst pray.' A group of Templars hasted to him, seized him and repelled him from me. I resumed my prayer. The same man, while the others were otherwise busy, rushed once more on me and turned my face eastward, saying, 'This is the way thou shouldst pray!' The Templars again came in . . . and expelled him. They apologized to me, saying 'This is a stranger who has only recently arrived from the land of the Franks and he has never before seen anyone praying except eastward.' Thereupon I said to*

> *myself 'I have had enough prayer.' So I went out and have ever been surprised at the conduct of this devil of a man, at the change in the color of his face, his trembling . . . at the sight of one praying towards [Mecca].*
>
> *—Usama ibn Munqidh, Memoirs of an Arab-Syrian Gentleman at the Time of the Crusades, translated by P.K. Hitti*

- Why do you think the Templars, Christians devoted to defending Outremer, would be so friendly with ibn Munqidh, a Muslim?
- What parts of this passage show the acclimation of western Europeans to life in the Middle East?

The crusaders organized their government in feudal terms, but the native populations never became serfs owing service to their lords. Instead, they paid their taxes in cash or in goods. This form of payment was based on existing practices, and in many ways, the crusaders left rural agricultural production unchanged. Christian landlords used forms of taxation and village administration similar to those their Muslim predecessors had, and they relied on Muslim scribes and interpreters given the diversity of the people and languages in the region. Islamic and Jewish communities maintained their own schools and legal institutions. Despite the earlier violence and ongoing religious and ethnic tensions, the desire for trade and prosperity helped ease some of the tensions between the crusaders and native communities.

The lack of settlers from Europe ensured that the number of soldiers in Outremer was small. This was why the church promoted the crusading orders, and why the crusaders built imposing fortresses and castles, like the famous Krak des Chevaliers in Syria, that could be defended by a relatively small number of soldiers (Figure 13.22). Some European families, especially aristocrats with a family connection, went on sending crusaders, such as the dukes of Burgundy who continued to support the crusading movement. Many crusaders wrote letters to loved ones describing the military engagements in which they had taken part, often using provocative language to cast Muslims in a negative light. Often their expectation was that they would return home, and many pilgrims and crusaders did so rather than settling in the Holy Land.

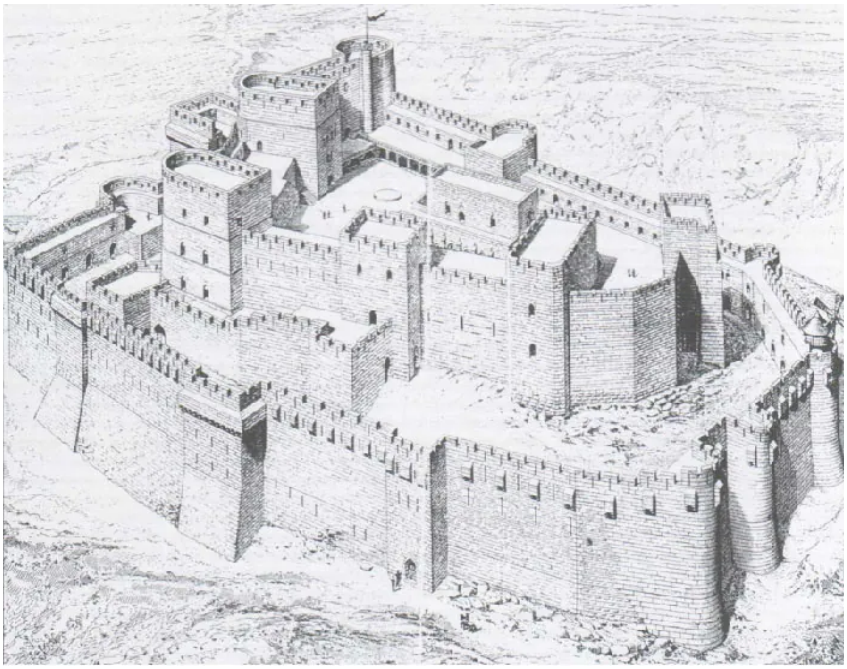


Figure 13.22 Krak des Chevaliers. This is a nineteenth-century artist's drawing of the compact fortress of Krak des Chevaliers in Syria, built to be defensible by a small number of fighters. (credit: "The Krak des Chevaliers as it was in the Middle-Ages" by Guillaume Rey : Étude sur les monuments de l'architecture militaire des croisés en Syrie et dans l'île de Chypre (1871)/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

While European settlers in Outremer remained few, other types of Europeans kept the cities and ports busy, both during the period of the Crusader States and after their fall. In addition to pilgrims, administrators, and scholars, merchants from the Italian city-

states like Venice and Genoa benefited from the crusading movement. They profited by shipping pilgrims and fighters to Outremer and wrested lucrative concessions to establish their mercantile outposts in cities like Constantinople, Antioch, and Acre. Their contact with the trading emporiums of the Middle East connected Europe to the trade routes that extended across Afro-Eurasia and increased Europeans' consumption of spices, silk, lacquerware, and ceramics from China.

These trading connections were not the only result valued by the Italian merchants. They were also eager for better knowledge of the peoples and geography of the lands, with an eye to establishing direct trading contacts with the distant civilizations that produced luxury goods Europeans began to demand. The best example is the fourteenth-century merchant and explorer Marco Polo, who followed the land routes to China. The Italian merchants kept up their trade and contact with different Islamic kingdoms, and the wealth of their mercantile cities inspired the kings of Europe to patronize their own merchants and explorers to help them capitalize on the riches of the world that flowed into the Mediterranean. This age of exploration and trade was accelerated by European experiences in the Crusades.

Later Crusading

The crusading movement continued after the Third Crusade, but enthusiasm waned. Pope Innocent III, one of the most powerful medieval popes, called for a new crusade in 1202. The crusaders wanted to avoid the overland routes through Anatolia that had been a problem from the start. They hoped to avoid the Byzantine Empire too, because tensions between crusader leaders and the Byzantine emperors had been worsened by religious conflict and accusations of betrayal. These crusaders ordered ships from Italian cities to carry them directly to the Holy Land. In return, the Venetian leader asked the crusaders to attack a port city named Zara on the Dalmatian coast, which was Christian but Venice's rival. When the crusaders agreed, the pope was furious and excommunicated them.

The crusaders continued to Constantinople, where they became involved in the internal politics of the Byzantine Empire and attacked the city, sacking it after a complicated attempt to put a pro-crusader emperor on the throne. A city that had stood against countless enemies for nearly a thousand years had been crushed. The event marked a deep betrayal of the Greek Christians and of crusading ideals. While the Catholics established the short-lived Latin Empire of Constantinople, considerable damage had been done to the crusading movement and to relations between the Greek Orthodox and Catholic churches.

Later calls for crusades were met with some enthusiasm, but the object of the fight became Egypt, recognized as an important base for controlling the Holy Land. Nevertheless, later crusades became increasingly French and less successful at accomplishing their goals, at least as far as establishing Christian control of the Holy Land went. The French crusader-king Louis IX led the Seventh and Eighth Crusades against Muslim rulers in North Africa and died of illness there. (He was later canonized as St. Louis.) When the port city of Acre in present-day Israel fell in 1291, the last of the Crusader States fell with it.

The crusading ideal was also transformed by practice and experience. The popes now called holy wars not just to liberate Jerusalem but to fight against the enemies of the church. Crusades were called against non-Christians in the Baltic regions, against heretics in France, and even against the pope's personal enemies in Italy (Figure 13.23). Crusaders came to expect standard privileges like the indulgence, a means to reduce the penance owed for sinning by giving money directly to the church or paying for masses or other clerical services. They could also rely on the protection of their property and relief from feudal dues or taxes. Crusading become commonplace by the thirteenth century, and generations of families made going on crusade a family tradition. The popes frequently called on Christian knights and aristocrats to fight against Muslims in a conflict that now seemed to be waged everywhere, not just in the Middle East, and against non-Christians of all types. Conflict was never the sole characteristic of relationships between Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people in the medieval period, but the image of Muslims and Jewish people as perennial enemies of Christian culture that developed in the crusading era had a lasting negative impact in Europe and elsewhere, even to the present day.



Figure 13.23 Crusade in the Baltics. This relief carving from the early fourteenth century shows Germanic knights, members of a crusading order, fighting against Lithuanians in the Baltic Crusades. (credit: "Lithuanians fighting Teutonic Knights" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, the crusading ideal declined in popularity. This was due in part to the decline of the power of the papacy and in part to the revival of royal power in the fourteenth century. The Crusades had been launched by popular popes viewed as reformers and men of virtue. Over time, they came to seem more concerned about their own power and prestige and less like the hard-working clerics who had battled kings for the freedom of the church. In the early fourteenth century, the king of France accused the Knights Templar, one of the more popular crusading orders, of committing crimes such as blasphemy and apostasy (the rejection of Christianity). The order's leaders were executed as heretics, and the popes disbanded the order, largely to please the French king.

The Past Meets the Present

The Modern Crusade?

As part of the secularization of society that occurred with industrialization and the rise of the nation-state, most modern Western cultures reject the idea of warfare for religious regions. Romanticized images of the Crusades persist in movies like *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and in video games like Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed*.

The rhetoric of holy war, and the memory of it in Islamic and Christian communities, also persist in modern political discourse in many Western countries, but in different contexts. As the medieval scholar Matthew Gabriele has argued, after 9/11, the concept was revived in the United States to describe its conflict with terrorism. "The consensus of American opinion now holds that, in the minds of Al Qaeda and other 'radical Islamists,' the attacks were part of a religious war, a cosmic, Manichean struggle that would only end with complete and utter victory of one side over another."[1]

Gabriele argues that use of the term "holy war" is complicated because of all the assumptions that go with it, especially the way it "omits the messiness of everyday life in the spaces in which Muslims and Christians lived side-by-side in the medieval world—tensions, violence, and coexistence captured by Ibn Jubayr, Usama ibn Munqidh, and the Templar of Tyre among many others."[2] A study of the Crusades, then, must take into account the lived history of religious toleration in the Middle Ages as well as the points of conflict.

- Why would video games and action films revisit the Crusades in the modern period?
- In what ways can a simplistic view of the Crusades be misleading to modern audiences?

While Christian kingdoms expanded in the Baltic regions and in the Iberian Peninsula, the rise of powerful Islamic kingdoms in the Middle East, like the Mamluks in Egypt and later the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia, ensured that crusades to control Jerusalem became impractical. Kings and aristocrats turned their attention to building up nation-states and warring against their dynastic

rivals at home. The rhetoric of crusade still colored fights between Christians and non-Christians, but these conflicts often served the political goals of kings and monarchs willing to deal with the papacy in return for its blessing.

Footnotes

- 1Mathew Gabriele. “Debating the ‘Crusade’ in Contemporary America.” *The Medieval Journal* vol. 6 no. 1. 2016.
- 2Mathew Gabriele. “Debating the ‘Crusade’ in Contemporary America.” *The Medieval Journal* vol. 6 no. 1. 2016.

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11.6: Key Terms

chivalry
a code of ideal conduct meant to validate the practices of noble warriors by Christianizing knightly violence and behavior

Cluniac reform
a movement that aimed to limit the influence of aristocrats in church matters

dynatoi
members of the Byzantine elite who often compromised imperial authority

feudalism
a collection of practices that bound lesser lords to greater lords through land and privileges given in return for personal and military support

Great Schism of 1054
the conflict that solidified the separation of the eastern and western Christian churches

jihad
a religiously infused conflict waged on behalf of Islam, or any struggle a Muslim undertakes in the name of Allah

mamluks
educated, formerly enslaved men who served as soldiers and administrators in Islamic societies beginning in the ninth century

manorialism
a medieval economic system of agricultural production directed by a lord and carried out by serfs or other varieties of unfree laborers

Outremer
the French name for the four Crusader States created after the First Crusade, the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem

papacy
the set of administrative structures associated with the government of the Catholic Church primarily—but not exclusively—linked with the city of Rome

serfs
unfree peasants who owed labor to a feudal lord and lived under the lord's authority

Sufism
the mystical expression of Islamic faith

sultan
a ruler who claims authority over the Islamic community but not necessarily the title of caliph

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11.7: Section Summary

13.1 The Post-Roman West in the Early Middle Ages

The early Middle Ages helped set the stage for a new society to emerge from Roman, Christian, and Germanic traditions, and for a revival of the classical world to influence the rise of Islamic culture. Kings, clergy, and scholars helped to preserve the classical past and maintain diplomatic and economic ties across western Afro-Eurasia. The growth of cultural and religious cohesion through western Europe and the crude but effective institutions of the feudal world laid the groundwork for a period of stability and growth to come in the High Middle Ages.

13.2 The Seljuk Migration and the Call from the East

The Abbasid rulers had established their control over the Middle East and created a multiethnic, multireligious society that promoted trade, scholarship, and urbanization. By the tenth century, however, the caliphs' sphere had been reduced to Syria and Iraq. Religious and political rivals like the Fatimids, who established the only Shia caliphate, weakened the Abbasids. The arrival of the Seljuk Turks helped to push back the Fatimids and dealt a devastating blow to the Byzantine Empire. The Seljuks enjoyed their status as protectors of the Abbasid realms, and like other conquerors before them, they eagerly embraced Persian culture, art, and literature. The Byzantine emperors, suffering a loss of prestige and territory, looked west in the hope that renewed alliances with the Germanic kingdoms could help restore their power in Anatolia.

13.3 Patriarch and Papacy: The Church and the Call to Crusade

The period of recovery from the collapse of the Carolingian Empire brought about the ordering of society from the lowliest serf to the kings of western Afro-Eurasia. Popes wanted to reform the church and used their authority to challenge the secular rulers of European kingdoms. Those same rulers worked to create stability by integrating their warrior culture with Christian beliefs, both to justify and to restrain violence. The Byzantine emperor's call to the pope for aid leaned on all these complex developments and helped to launch the Crusades, a new chapter in the history of conflict fueled by religion.

13.4 The Crusading Movement

The Crusades were a movement that signaled the growth of the papacy's influence in western Europe and helped to stimulate trade, the growth of the Italian city-states, and contact with peoples across Afro-Eurasia. They were also complicated by the ways in which they failed their own ideals: the massacre of innocents, the betrayal of other Christians, and the too-frequent use of warfare to meet political or economic goals. The Crusades persisted in the European imagination for the rest of the Middle Ages, and in many ways, their legacy shapes the modern world today.

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11.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What was the relationship between the Germanic kings and the non-German aristocracy they ruled?

a. They could not find common ground and were often at war.
b. They could work together when religious differences were not a point of contention.
c. They viewed each other as so similar that there were no differences between them.
d. They were able to preserve the Roman Empire until the end of the Middle Ages.

2.
How did the Visigoths' conversion to Christianity change their relationship with the Jewish people?

a. The Visigoths became more tolerant of Jewish people.
b. The Visigoths did not change their policies toward Jewish people.
c. Jewish people joined the Visigoths in converting to Christianity.
d. The Visigoths began to insist that Jewish people convert or suffer consequences.

3.
Which is not a key feature of feudalism?

a. the *wergild*
b. serfs
c. fiefs
d. manorialism

4.
Feudalism developed after the collapse of what empire?

a. the Byzantine Empire
b. the Roman Empire
c. the Carolingian Empire
d. the Caliphate of Cordoba

5.
What state was founded in North Africa and was eventually centered in Egypt?

a. the Abbasid Caliphate
b. the Byzantine Empire
c. the Caliphate of Cordoba
d. the Fatimid Caliphate

6.
What religious movement rejected the worldliness of the Abbasid Caliphate and instead pursued spiritual union with God?

a. Sufism
b. Shi'ite Islam
c. Mamluk
d. Shaman

7.
Legitimate caliphs in Shia Islam had to be descended from what early figure in Islamic history?

a. Abu Bakr
b. Ali
c. Moses
d. Constantine

8.
What dynasty established the only Shia caliphate?

a. Fatimids

b. Buyids
c. Seljuks
d. Macedonians

9.
What challenge did both the Abbasid Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire face?

a. They both had to find military alternatives to their own elite.
b. They both had to prove they were descended from a religious authority.
c. They both had to take control of Italy to ensure their wealth.
d. They both had to develop systems of writing to record their scriptures.

10.
What event marked the separation of the eastern and western churches?

a. the First Crusade
b. the Great Schism
c. the fall of Rome
d. the Islamic conquest of Spain

11.
Why did Pope Urban call for the First Crusade while in France and not in Rome?

a. France had more Christians than Italy.
b. Rome was occupied by a rival pope supported by the German emperor.
c. France had better systems of communication than Rome.
d. Rome had a significant Muslim population, and the pope did not want them harmed.

12.
What does the term jihad mean?

a. just war
b. conversion
c. struggle
d. pilgrimage

13.
What religious communities did the crusaders attack before they had even left Europe?

a. Christian communities
b. Monasteries
c. Islamic communities
d. Jewish communities

14.
What site in Jerusalem is considered of particular importance to Christians?

a. the Holy Sepulchre
b. the Al-Aqsa Mosque
c. the Temple Mount
d. the Pope’s Palace

15.
Why was the Byzantine emperor unhappy with the development of Outremer?

a. The emperor had controlled Jerusalem, and the crusaders took it from him.
b. The emperor was Muslim and believed Jerusalem should stay under Muslim control.
c. The emperor expected the crusaders to return to him the territory they conquered.
d. The emperor did not approve of mixing religion and warfare.

16.
What two groups were targets of massacres and expulsions after the establishment of Outremer?

a. Jewish people and Christians who were not Catholic

b. Jewish people and Muslims
c. Muslims and the Greek Orthodox
d. Catholics and Muslims

17.
What was a reason for the decline in crusading in the later Middle Ages?

a. the decline of the power and influence of the popes
b. the control of Jerusalem by a Christian state
c. the disinterest in religion felt by many Europeans
d. the good relationship between Muslims and Christians

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11.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What were the chief weaknesses of the Carolingian Empire?
2.
Under what circumstances did peoples of different ethnic or cultural background encounter each other in the early Middle Ages?
3.
In what ways was the Caliphate of Cordoba different from Germanic kingdoms?
4.
What were the causes of the devolution of Abbasid power?
5.
Why did the Seljuks assume the title of sultan rather than caliph?
6.
What caused the Byzantine Empire to seek aid from the Christian West?
7.
What differences between the eastern and western Christian churches in the eleventh century led to the Great Schism?
8.
What motivations did western Christians have for leaving their homes and participating in the Crusades?
9.
Why was Jerusalem so important to Jewish people, Christians, and Muslims in the medieval period?
10.
Why did many eastern Christians and Jewish people not welcome the arrival of the crusaders into the Holy Land?

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11.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
What challenges did people face in the period of time after the collapse of Roman authority in western Europe?
2.
How did religion influence political life in the early Middle Ages?
3.
What roles did women play in early medieval societies?
4.
How did the Germanic tribes transform the western Roman Empire?
5.
What external and internal forces challenged the stability of states, Christian or Islamic, in this period?
6.
In what circumstances were peoples of different faiths tolerated in this period? Under what conditions were people more divided over religion? Why?
7.
In what ways were the Germans, the Byzantine Empire, and the Muslim states all inheritors of Roman and Greek culture?
8.
How did religious reform shape relationships between different Christian communities?
9.
What do the Christian ideas of crusade have in common with the Islamic ideas of jihad? What complicates these ideas as notions of "just war"?
10.
What stated goals did the crusading movement achieve, and what unintended consequences arose from them?
11.
In what way did the Crusades bring peoples from across Afro-Eurasia into contact with each other?
12.
In what ways did the Crusades change the relationship between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in the Middle East? What impact have the Crusades had on subsequent ideas of religious toleration?
13.
How did geography affect the crusaders, the Byzantine Empire, or the Muslim states?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

12: Pax Mongolica- The Steppe Empire of the Mongols

12.1: Introduction
12.2: Song China and the Steppe Peoples
12.3: Chinggis Khan and the Early Mongol Empire
12.4: The Mongol Empire Fragments
12.5: Christianity and Islam outside Central Asia
12.6: Key Terms
12.7: Section Summary
12.8: Review Questions
12.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
12.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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12.1: Introduction



Figure 14.1 Kublai Khan. This image is from a silk scroll painting made in 1280 CE by Liu Guandao, known as Zhongxian, an artist of Kublai Khan's court. It depicts Kublai (center in a white fur coat) with his wife and others on a traditional hunt, demonstrating the value the Mongols continued to place on their origins even after their empire spread far from their ancestral steppe lands. (credit: modification of work "Kublai Khan on a hunting expedition, painted on a silk handscroll (fragment)" by Cambridge Illustrated History of China (1999) by Patricia B. Ebrey/National Palace Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

14.1 Song China and the Steppe Peoples
14.2 Chinggis Khan and the Early Mongol Empire
14.3 The Mongol Empire Fragments
14.4 Christianity and Islam outside Central Asia

The years between 1000 and 1350 CE were a time of extreme highs and lows for the people living in the Eurasian land mass. China came close to industrializing and creating a Confucian meritocracy. An increasing percentage of Eurasia's population converted to Islam, even as Christian military forces pushed Islamic civilization to the southern tip of Iberia and tried to wrest the eastern Mediterranean—the territory viewed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as "the Holy Land"—from Muslim rule. Europeans grappled with creating governments strong enough to protect the population but with robust enough checks on centralized authority to keep at least the elites from being abused. Enslaved people revolted and began to rule in the Nile delta and Indian subcontinent.

Nowhere, however, was change more dramatic and consequential than among the scattered seminomadic people of the Inner Asian Steppe. One of their number, written off and enslaved as a child, emerged to unite and lead a large faction of them into such a potent force that his descendants, who included Kublai Khan (Figure 14.1), marched as conquerors through the palaces of the Chinese Son of Heaven, the Caliph of God's messenger, and countless cities. This leader was known to the world as Chinggis (Genghis) Khan. Uniting a million or so of the world's 400 million people into the Mongol Empire, he not only altered the trajectory of their lives, he also unleashed forces that swept many old ways aside and laid the foundations for the modern world to emerge.

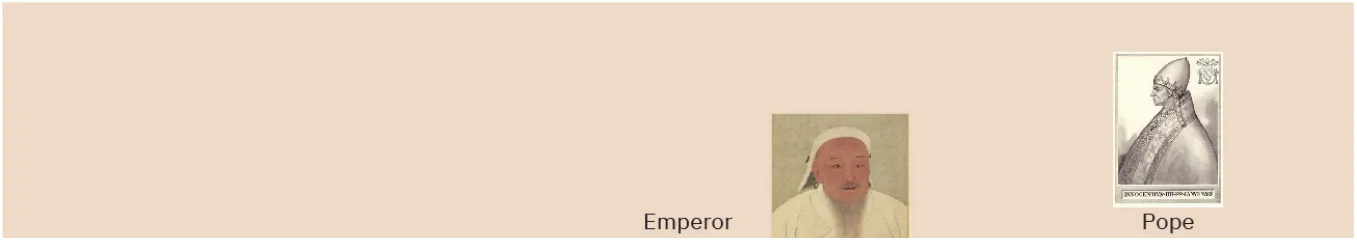


Figure 14.2 Timeline: Pax Mongolica: The Steppe Empire of the Mongols. (credit “1112”: modification of work “Auspicious Cranes” by Liaoning Provincial Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1198”: modification of work “Pope Innocent III wearing a Y-shaped pallium” by Fresco at the cloister Sacro Speco/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1206–1227”: modification of work “Emperor Taizu of Yuan, better known as Genghis Khan” by National Palace Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1215”: modification of work “King John of England signing Magna Carta” by The Granger Collection, New York/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1236–1240”: modification of work “Sultana Razia Begum” by Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad/Museums of India, Public Domain; credit “1252”: modification of work “Pope Innocent IV” by The Lives and Times of the Popes by Chevalier Artaud de Montor, New York: The Catholic Publication Society of America, 1911/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)



Figure 14.3 Locator Map: Pax Mongolica: The Steppe Empire of the Mongols. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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12.2: Song China and the Steppe Peoples

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the political and economic structures of Song China
- Describe the way of life of Song China's northern neighbors
- Discuss Chinggis Khan's role as unifier and empire builder

The disintegration of China's Tang dynasty in 907 CE left a chaotic power vacuum in the territory it had ruled. Generals turned the jurisdictions they could control into small independent sovereign states. More traditional seminomadic peoples from the sparsely settled semiarid grasslands and mountains to the north of China's borders, such as the Khitan Liao and the Xia, seized control of many former Tang domains. As they occupied these areas, some groups switched from migrating periodically for animal grazing and hunting, with the occasional raid on neighbors, to living a more agrarian life with urban centers and formal government, which would become hallmarks of Chinese civilization. The absence of central authority and legitimate succession led to frequent conflicts within and between these groups. Other seminomadic people located farther from China such as the Tatars and Mongols in the west and north, however, continued to live in loosely organized groups that were fluid in composition and unsettled in duration. They built no permanent structures and had only sporadic interaction with those to the south, occasionally exchanging or plundering goods.

Meanwhile, in the central and southern parts of what had been Tang China, the Zhao family convinced the fractured political units that they held the Mandate of Heaven—the favor of the natural order that sustained them but could be lost by those less worthy—thus beginning the Song dynasty in the 960s. The Khitan Liao and Xia, who ruled much of northern China, refused to recognize the Zhao patriarch as the Son of Heaven, the rightful Chinese ruler. Attempts to force such recognition failed, leaving the Song with a much smaller realm than the Han or Tang. Despite this, Song China was largely stable, with a steadily rising population and standard of living. In the 1120s, military reversals led to the loss of substantial territory and set back economic growth, but the Song were able to recover, only to be faced with the Mongol invasion in the 1230s.

Song China to the Thirteenth Century

While the Song dynasty ruled over less territory than other major dynasties, it experienced tremendous population and economic growth. Its emperors created a system closer to the ideals and virtues laid out by Confucius and his followers than any of their predecessors had, and for the most part, they lived and ruled by them. Those precepts had limitations, however, especially when it came to securing the territory against the increased power of the seminomadic steppe peoples, who were now adopting the technology and lifestyle of their more settled neighbors.

Securing the dynasty's rule required replacing local military leaders with imperially appointed mandarins, civilian government officials who could advise and, when necessary, restrain the generals on matters of foreign policy. Mandarins were the key class in the social and political hierarchy during times of stability in the more than two thousand years of Confucian dominance in China, from the second century BCE to 1911 CE. Starting as allies of the early Han emperor who oversaw local landed gentry, mandarins were selected by a process that by the height of the Tang dynasty had evolved into a system of exams on Confucian texts. The Song made great progress bringing the Confucian ideal of government by scholar-officials to fruition by enacting reforms that made the exam process more merit based and less subject to nepotism or favoritism. While the system was interrupted by the Mongol Yuan dynasty, the Song reforms became the basis for the way Chinese government officials were selected until the fall of the monarchy in the early twentieth century.

Mandarins were the top officials in China, and having sons in this class was the primary method of gaining or maintaining social status. Women, even daughters of current officials, were not able to benefit. Although existing mandarin families had significant advantages in preparing their sons to succeed on the exams, it was not unheard of for a village to recognize talent in a peasant or artisan family's child and support that child's study. Not only would this step elevate that family into a higher social class, it would also give the village better access to government officials.

The Song dynasty's founding brothers, Emperors Taizu and Taizong, had both served in the military, yet they structured a government in which the mandarins applied their Confucian pacifism to protect the state by bribing potentially hostile neighbors either not to attack them or to attack hostile neighbors for the Song. This policy stemmed from the belief that the Tang dynasty had fallen because it expanded into areas populated by non-Chinese peoples who refused to adopt orderly Confucian values. Pacifying those areas took unsustainable amounts of resources. The Song attitude toward the military was summed up in a saying from the era: "Do not waste good iron making nails; do not waste good men making soldiers."

At the same time, Song engineers were the first to develop effective military uses for gunpowder, creating flamethrowers, handheld projectile-launching early guns, and shrapnel-laden bombs, hurled first by catapults and later by rockets. The Song had powerful military technology, but their predisposition toward Confucian pacifism and fear of a strong military that could endanger civilian rule prevented them from effectively using it much of the time.

While Tang dynasty China had emphasized increasing wealth through territorial expansion, the Song relied instead on internal economic development. Agriculture focused not on mere subsistence farming but on creating a food surplus that then supported a considerable expansion in population and, in turn, an increase in urbanization. At the same time, rural, farming households had increased purchasing power. Much of this was due to improvements in agricultural technology, which increased both the amount of available cultivatable land as well as crop yields. For example, irrigation made possible by the invention of chain-driven pumps turned unused hillsides into arable land (Figure 14.4). Peasants began planting new strains of rice that ripened quickly enough to yield two harvests per year. The Song government aided this economic development by stabilizing agricultural markets and food prices and taking advantage of new technologies that greatly increased the productivity of irrigation. It also maintained transportation and irrigation systems and spread the seeds of more efficient crops. In short, more land was open to farm, and the result was an increase in harvests and the availability of produce.



Figure 14.4 Terraced Rice Paddies. These terraced rice paddies in Longsheng, China, demonstrate how, with irrigation, hilly land can be cultivated. (credit: "Paddy fields of Longsheng, China" by "Drolexandre"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

Link to Learning

Machinery to move water uphill was a key part of the irrigation technology that fueled the agricultural revolution in Song China. Read this brief text about the history of the chain pump and its connections to China to learn more.

The resulting increase in China's food supply fueled a huge population boom, freeing labor to work in economic sectors outside agriculture. The first complete Song census showed around fifty-five million people in the early eleventh century. One hundred years later, there were around 120 million. At its height, Song China had at least three cities with populations of more than one million and dozens of cities with more than 100,000 people; in the same period in Europe, no city other than the Byzantine capital of Constantinople even approached these sizes after the fall of the western Roman Empire.

Some scholars contend that by the twelfth century, Song China was experiencing an industrial revolution similar to that of eighteenth-century Britain. Surplus labor from the population boom provided significant opportunities for the expansion of the production of industrial goods, and the dynasty saw iron production rise from around 65 million pounds around the year 1000 to more than 250 million pounds by 1100. This was almost double what would be produced in Britain even seven hundred years later. Large-scale factory production and water-powered textile and paper-making machinery were in use in some larger cities. These developments, along with the construction of better roads and canals, allowed the Song to become a more mobile and interconnected society. The increase in productivity meant that goods could be traded over greater distances, and there was more need (and opportunity) for merchants and other support workers to interact and move these goods, thus distributing the economic benefits that came with the use of machines.

Beyond the Book

Urban Society in the Song Period

One of the most famous depictions of urban daily life in Song China is a hand-painted scroll from the first decades of the twelfth century, attributed to Chinese painter Zhang Zeduan. The title of this scroll is generally translated as *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, although some suggest that Qingming refers not to a specific festival but to a more generic time of peace and order.

The Qingming scroll illustrates the prosperity and economic development of the Song period by showing a variety of everyday social and economic activities undertaken by people of all classes in an unspecified Chinese city. Traditional interpretations suggest it is a realistic portrayal of daily life in Bianjing (modern Kaifeng), the Song capital from 960 to 1127. More modern critical analysis suggests instead that the scroll dates from a generation or more later and represents a yearning for a more idealized time in the past. For example, specific features of the capital have been omitted, and the images lack the signs of crime, poverty, and homelessness that are generally typical of large cities in any civilization.

It is not difficult to understand why well-known landmarks and characteristics of the capital are absent. While the scroll was likely intended to present a realistic visual depiction of the capital, those seeking to portray places of which they are proud often show them in their best light. Thus, the exclusion of the seedier sides of life makes sense; it is a truthful representation of aspects of Song society during this period, but one that does remain dishonest by omission, and a reminder to us as modern historians to carefully analyze and think about the sources from the past on which we rely for information.

Whether the scroll was intended to reflect what the artist chose to see in the city in which he lived or was an homage to an earlier and better time, it does show several aspects of daily urban life and Song dynasty technology. Watch the animated video to learn more.

Click to view content

- Contrast the types of businesses and modes of transportation depicted in the scroll with those in contemporary U.S. towns and cities.
- Does the omission of some aspects of Song society mean we should consider the scroll untrustworthy as a historical document for reconstructing the past? Why or why not?

The Inner Asian Steppe and Chinese Dynastic Struggles

Steppe peoples organized themselves under widely varying degrees of centralized authority. At one end were small self-governing nomadic clans with fluctuating membership and modest herds in remote parts of the steppe. At the other extreme were settled societies with fixed capital cities, centralized administrations funded by routine taxation, and a writing system for their language. In between were larger groups of seminomadic tribes that were mostly preliterate, with more loosely fixed memberships and territorial ranges than the settled societies. In the wake of the Tang dynasty collapse at the beginning of the tenth century, some seminomadic tribes seeking the prosperity and technology of China transitioned to more settled and centralized civilizations.

Taking advantage of the power vacuum caused by the collapse of the Tang dynasty, two steppe peoples extended their rule from the Inner Asian Steppe into northern China: the Khitan Liao, linguistically a Mongolian people who formed the Liao kingdom, and the Xia, sometimes called the Tangut, linguistically a Tibetan people who formed the Xi Xia kingdom. These kingdoms became a bridge between the long-established, highly centralized, and sedentary civilization of China and the nomadic tribes of the steppe (Figure 14.5).



Figure 14.5 The Collapse of the Tang Dynasty. Multiple sovereign political units emerged from the chaos of the Tang dynasty's collapse in the early tenth century. Note the loss of Song territory—which previously occupied much of the blue area in the northeast—as a new dynasty, the Jurchen Jin, expanded southward, displacing the Khitan Liao and taking many Song lands. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The eight tribes of the Khitan Liao spent the chaotic years between the Tang and the Song making a transition to life as a settled people with administrative institutions. Establishing a permanent capital city in the north in 918, their leader abandoned the traditional elections in favor of a hereditary monarchy. A dual system of administration was adopted, using traditional tribal practices of governance in areas populated predominantly by steppe people, while a system of exams similar to that used by the mandarins selected officials in the majority-Chinese parts of the kingdom. The processes of centralized administration required a written script, which was finalized in 920. The Liao dynasty also promoted economic development by moving Chinese workers skilled in technologies that steppe people did not practice, like metallurgy, to teach their crafts to those living in the steppe.

In 1004, the Song and the Liao agreed to the Treaty of Shanyuan. This pact highlighted the changing relationship between the steppe people and the Chinese between the Tang and the Song dynasties. In it, both the Song and the Liao emperors were referred to as Sons of Heaven. The two states were recognized as equals, each having the rights and obligations of border control and extradition, and neither allowed to alter the waterways that flowed between them. Tellingly, however, on the issue of tribute, the Song were obligated to give the Liao an annual payment of 200,000 bolts of silk and 130,000 ounces of silver (worth about USD$2.7 million in 2020 prices). No reciprocal obligation of the Liao to give tribute to the Song was specified.

The Song resented this relationship with the Liao, and in 1120 they bankrolled the revolt of one of Khitan Liao's tributary states, the Jurchen, a steppe people who were themselves transitioning to more centralized, sedentary structures apart from their traditional

tribal organization. Once the Liao and the Jurchen were locked in combat, the Song attacked from the south. Exploiting divisions within the Liao kingdom, the Song and the Jurchen were victorious by 1125. The remnants of the Liao royal family fled west with supporters and founded the Kara-Khitan state. The Jurchen assumed rule of the former Liao lands as the Jin dynasty.

The Jin were not content to supplant the Liao. The Song had already been paying them a modest tribute of luxury goods, and the Song need for help to defeat the Liao convinced the Jin that, while seemingly rich and prosperous, the Song were militarily weak. Their perception would certainly have been reinforced if they had been aware of the temperament of the Song emperor Huizong. In power since 1100, Emperor Huizong was more renowned as a Daoist poet and artist than an effective ruler. His most famous work, a poem and painting titled *Auspicious Cranes*, depicts the sighting of a flock of cranes, a traditional Chinese symbol of greatness and longevity and one of the links between humanity and the heavens in Daoism (Figure 14.6). Huizong interpreted the sighting as a sign his reign would be glorious and long. The Jin had other ideas, however, and attacked the Song in 1126. Huizong quickly abdicated in favor of his eldest son, Qinzong, who proved no more adept in military matters than his father. With Jin forces occupying large parts of Song territory north of the Yellow River valley and laying siege to the capital, Qinzong dispatched a peace mission, led by his half-brother Gaozong. The Jin took the mission hostage and extracted a hefty ransom and annual tribute to release its members and end the hostilities.

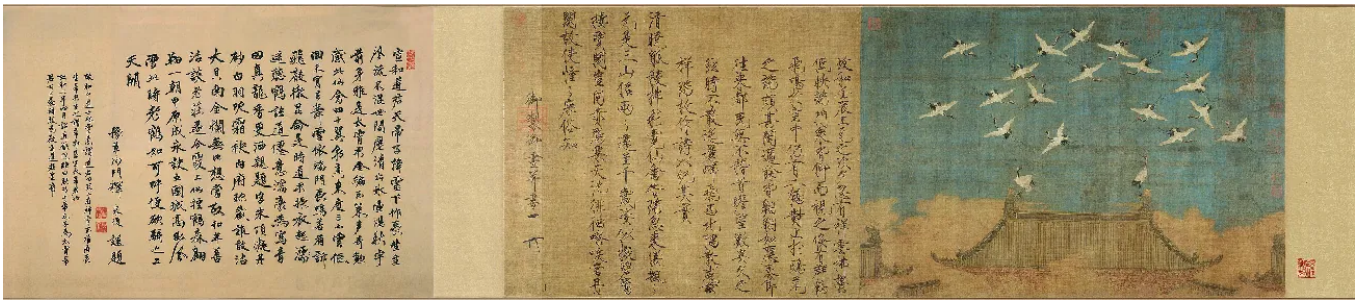


Figure 14.6 *Auspicious Cranes*. Emperor Huizong's poem and painting from 1112 uses ink and paint on silk to commemorate a good omen , the reported sighting of a flock of cranes on one of the palace buildings. (credit: modification of work "Auspicious Cranes" by Liaoning Provincial Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The peace proved short-lived as Qinzong tried to entice the former Liao mandarins, who were now working in service to the Jin, to revolt. They reported Qinzong's clumsy intrigues to the Jin emperor, who launched a more protracted attack. Bent on conquest and revenge this time, the Jin refused to be bought, and in 1127 they took the Song capital and seized the entire imperial household, goods, and people, including Huizong and Qinzong. In what became known as the Jingkang incident, the Jin went on a three-week rampage of raping and looting throughout the city.

Gaozong, who proved much more politically adept than his father or his brother, had been sent south to lead reinforcements back to the capital. Upon learning of the capital's fall, Gaozong united the military and mandarins behind him, proclaimed himself emperor, and rallied Song forces to halt the Jin advance. This event is considered the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty. War continued to rage until the 1140s, when the two sides agreed to the Treaty of Shaoxing, in which Gaozong ceded all Song territory north of the Huai River to the Jin, acknowledged the Song's tributary status to the Jin, and agreed to pay an annual tribute of 250,000 bolts of silk and 325,000 ounces of silver (more than USD$6.7 million today). Huizong died in captivity before the treaty was signed. Perhaps as a statement of contempt for his incompetence, Gaozong did not negotiate for his elder half-brother's release, condemning him to live out his remaining twenty years as a Jin captive.

Within a dozen years of conquering the Liao Empire, the Jin began embracing the institutions and structures of the Song Confucian state. Landed aristocrats, generally descended from tribal chieftains, were replaced by mandarins selected by Confucian exams. The capital was relocated from the traditional Jurchen homeland in northeast Asia to Zhongdu, around contemporary Beijing. Confucian texts and Chinese literature were translated into Jurchen to speed the spread of Chinese culture and values, and the mandarin exams began to be given in Jurchen as well as proto-Chinese. Jurchen families were bribed (or forced) to relocate into former Liao and Song areas to mix with the Han population.

Meanwhile, despite the huge setbacks and defeats of the second quarter of the twelfth century, Gaozong and his immediate successors were able to unite and stabilize the Song dynasty. The long period of warfare allowed many ethnic Chinese to move south as refugees, where government assistance enabled them to find land or employment. By 1200, the Southern Song population

was roughly the same size as it had been under the last census of the Song, despite encompassing much less land, and the economy seemed to have recovered to prewar levels.

The Rise of Chinggis Khan and Mongol Unification

While an increasing number of steppe people gathered in settled communities, many still lived as nomads. The clan, a small group of several families that shared an encampment and herded or hunted together, was the basic unit of steppe society. Each clan had a ruling lineage from which leaders were selected and that intermarried with other lineages to avoid in-breeding. Thus, the ruling lineages formed an aristocracy of sorts. Clans could split apart, creating a ruling lineage for a new clan, so it was possible to move from commoner to aristocrat, although founding and leading a clan was no small feat.

Given the high mortality among the steppe peoples, the adoption of children and widows was commonplace. Polygamy was practiced by men who could support multiple wives and the children they would produce, and most households included some enslaved people. Children, wives, enslaved people, and livestock were often obtained by raiding weaker, underprepared clans.

Clans joined together to form tribes under a single leader to better protect their herds and households, cooperate on resource management and migration, and engage in united actions like raids on other clans. Eurasian tribes were loosely organized, often multiethnic and multilingual, not exclusive to a kinship network, and open to any who were willing to obey the leader. Clans drifted in and out of tribes depending on their needs and wishes. Multiple tribes periodically united around a single skillful or charismatic leader, creating a larger confederation. This unity was very short-lived, rarely lasting beyond a generation or two.

Many clans and dozens of tribes occupied the Mongolian grasslands in the late twelfth century (Figure 14.7). Settled peoples like the Jin and Song had long incited these nomadic groups against one another, adding to the turmoil of incessant clan raids. In 1161, concerned that a confederation led by Mongolian speakers was growing too powerful, the Jin encouraged and supported a confederation led by Tatars to attack the Mongol-led confederation. Tatar was a Turkish language spoken by many inhabitants of the grasslands north of China. (The fluidity of membership in clans, tribes, and confederations makes it problematic to consider a group led by a speaker of one language as truly having a common ethnic heritage or long-standing communal bond such as a modern nation has. Nevertheless, perhaps for the sake of simplicity, scholars tend to refer to confederations of seminomads by the primary language of their leader.)



Figure 14.7 Mongol Tribes and the Three Steppe Kingdoms. This map shows (in yellow) the areas that various Mongol tribes considered their lands in the late twelfth century and where they were in relation to the three settled kingdoms of the Kara-Khitan, Xia, and Jin between the steppe and the Southern Song dynasty. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Tatar attack on the Mongol confederation scattered its clans, forcing them to form new tribes and seek to join other confederations. It was in this context that a son was born to Hoelun, primary wife of one of the clan leaders of the recently defeated Mongol confederation in their camp between the Onon and Herlen Rivers. The child, born as Temujin, is better known today by the title he acquired later in life and that history most remembers him by: Chinggis Khan, meaning “universal ruler.” He completely altered the relationships between the nomadic groups on the Eurasian Steppe and radically changed the trajectory of world history.

There are no historical records of Temujin before he became known as Chinggis Khan, the powerful ruler of the world’s largest empire in his time. A work called *The Secret History of the Mongols*, likely written after his death, is the most potentially reliable source, though it is suspect because it is based solely on oral history interpreted by non-Mongols.

Whereas *The Secret History of the Mongols* recounts many heroic exploits in Temujin’s family’s struggle to survive, it paints a bleak picture of their existence on the steppe. Temujin was briefly enslaved by the rival clan until a sympathetic family helped him escape. Not long after Temujin married, raiders from the Merkit Mongol tribe attacked and kidnapped his wife, Borte. Temujin sought help from Ong Khan, leader of the Kereit Mongol confederation, to retrieve her, and she gave birth to a son not long after. The timing made it unclear who the father was; nevertheless, Temujin accepted the child as his. At some point in the early 1180s, Temujin broke with his friend and clan leader Jamukha and formed a new clan with himself as head.

In Their Own Words

Jamukha and Temujin Pledge Eternal Friendship and Loyalty

The Secret History of the Mongols is silent on how Temujin and his close friend Jamukha became blood brothers when Temujin and his family were roaming clanless on the Inner Asian Steppe. In the aftermath of the battle in which they fought together to

free Temujin's wife, Temujin joined Jamukha's clan. The selection that follows is an account from *The Secret History of the Mongols* describing their pledges of unity and loyalty. As you read, think about how the two depict their relationship and what obligations they pledge to each other. Consider also how they symbolically confirm their new relationship, and how they celebrate it.

> *This is how they declared themselves friends by oath for the second time.*
>
> *They said to each other, "Listening to the pronouncement of the old men of former ages which says: "Sworn friends—the two of them Share but a single life; They do not abandon one another: They are each a life's safeguard for the other." We learn that such is the rule by which sworn friends love each other. Now, renewing once more our oath of friendship, we shall love each other."*
>
> *Temujin girdled his sworn friend Jamukha with the golden belt taken as loot from Toqto'a of the Merkit. He also gave sworn friend Jamuqa for a mount Toqto'a's yellowish white mare with a black tail and mane, a mare that had not foaled for several years. Jamuqa girdled his sworn friend Temujin with the golden belt taken as loot from Dayir Usun of the U'as Merkit, and he gave Temujin for a mount the kid-white horse with a horn, also of Dayir Usun. At the Leafy Tree on the southern side of the Quldaqar Cliff in the Qorqonaq Valley they declared themselves sworn friends and loved each other; they enjoyed themselves revelling and feasting, and at night they slept together, the two of them alone under their blanket.*
>
> *—Igor de Rachewiltz, The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*

- What personal values and behaviors in the oath Temujin and Jamukha swear to each other are important to the Mongolian-speaking peoples?
- What do the gifts they exchange suggest Mongolian speakers greatly value?

By 1187, Temujin had such an impressive force and reputation that Ong Khan turned to him when the Jin induced Ong Khan to attack the Tatar Confederation. Ong Khan and Temujin defeated the Tatars and acquired goods more luxurious than Temujin's people had ever seen. This drew even more people to his clan. As the clans allied with Temujin grew, Jamukha expanded his clan to keep up with him. Soon those in the Mongol-speaking part of the steppe were left with the choice of joining Temujin, joining Jamukha, or risking attack by one or the other.

Temujin made drastic changes to traditional Mongol practices, in part as a reaction to the hardships he suffered growing up, which laid the groundwork for his creation of a huge multiethnic empire. As he engaged in warfare with a wider array of rivals, he considered class differences. He punished those who led any resistance and executed the leaders of rival clans, but he often spared the common people and integrated the men into his army. He ordered his fighters to refrain from looting and raping and instead to pursue any fleeing warriors to capture or kill them, minimizing future retaliatory raids by those who escaped. Rather than enslaving the captured adult males, he put the members of aristocratic lineages on trial for committing whatever affront he had used to justify the attack. Once found guilty, which was the general outcome, they were executed. Temujin then divided the spoils of the raid equally between the participants and the households of his men killed in the raid. By assuring his soldiers that their widows and orphans would not be at the mercy of whoever took them in, he reduced the incentive to desert.

Temujin also divided his warriors into units of ten, each bound to the others by oaths of loyalty, and then units of one hundred and one thousand that chose their own leaders and swore similar oaths. Only at the highest level, ten units of one thousand warriors, did he appoint commanders, and he did so on the basis of merit and loyalty to him, not kinship or clan identity. The groups drilled precision moves and learned simple musical chants that identified the formations their commanders desired in the heat of battle. This innovative organization not only forged a deadly, efficient fighting force; it also provided all males with a shared and classless

role in society and unified an increasingly ethnically and linguistically diverse portion of the steppe people, whom Temujin began to call the People of the Felt Walls in a reference to their fabric-covered homes.

Temujin's reforms introduced a new division in steppe civilization that today might be called class warfare. People from aristocratic lineages began to fear Temujin and joined with Jamukha, but commoners sought the protection and rewards of joining the People of the Felt Walls. The aging Ong Khan disapproved of Temujin's attack on tradition and aristocratic privilege and began favoring Jamukha. After Ong Khan tried to lure him into a trap, Temujin fled to a rendezvous with his top leaders, who swore renewed loyalty to each other in the Baljuna Covenant. The covenant became a rallying point and symbol of Mongol nationalism for future generations.

The men who swore to the covenant came from nine different clans and represented at least four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the traditional Mongol worship of Tengri, the Eternal Blue Sky. The glue that held the People of the Felt Walls together was not kinship, ethnicity, or religion but devotion to the civil society Temujin had created. Word went out from Baljuna to the scattering People of the Felt Walls to regroup and to find Temujin and the others in a remote part of the steppe.

Ong Khan believed Temujin was hiding out a weeks' ride away in the east. Temujin and his followers were much closer, however. They surrounded Ong Khan's forces, using the element of surprise to launch an attack that lasted three days. Demoralized, many of Ong Khan and Jamukha's followers began to join Temujin. Ong Khan was killed while crossing alone into territory controlled by the Naiman, the last confederation that could oppose Temujin.

With Temujin expanding and the Naiman harboring Jamukha and other refugees from Ong Khan, war between the two groups was inevitable. Temujin's discipline and tactical training of his troops paid off, and in 1204 the Naiman collapsed, its leadership dead or in flight. The survivors joined the People of the Felt Walls. Jamukha was eventually turned in by his followers and executed, along with those who had betrayed him, since Temujin felt their treachery to their lord deserved punishment.

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12.3: Chinggis Khan and the Early Mongol Empire

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

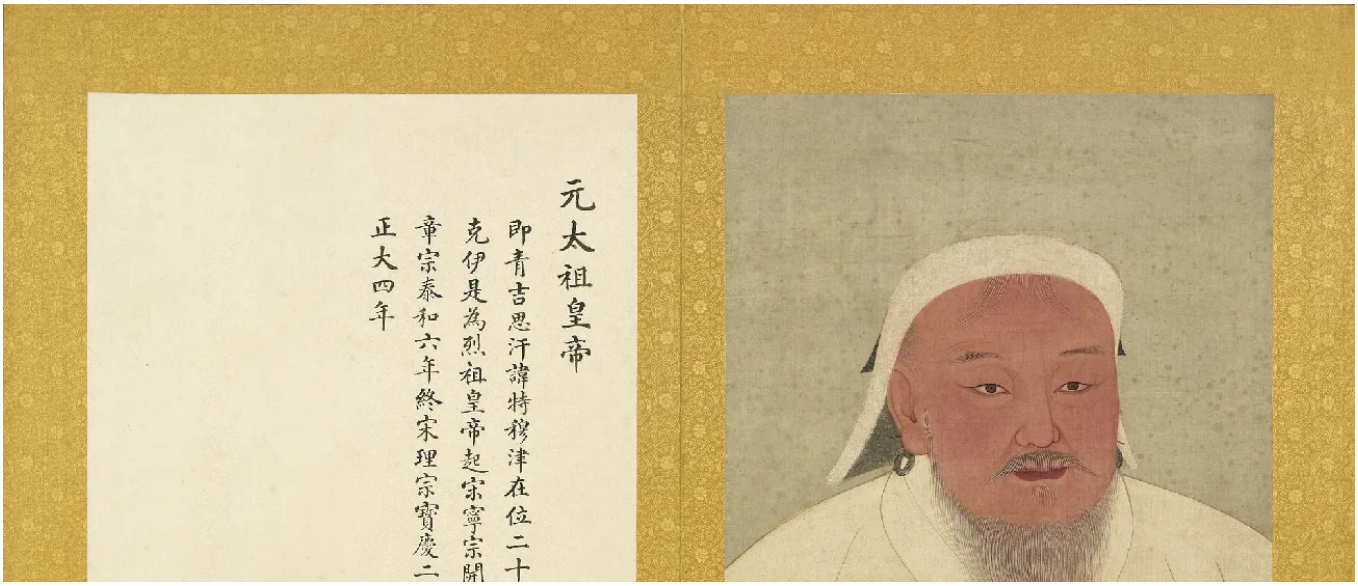
- Describe the new civilization Chinggis Khan created for the Mongols
- Analyze the trajectory and motivations of the conquests made under Chinggis, Ogedei, and Mongke Khan
- Explain the actions Ogedei Khan took to bring about Chinggis Khan's vision for a Eurasian trading empire
- Identify the obstacles the Mongols faced in their efforts to unify and expand their empire

With no remaining rivals to Temujin's rule over the People of the Felt Walls, nothing stood in the way of his vision of a better world for his followers; Chinggis Khan, or "World Leader," had truly been born. His vision was twofold. On one hand, Chinggis wanted to end the constant strife and warfare that characterized life on the steppe. Despite being a practitioner of violence and warfare, he also wanted to promote the peaceful acquisition of goods. He spent the rest of his life forcefully promoting those objectives, regardless of whether others desired them, with a bloody ruthlessness that seems at odds with those very same goals.

The *Yassa* and Mongol Life

To allow bitter feelings to subside after years of struggle, Chinggis waited until 1206 to call a *kurultai* to consolidate and confirm his rule over all Mongols. A *kurultai* was a meeting of those loyal to the leader of a seminomadic confederation, convened to confirm acceptance of a major change the leader wanted to make in relations within the group or between the group and others. Attendance signaled acceptance, and not attending meant not just disagreement but possibly withdrawal of loyalty to the leader. Temujin's *kurultai* was unprecedented in its scale. *The Secret History of the Mongols* records that nearly all the million or so People of the Felt Walls attended, setting up encampments that spread for miles. Unlike almost all previous coronations in recorded history, Temujin's was a highly inclusive event, not just for the elites and population of the capital. A shaman proclaimed him Chinggis Khan and confirmed that Tengri, a god revered by many central Asian peoples, granted him authority and would bless his people with prosperity and good fortune as long as he governed wisely and fairly, an idea similar to the Confucian Mandate of Heaven.

To prevent conflict over succession and maintain the democratic spirit of the *kurultai* where members had a say in selection, Chinggis Khan decreed that any future great khan, that is, any leader over the entirety of what he began to refer to as the "great Mongol nation" and the superior of all lesser khans, could be chosen only by a *kurultai* and not familial succession alone. Chinggis Khan now filled the role of clan and tribe leader. He put forth rules known as the *yassa* to govern relations between households; later, as the empire grew, he ordered the development of a written script for the Mongol language—based on that used by Uyghur tribes from areas north of China and Mongolia—so the *yassa* and records pertaining to it could be recorded (Figure 14.8).



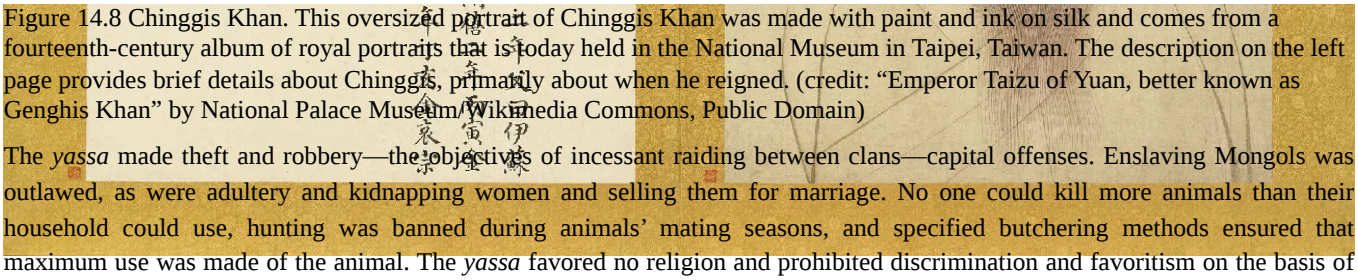


Figure 14.8 Chinggis Khan. This oversized portrait of Chinggis Khan was made with paint and ink on silk and comes from a fourteenth-century album of royal portraits that is today held in the National Museum in Taipei, Taiwan. The description on the left page provides brief details about Chinggis, primarily about when he reigned. (credit: "Emperor Taizu of Yuan, better known as Genghis Khan" by National Palace Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The *yassa* made theft and robbery—the objectives of incessant raiding between clans—capital offenses. Enslaving Mongols was outlawed, as were adultery and kidnapping women and selling them for marriage. No one could kill more animals than their household could use, hunting was banned during animals' mating seasons, and specified butchering methods ensured that maximum use was made of the animal. The *yassa* favored no religion and prohibited discrimination and favoritism on the basis of religion, perhaps the first law code to do so. Chinggis Khan, who continued to worship Tengri, granted tax and labor service exemptions to all religious leaders and holders of church lands, privileges later extended to those in secular occupations requiring literacy, such as medicine and law.

The family was the center of life for a Mongol woman, yet she had little if any say about how her family was formed. Marriages were arranged, and polygamy was common, although a man was not supposed to have more wives than he could support. Adult males in the household could sleep with any of the women in the household if this did not violate incest taboos, and it is unclear the degree to which a woman's consent was necessary. Because the *yassa* defined adultery as occurring only between married people of different households, it codified the potential for sexual assault within households.

Mongol women did have some power, however. They were often left to oversee the household when the men went to herd, hunt, and raid. A widow beyond childbearing years was often considered a household head and took her husband's place in the clan's collective decision-making institutions. When Chinggis Khan was away on extended campaigns, his wife Borte was the de facto leader of the civilians of the Mongol Empire, and the wives and mothers of later Mongol rulers could hold significant power over a khanate following this model. Such instances of female leadership were far, far rarer—or entirely unheard of—in most other Afro-Eurasian societies of the same period.

The Conquest Movement of Chinggis Khan

The *yassa* and the social-military organization put in place by Chinggis Khan removed many sources of strife from the Mongol Empire. But they also prohibited traditional activities, such as raiding other clans, that had led to social mobility. Chinggis Khan believed that without new sources of wealth and glory, people might grow restless and reject the peace he tried to create. His life experience had given him no concept of settled economic development or ways to redirect his people's energy to that goal. From the time he joined Ong Khan's attack on the Tatars and saw the luxuries acquired from the Jin and the Song, Chinggis knew settled peoples were a source of wealth ripe for the Mongol Empire to take, and for him as their leader to distribute. In his eyes, conquering these peoples or intimidating them into giving tribute was the next logical step.

As word spread of Chinggis Khan's coronation, some warriors in the settled kingdoms between the steppe and Song China left to join the Mongol Empire. The Kara-Khitan, assuming resistance would not go well, offered tribute to Chinggis Khan. After a coup in 1210, the new Xi Xia ruler accepted tributary status on terms similar to those of the Kara-Khitan.

The Jin, however, were another matter. In 1210, a new Jin emperor demanded Chinggis Khan submit to him and send tribute, so Chinggis marched his smaller but superior army south to invade (Figure 14.9). A master at exploiting his opponents' weaknesses, he realized that his linguistic cousins, the Khitan, resented the rule of the Jurchen Jin dynasty, so he portrayed his army as a liberating force for them. With their army swelling with Jin defectors, the Mongols were able to lay siege to Zhongdu, the Jin capital, and eventually seize the starving city. Chinggis Khan ordered the city thoroughly looted, tens of thousands enslaved, and untold numbers of others massacred.

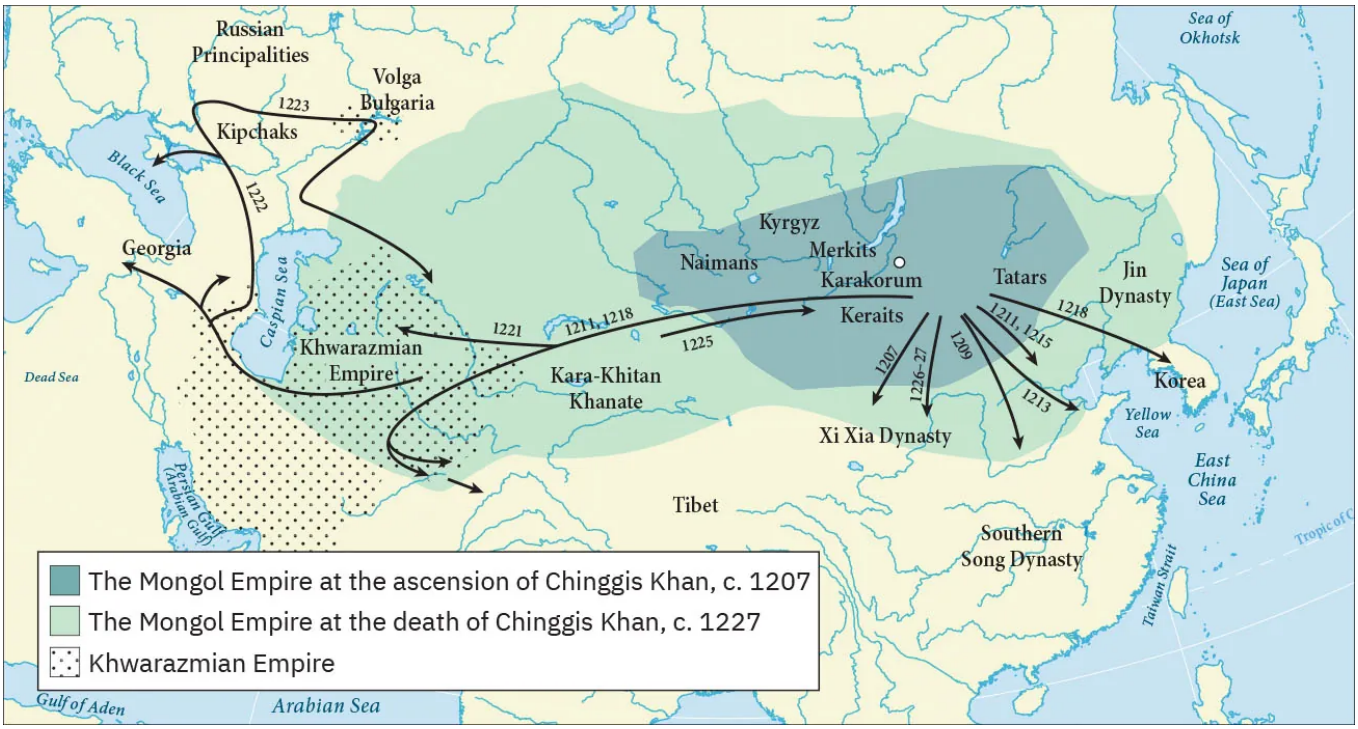


Figure 14.9 The Mongol Empire. This map shows the areas conquered by the Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan's leadership from 1207 to 1227. The black arrows depict the paths his army took, including exploratory campaigns outside the empire's boundaries to the west. In areas of northern China, Chinggis Khan had to invade areas he had already conquered that rebelled. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Once the spoils from Zhongdu had been gathered, Chinggis Khan and his army headed back to the steppe, leaving the campaign against the Jin mostly in the hands of his Khitan allies. Forces loyal to Chinggis Khan continued to subdue the Yellow River basin and expanded north into the Jurchen homeland, even venturing to the Korean Peninsula. By 1223, these areas were pacified and providing tribute to the Mongol Empire and its allies who occupied them. Ironically, this vast amount of looted goods forced Chinggis Khan to build the first permanent structures on the steppe, a warehouse complex to hold war booty so it could be preserved and distributed or traded over time.

The Kara-Khitan kingdom caught Chinggis Khan's attention in 1213 when the son of the Naiman leader he had defeated a decade earlier took control. The Kara-Khitan were already not meeting tribute expectations, and now a once-defeated rival led them. The Mongols quickly triumphed over the Kara-Khitan and absorbed them into the empire. Their conquests were wide, however, and not limited to China and the East. Mongol armies moved westward and likely seemed an unstoppable force to many.

The vast amount of wealth seized from the Jin fundamentally changed the mindset of the Mongol leadership, which demanded ever more goods, food, grazing lands, and raw materials. These new needs prompted Chinggis Khan to seek trading and raiding opportunities farther west. The absorption of the Kara-Khitan into the Mongol Empire had provided a direct border with the Islamic world through Khwarazmia, a realm stretching from Persia through central Asia. Around 1218, Chinggis Khan sent a caravan of a few hundred of his Muslim subjects to the leader of Khwarazmia, Allah al-Din Muhammad, with a letter requesting the establishment of trade relations and a great many valuable goods to show what he could offer.

Before the caravan reached the Khwarazmian ruler, however, his governor of Otrar confiscated the goods and killed the traders. In a grave miscalculation, Allah al-Din Muhammad then killed most of the emissaries Chinggis Khan sent to demand compensation, returning only a couple of them, disfigured. This did not just mean war to Chinggis Khan; it meant a war of revenge of the utmost brutality. This included the decimation of the cities of Herat, Merv, and Nishapur, which for centuries had been three of the most important and prominent cities of the eastern Islamic world. By 1223, Allah al-Din Muhammad had been killed while fleeing Mongol troops on an island in the Caspian Sea. Chinggis Khan divided the Khwarazmian state up to be administered by his sons and generals.

The Past Meets the Present

World Trade

In the present day, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has seen countries from around the world join together with the support of the United Nations to develop and expand trade over long distances. Recognizing that the world is becoming increasingly globalized and that goods are moving across borders and between people more than ever before, the WTO has played a major role in streamlining, regulating, and supporting international commerce since its founding in 1995. But can we view the WTO as a contemporary version of Chinggis Khan's vision for world trade?

Chinggis Khan's messages to the ruler of Khwarazmia indicate that he genuinely sought trade, not tribute. In one he notes, "I have no need to covet other dominions. We have an equal interest in fostering trade between our subjects." In a second letter, after the sultan had responded by sending a trade caravan, Chinggis Khan notes, "Merchants from your country have come among us . . . we have likewise dispatched to your country in their company a group of merchants in order that they may acquire the wondrous wares of those regions; and that henceforth the abscess of evil thoughts may be lanced by the improvement of relations and agreement between us, and the pus of sedition and rebellion removed."

Both Chinggis Khan's messages convey that trade promotes peace among countries and people. While the sultan did not see it that way, this idea is now the basis for many actions in international relations, where the concept of liberalism—which contends that the way to a peaceful world is to promote economic growth by barrier-free economic exchange between countries—holds great sway. While the WTO works through collaboration rather than by edict, the logic and intent are the same: allow goods to be exchanged throughout the world with a single set of rules, and people will live in harmony with one another.

- What benefits might Chinggis Khan have seen in supporting a free flow of trade between his empire and the Khwarazmians, even when they fought one another?
- Should we consider the formation of an organization like the WTO an innovation of the twentieth century or an outcome directly connected to the trade networks of the past? Why?

Reconnaissance for launching surprise attacks against Khwarazmia brought the Mongols into unfamiliar territory. To the south, they discovered India's Delhi Sultanate in one of its rare periods of unity and growth. These Muslims were not part of the Khwarazmian realm, however, so attacking them would have been an unnecessary distraction. Seeking a route to surprise the Khwarazmians from the north, two of Chinggis's most trusted generals, Jebe and Subutai, had crossed through the Georgian Kingdom, then the lands of the Rus, Slavic ancestors of modern Russians who had ruled the agricultural lands east of Hungary and Poland. They quickly annihilated the Khwarazmian and Rus forces, forcing both groups to become tributaries to Chinggis Khan.

Ogedei Khan's Great Mongol Nation

Chinggis Khan spent his remaining years reasserting control over his Chinese conquests. The Jin, for example, regained tenuous sovereignty over the areas between Zhongdu and the coast. The Xi Xia refused to send troops to aid the war against the Khwarazmians, an act Chinggis saw as a betrayal. After defeating the Khwarazmians, he invaded the Xi Xia lands to punish them for this disloyalty. He was unable to enjoy the vengeance finally brought upon these uncooperative subjects, however, dying several months before the completion of his conquest, possibly as a result of being thrown from a horse.

As was Mongol custom, Chinggis Khan's estate was to be divided between his four sons by his primary wife Borte. His estate was a huge chunk of the Eurasian continent with millions of people to rule and a great deal of annual tribute. To preserve this wealth and the harmony the *yassa* had created for at least the population of the Mongol Empire, Chinggis had insisted that one of his sons be the next great khan. This son was to not only run one-fourth of the empire directly but also command the military, serve as the final court of appeal, and control a central government consisting largely of postal stations for communication and warehouses for spoils and tribute.

Link to Learning

This web page has a simplified chart of Chinggis Khan's male line of descent through his grandchildren, many of whom are referenced in this chapter. The site uses a different method of transliteration, so some names appear differently (for instance, Qubilai = Kublai and Cayatai = Chagatai). The German text reads "Mongol Grand Khans. The wife of Ogedei, Torgene, led the state from 1241 to 1246; Oyul Gaimis, the wife of Guyuk, was regent from 1248 to 1251."

At a *kurultai* of his family and closest advisers years before Chinggis' death, Ogedei was chosen to be this great khan. That decision was respected, demonstrating just how successful Chinggis had been in uniting the steppe peoples. The division of the empire between Chinggis Khan and Borte's sons also occurred. Ogedei received the conquered lands of the Xi Xia and Jin. The heirs of the oldest of Chinggis Khan's sons, Jochi, who had died a few months before his father, were given portions of the Mongol lands in central Asia, the territory of the Rus in modern Russia, and adjacent areas in northwest Eurasia. Led by Chinggis's oldest grandson, Batu, they became known as the Golden Horde, *horde* being one of the most common terms used for the tribal organization of the Mongols. The youngest son, Tolui, was granted the Mongol homeland, and the rest went to the second son, Chagatai.

Ogedei's coronation as khan reflected his reputation as a partier, with weeks of celebrations and feasting that involved virtually the entire nation and carefree depletion of the treasury by distributions of generous gifts to attendees. Tribute collections had fallen off, however, especially once word of Chinggis's death spread. After Ogedei's reckless spending, the Mongols were suddenly in financial trouble and unable to satisfy either the population's growing expectations of living standards or their new leader's ostentatious ambitions. Ogedei needed a way to quickly find more money.

To intimidate the tributary states, Ogedei attacked and defeated the Jin by 1234. The Jin civilization's wealth flowed into the Mongol treasury, but it was not enough. More than pursuing a life of conquest, Ogedei wanted to siphon off wealth as tribute through control of Eurasia's trade routes. To do that, he needed a capital, which he stored near Chinggis Khan's warehouses in the Mongol heartlands; this was the origin of Karakorum as a city. Funding its construction required yet more tribute, however. In 1235, Ogedei called a *kurultai* to decide which lands should be conquered to provide it. After much debate, it was decided to attack both Europe and Song China.

The war against the Song was inconclusive. Both sides suffered heavy losses, and peace negotiations began in 1241. The Mongols fared better in the west. They reestablished control over areas they had subdued earlier, conquered Kyiv (Kiev) in 1240, and essentially wiped out most Christian armies east of the Holy Roman Empire, looting major cities such as Krakow and Buda in modern-day Poland and Hungary. As they entered Bohemia in early 1242, word came that Ogedei had died the previous December. To participate in the expected *kurultai* to replace him, the Mongols abruptly retreated before bringing full destruction to eastern Europe, though leaving devastation in their wake.

While Ogedei's reign had mixed success, his extravagance and hedonism reflected the lifestyle the Mongol Empire adopted in the decades of unity brought by Chinggis Khan's *yassa*. Ogedei instituted practices that allowed fairly effective extraction of resources and imposed stability and order in the lands he and his father had conquered. The details are generally credited to a Khitan mandarin named Yelu Chucai, whom Chinggis Khan first took notice of in 1215 and whom Ogedei tapped to expand the burgeoning system of taxation and recordkeeping for the whole empire. Yelu is credited with convincing Ogedei that "an empire can be conquered from horseback, but it cannot be ruled from horseback," setting the stage for the bureaucratization of Mongol rule.

Ogedei embraced Yelu's plans of systematic recurring taxation to replace tribute. He saw his empire as the center of world trade and expanded the infrastructure to support that. Primarily for military communication, Chinggis Khan had established a system of horse relay stations called *yam* on the long-distance roads throughout his realm. These *yam* were located at one-day intervals from one another and included rest areas and supply depots. Ogedei expanded the system, extending its use to merchants and diplomats and lavishly rewarding traders who brought items he had never encountered before. This hospitality and his spendthrift ways attracted many merchants.

In addition, Ogedei created the Pax Mongolica, or Mongol Peace, which united a large part of the world through the exchange of goods and the long-distance travel of people and ideas. This was accomplished through a twofold approach: it was facilitated by the peace and justice imposed by Mongols on those who accepted or embraced their rule and was funded by the taxation of all producing people. At the same time, it was assured by clear instances of unabashed brutality against any who would dare resist their spread into new lands. Many recognized that resistance was not worth the risk.

Ogedei had given no thought to succession, however, and almost a decade of infighting occurred after his death, calling forth a great effort to maintain what had already been conquered. A battle between Chinggis Khan's grandsons Guyuk and Batu seemed imminent when the forty-two-year-old Guyuk mysteriously died.

The Past Meets the Present

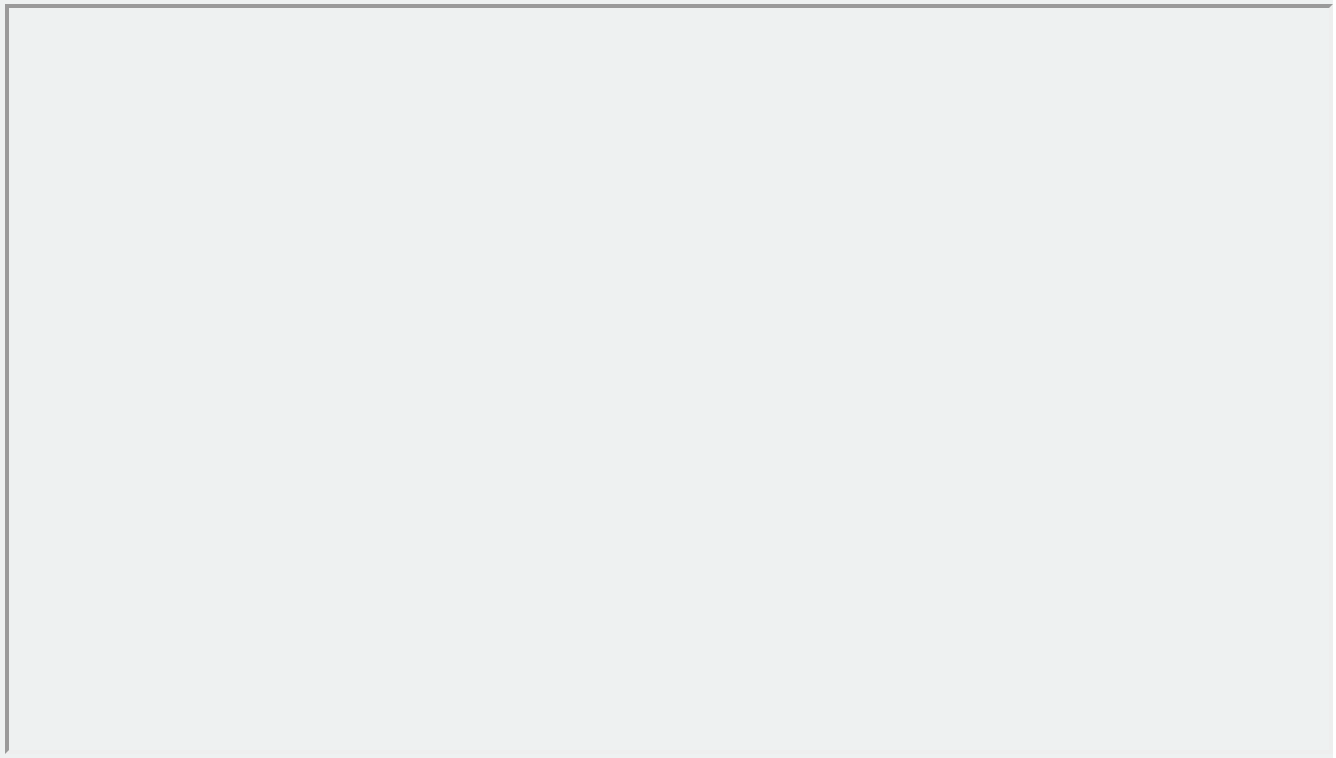
Chinggis Khan, Mongol National Identity, and the Hu

Although several clans and tribes of the Inner Asian Steppe spoke a common language, it was not until the reign of Chinggis Khan that they became a unified nation. From that point on, except for roughly three generations of Soviet rule in the twentieth century, during which symbols and figures with a strong local nationalist focus were often banned, Chinggis Khan has been inexorably linked to Mongol national identity.

A recent pop culture example is the breakout Mongolian heavy-metal band The Hu. Their 2019 debut album was called *Gereg*, after the medallions that granted merchants the use of the Mongols' system of rest and supply areas on the roads. The Hu were the first Mongolian band to have a song lead the Billboard Top 100 list. In the fall of 2019, they finished a twenty-three-city European tour, and for their contributions in spreading Mongol culture globally, the Mongolian government gave them the country's highest award, the Order of Chinggis Khan. Almost every song on their album harkens back to the days of the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century.

The second verse of "The Great Chinggis Khaan" (simply an alternative spelling of "khan") sums up both Chinggis Khan's vision of the world and the way the Mongolian people view him. Here is the official music video of The Hu song "The Great Chinggis Khaan." You may want to turn on the closed captioning to read the lyrics in English.

Click to view content



- Why might The Hu have chosen Chinggis Khan as a focus for their first album?
- What aspects of the status of Chinggis Khan in both contemporary Mongolian society and world history more generally do you think explain why this song proved so popular?

The Last Gasp of Mongol Expansion

It took until 1251 for majority support to coalesce around Chinggis Khan's grandson Mongke. While Mongke successfully expanded Mongol domains, his reign would mark the end of continued conquest while also signaling the end of a united Mongol Empire.

Blending the best elements of Chinggis Khan and Ogedei, Mongke was poised to re-create the greatness of unified Mongol rule. He stabilized the empire, ordering a census to assess not just taxes but also the natural and human resources of his domains. To

increase the empire's wealth and dissipate potential restless energy that might be turned on him, he undertook multidirectional expansion. His brother Hulagu Khan was asked to subdue the Islamic world, while another brother, Kublai Khan, was sent to Song China.

Hulagu was enormously successful; like his grandfather in northern China, he exploited existing conflicts, which included resentment by the minority Shia Muslims against the Sunni caliph. Combining this strategy with the Mongols' usual offer to spare from destruction those who would acknowledge Mongol rule and submit tribute without struggle, Hulagu was able to gain control of much of the caliph's lands, especially Shia areas. By late 1257, his forces had surrounded Baghdad, and the city fell in early 1258, its physical defenses undermined. Tens, possibly hundreds, of thousands were massacred, and the caliph himself was killed.

Meanwhile, Kublai was also successful, conquering areas of Tibet and southwestern China. During the campaign, he began to favor Tibetan Buddhism, although not to the point of dismissing or persecuting other faiths. Mongke then moved him to administer the former Jin areas that were conquered by his grandfather, while Mongke himself, seeing the Song's vulnerability, launched a broader attack against them in 1256. In 1259, as reports reached Mongke that Kublai was establishing a power base in northern China, he ordered Kublai to join him in the war against the Song, probably also wanting to keep close watch over him.

Before Kublai could reach him, however, Mongke died, likely from dysentery. His cousin Ariq Boke, another of Chinggis Khan's grandsons and the one who had been left to administer the Mongol homeland, declared himself the new khan of the Mongol Empire ahead of a *kurultai*. Upon hearing this, Kublai, who was returning for the *kurultai*, also declared himself the new khan. While Kublai would prove a powerful and capable ruler, much had begun to change since the days of Chinggis, and the stage was set for the end of a unified Mongol Empire and a single khan who dominated the entirety of the territories they had conquered. Continued success in conquest had been a major factor in keeping rivals from unnecessarily challenging the rule of the chosen great khan or devolving his power. With this period of expansion over, these rivals were presented with new opportunities to claim more power for themselves, especially with the size and diversity of the empire the Mongols now ruled.

The last *kurultai* of the Mongol Empire failed and led to the permanent splitting of the realm. Hulagu stood with his brother Kublai. The Golden Horde, now led by Batu's younger brother Berke, supported Ariq Boke. This left Orghina, sister-in-law to Hulagu and granddaughter of Chinggis Khan, in a position to choose which of her cousins would rule the Mongol Empire. Orghina, acting as regent for her son who was too young to assume a leadership role, chose neutrality, endorsing neither claimant. The fact that she was making this decision, not advising a man who would make the choice, shows the strides women had made under the *yassa*. Kublai ultimately prevailed, since his bonds with the army conquering China and his resource-rich power base in the northeast left him well situated to repulse Ariq Boke's attacks. In 1264, Ariq Boke rode to Kublai's capital and surrendered. He died under house arrest a couple of years later, probably having been poisoned.

Hulagu recognized Kublai as the great khan, calling himself *il-khan* (lesser khan) and his realm the Il-Khanate. He and his successors pursued their own policies independently, however, and Kublai's hold on the Chagatai Khanate remained only as strong as the armies he devoted to enforcing it. The Golden Horde was well out of his reach. From this point on, the parts of the once-united Mongol Empire were administered separately and evolved differently (Figure 14.10). Historians refer to them as khanates—the Khanate of the Golden Horde, Il-Khanate, Chagatai Khanate, and the Khanate of the Great Khan—to distinguish them from the prior period of unity.



Figure 14.10 The Four Khanates of the Mongol Empire. This map shows the areas ruled by the four Mongol khanates after the death of Kublai Khan in 1294. For all intents and purposes, these were separate sovereign states. Hulagu's Il-Khanate was the only one to recognize Kublai as great khan. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The struggle for power between Kublai and Ariq Boke also reflected a divide between Mongols willing to live as settled people and those who sought to preserve traditional nomadic ways. Kublai and Hulagu represented Mongols willing to adopt some aspects of settled life. Their successors, especially Kublai's, embraced the settled lifestyle even more. Ariq Boke embodied the spirit of their traditional nomadic culture, the weaknesses of which had been under attack since Temujin had become Chinggis Khan and had sought to promote harmony and justice in ways traditional Mongol customs and practices did not. While Mongol armies were a formidable force in open battles on broad plains, it was only with the help of settled people and their technologies that they could take down the world's richest cities and bring their riches to the Mongolian plain and, more importantly, create bureaucratic systems to keep it flowing and distribute it.

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12.4: The Mongol Empire Fragments

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Analyze the extent to which Chinggis Khan's vision for the future of Eurasia was realized by his grandsons
- Explain why Islam was successful in gaining converts in the Mongol Empire
- Analyze the degree to which Yuan China was a continuation of traditional Chinese civilization

While the ascension of Mongke Khan in 1251 gave hope for the realization of a Mongol Empire overseeing Eurasian trade, it proved only a temporary rebirth, since a lust for power consumed Chinggis Khan's grandsons. The rulers of three of the four khanates—the Chagatai Khanate, the Khanate of the Golden Horde, and the Il-Khanate—eventually converted to Islam along with many of their people, but having a common religion did not keep them from fighting one another. By the mid-fourteenth century, two khanates had completely fragmented. Sporadic efforts were made to expand against the Delhi Sultanate but failed. Kublai conquered China and established the Yuan dynasty, also known as the Great Khanate of Yuan China, in the 1270s. However, in the fourteenth century, China too was dealing with serious internal divisions.

Islam and the Mongols

While the lands of the Eurasian Steppe were always a place of great religious heterogeneity, Islam was the faith of most of the people living there. Except in the Slavic areas of the Golden Horde, the lands west of the Volga River, the endorsement of the ruling Mongol elite added to the attractions of Islam, leading the majority of the population to convert. The other faiths were relegated to small, scattered communities (Figure 14.11).



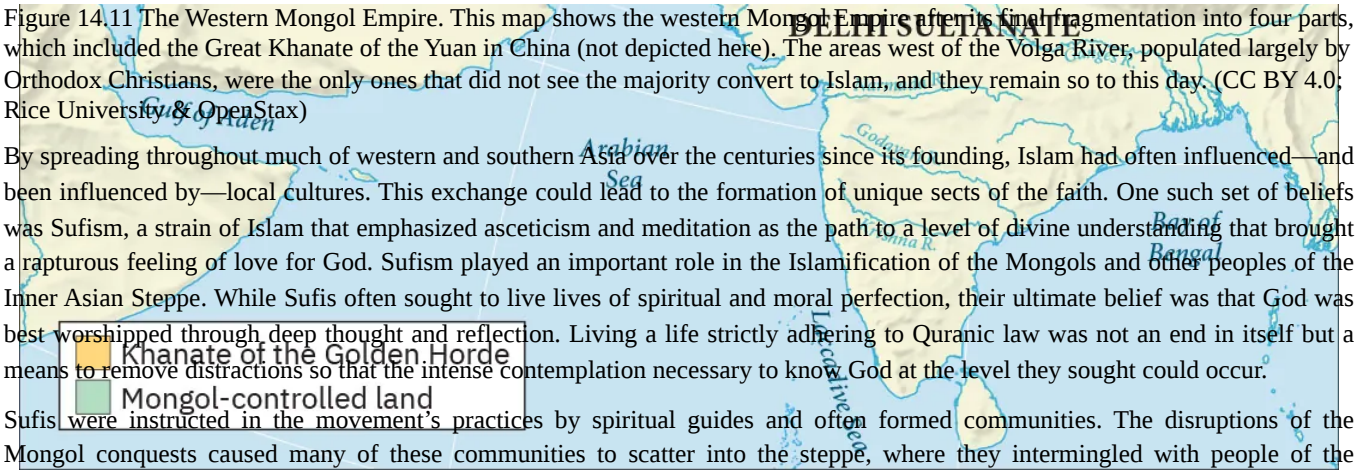


Figure 14.11 The Western Mongol Empire. This map shows the western Mongol Empire after its final fragmentation into four parts, which included the Great Khanate of the Yuan in China (not depicted here). The areas west of the Volga River, populated largely by Orthodox Christians, were the only ones that did not see the majority convert to Islam, and they remain so to this day. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

By spreading throughout much of western and southern Asia over the centuries since its founding, Islam had often influenced—and been influenced by—local cultures. This exchange could lead to the formation of unique sects of the faith. One such set of beliefs was Sufism, a strain of Islam that emphasized asceticism and meditation as the path to a level of divine understanding that brought a rapturous feeling of love for God. Sufism played an important role in the Islamification of the Mongols and other peoples of the Inner Asian Steppe. While Sufis often sought to live lives of spiritual and moral perfection, their ultimate belief was that God was best worshipped through deep thought and reflection. Living a life strictly adhering to Quranic law was not an end in itself but a means to remove distractions so that the intense contemplation necessary to know God at the level they sought could occur.

Sufis were instructed in the movement's practices by spiritual guides and often formed communities. The disruptions of the Mongol conquests caused many of these communities to scatter into the steppe, where they intermingled with people of the Mongol Empire, and where Sufi spiritual guides seemed similar to the shamans Mongols knew as the guardians of worship of Tengri. The Sufi emphasis on a mystical path of meditation and reflection also allowed Mongols to continue to live under the *yassa* and accept Sufi teachings and practices. As Muslims and Mongols interacted and formed families, Sufism made the conversion to Islam seem more of an evolution and less of a dramatic change.

The Fate of Hulagu's Il-Khanate

Hulagu Khan had to balance several conflicts once civil war broke out after the death of Mongke Khan in 1259. The most serious threat was war with the Golden Horde, led by Batu's younger brother Berke. A convert to Islam, Berke had become deeply disturbed by Hulagu's destruction of Baghdad and the murder of the caliph. There were also disputes about whether Hulagu or the Horde should receive tribute from areas on which Hulagu had reimposed stability. Not surprisingly, Hulagu and Berke ended up on different sides of the civil war to succeed Mongke. Their conflict lasted nearly four years, until both men died in 1265, and their successors moved on to other pursuits.

For decades, the leaders of the Il-Khanate remained in frequent but intermittent conflict with the Golden Horde and the Mamluks of Egypt, who were sometimes joined by the Seljuks operating out of Anatolia and the Chagatai khans. Repulsing these attacks consumed most of the Il-Khanate's efforts and resources, a situation compounded by periodic bouts of civil war over succession and making further expansion out of the question. The Il-Khans constantly struggled to hold the Tigris-Euphrates basin, leaving the Nile delta and lands holy to the Abrahamic religions in the Levant forever beyond their grasp.

Most of the population of the Il-Khanate had become Muslim centuries before. The need to concentrate on defense led the Il-Khans to leave most of the work of government in the hands of the religious scholars called the *ulama*, reinforcing traditional Islamic law and custom. Ghazan Khan, who ruled from 1295 to 1304, firmly favored Islam. His brother Oljaitu (who took the Muslim name Khodabandeh) promoted Shia Islam, further entrenching its presence in what is today eastern Iraq and Iran. Despite this, conflict with its Muslim neighbors continued as the Il-Khanate sought to take more resources for itself at their expense.

Overall, the economy was slow to recover from the devastation of Hulagu's attack, especially with frequent warfare continuing to destroy the irrigation and urban infrastructure. There were chronic labor shortages in the first generations after Hulagu's conquest because of wide-scale murder, enslavement, and relocation, as well as substantial emigration to neighboring Islamic lands. Ghazan's reign laid the groundwork for a generation of prosperity and cultural flowering relative to the tumultuous periods before and after. This prosperity was centered east of Baghdad and the Tigris-Euphrates basin, around Maragha and Tabriz in modern Iran. The Il-Khanate rulers tried to live up to Chinggis and Ogedei Khan's dream of a world united in trade by negotiating trade deals, most famously with Venice and Genoa on the Italian Peninsula. They were also able to maintain secure trade with Mongolian China. This prosperity, however, was not enough to overcome the peril of succession struggles. After the son of Ghazan died without an heir in 1335, the Il-Khanate fell into a civil war from which it never emerged. While several men claimed to be *il-khan* in subsequent years, none exercised control over more than a fraction of the lands Hulagu had conquered.

Dueling Voices

European Portraits of Chinggis Khan

Following are depictions of Chinggis Khan by two famous European writers. The first, from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, was written around 1400 as entertainment and likely reflected popular beliefs about the long-dead Mongol ruler. The second, from Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, was written in 1748 as a work of social science aimed at Enlightenment intellectuals. Montesquieu's disdain for absolute authority undoubtedly influenced his view of the great khan.

> *This noble king was known as Cambinskan, [Chinggis Khan]*
> *Who in his time was of so great renown*
> *That there was nowhere in the wide world known*
> *So excellent a lord in everything;*
> *He lacked in naught belonging to a king.*
> *As for the faith to which he had been born,*
> *He kept its law to which he had been sworn;*
> *And therewith he was hardy, rich, and wise,*
> *And merciful and just in all men's eyes,*
> *True to his word, benign and honourable,*
> *And in his heart like any center stable;*
> *Young, fresh, and strong, in warfare ambitious*
> *As any bachelor knight of all his house.*
> *Of handsome person, he was fortunate,*
> *And kept always so well his royal state*
> *That there was nowhere such another man.*
>
> *—Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales*

> *The Tartars appear to be mild and humane among themselves; and yet they are most cruel conquerors: when they take cities they put the inhabitants to the sword, and imagine that they act humanely if they only sell the people, or distribute them among their soldiers. They have destroyed Asia, from India even to the Mediterranean; and all the country which forms the east of Persia they have rendered a desert . . . . These people having no towns, all their wars are carried on with eagerness and impetuosity. They fight whenever they hope to conquer; and when they have no such hope, they join the stronger army. With such customs, it is contrary to the law of nations that a city incapable of repelling their attack should stop their progress. They regard not cities as an association of inhabitants, but as places made to bid defiance to their power.*
>
> *—Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws*

> *Thus the Tartars under Jenghiz Khan [Chinggis Khan], among whom it was a sin and even a capital crime to put a knife in the fire, to lean against a whip, to strike a horse with his bridle, to break one bone with another, did not believe it to be any sin to break their word, to seize upon another man's goods, to do an injury to a person, or to commit murder.*
>
> *—Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws*

- How are these two depictions different and similar? What might account for their differences?
- What do these excerpts suggest about how western Europeans saw the East—and the khanates in particular?

The Golden Horde

The areas the Golden Horde ruled, northwest Asia and the lands of the Rus, were less economically developed. People had a greater diversity of lifestyles and less centralized authority than imposed by the Il-Khans, and they were able to avoid splintering into civil war until outside factors intervened more than a generation after the Il-Khanate fell.

Batu and Berke, the foundational leaders of the Horde, established a capital for the storage of tribute as their grandfather had done, but they mainly roamed with their armies, raiding neighbors or defending against attacks. The people conquered by the Golden Horde varied from Turkish peoples like the Kipchaks, seminomads similar to the Mongols, to settled Slavic peasants in small urban centers. The Mongols ruled over the Turks indirectly, allowing local leaders to enforce the *yassa*, collect taxes, and conscript labor and soldiers. Mongol officials in the capital received and distributed tribute and heard appeals of local decisions. The Rus and other Slavic peoples were ruled more directly, with Mongol overseers assigned to each local ruler to make sure taxes flowed in and rebellion was kept down.

While Berke was the first Mongol ruler and khan of the Golden Horde to embrace Islam, not all his successors were Muslim. Islam continued to gain adherents among the Horde's Mongols, however. In 1313, Uzbeg made Islam the official religion of the Golden Horde, but he did not remove the *yassa's* tax exemption for other religions. Uzbeg's promotion of Islam undoubtedly strengthened the Islamic community throughout the Golden Horde's lands.

At the same time, the Horde's rule strengthened the Orthodox Christian church in its Slavic regions. The church came to represent Rus national identity as people turned to Christianity to distinguish themselves from, and perhaps subversively resist, the Mongols. The tax and service exemptions the *yassa* gave religious institutions and those running them surpassed those the church received from Rus nobles. Church-owned land expanded under the Horde, whether because of donations to help the church provide increasing amounts of spiritual solace and identity, or because of fraud that enabled elites to live free of Mongol taxation and obligation by donating their land and then becoming the church officials in charge of the donation. By the collapse of Mongol rule in the late fifteenth century, the Russian Orthodox church's holdings had grown to about one-third of the arable land in the areas formerly ruled by Rus nobles.

The Golden Horde both benefited from and contributed to the prosperity brought about by the Pax Mongolica. Direct European trade was under their control. Whether an import to the Mongol world in the east was produced by the Rus or brought from the continent by Italian merchants, it almost certainly entered through the Golden Horde, which had the first opportunity to buy it. The *yam* that facilitated the movement of goods throughout the empire was maintained for hundreds of years after Mongol rule had dissipated.

The troubled Chagatai Khanate lay in the middle of Mongol lands. Conflict with the other Mongol Khanates and Kublai's Yuan dynasty was inevitable. At various times, separately or in combination with each other, the other Mongol states supported usurpers against the Chagatai Khans. While most had no long-term success, they kept the khanate in turmoil until it splintered into small states in the mid-fourteenth century. In addition to fighting other Mongols, some Chagatai Khans raided and on a couple of occasions tried to conquer the Delhi Sultanate. These efforts proved futile and weakened the regime, inviting more challenges and instability.

The most important long-term impact of the Chagatai Khanate was its solidification of Islam's hold over western central Asia. Central Asia had always been a place of religious diversity, given that merchants of different faiths traversed its trade routes. It was a major factor in spreading Buddhism from India and Islam beyond the borders of the caliphate. Asian versions of Christianity, different from the Catholic and Orthodox traditions in Europe, thrived there as well. The last ruler to have governed the unified Chagatai Khanate, Tarmashirin, instituted policies that favored the displacement of other faiths by Islam and replaced the *yassa* with the more restrictive sharia, or Islamic religious law. While this change provoked resentment among the non-Muslim populations, Islamic law continued to be in force in lands given to the Chagatai after that khanate collapsed into small states that were in constant conflict.

Yuan China

In Yuan China, even as Kublai Khan was lining up forces against Ariq Boke, he demanded the Song emperor recognize him as the Son of Heaven in exchange for autonomy over the Han Chinese people. Not unexpectedly, the Song Son of Heaven declined to submit to vassalage under a man he considered a barbarian, and war broke out. Eventually, Kublai's forces were victorious, prompting him to declare that the Mandate of Heaven had shifted to him, and the Yuan dynasty was proclaimed. As might be expected for the champion of Mongols adapting to a settled lifestyle, Kublai set up a capital city close to the old Jin capital of Zhongdu, both part of modern Beijing. China proved very difficult to govern, however; by the 1330s, the Yuan dynasty was in decline.

The Conquest of Song China

Although Kublai attempted to subdue the Song while fighting Ariq Boke, he did not begin serious efforts to conquer them until 1265. It took over a dozen years, but by 1279, the Song military was broken and its royal family dead or in hiding.

The Mongols, with allied peoples from north China and other parts of the steppe, dominated the Song on land. The Song military never developed good cavalry, perhaps hoping their fiery and explosive weapons would intimidate enemy horses and render their opponent's cavalry useless. Retreating to the cities was not an option, because the Mongols were extremely adept at siege warfare. One area in which the Mongols were almost completely inexperienced, however, was naval warfare. The long and expansive river systems in southern China posed serious obstacles to the Mongols' ability to completely conquer the Song.

Through the 1270s, the Song still tried to function as a working, mobile government, moving up and down river systems until finally pushed out to sea, whereupon they moved from port to port with a huge fleet of ships. A combination of the geography of the region, previous developments in hydraulic and irrigation technology, and Song seafaring skills allowed them to resist the arrival of the Mongols for many years. Tens of thousands of civilians loyal to the Song traveled with them. In a great irony of history, the increasingly settled Yuan Mongols had turned the Song into aquatic seminomads. The Mongols adapted to naval warfare by relying on loyal non-Mongol experts. They controlled the labor of skilled craftspeople who built warships and had sailors who could maneuver them.

In the year 1279, many Song loyalists, approximately 250,000 people in over a thousand ocean-capable boats, anchored off a remote bay near modern Yamen, China. There they began building a capital and prepared for a last stand, hoping that if they won, their victory would rally the Chinese to revolt against the Mongols. Mongol forces secured the land behind the Song ships, leaving them dependent on only the supplies they had on board. Within a few days, the Songs' supply of fresh water ran out. Weakened by dehydration, they were no match for the Mongols. As a few ships fell to Mongol boarding parties, morale among the Song collapsed, and most of them committed suicide by jumping into the sea. China was united again for the first time in more than three hundred years, not by a Han Chinese Son of Heaven, but by the Mongol Kublai Khan.

Politics, Economy, and Society in Yuan China

Although retaining some Song policies such as the rotation of officeholders, the Yuan dynasty operated very differently from the way earlier Chinese dynasties had done. Kublai Khan's most drastic change was to replace the Confucian system of class distinctions based on economic function with one based on ethnicity. At the top of the Yuan class structure were Mongols, followed by non-Chinese people, who were Europeans or previous steppe inhabitants like the Jurchen, Tangut, and Khitan. The bottom two classes were Chinese people: those of Han ethnicity who had been ruled by the Jin in the north, and the remaining Song Chinese who lived in the south. Mongols could not marry people from these bottom two classes. Everyone's place in this new class system was noted in census records for each family, along with each head of household's occupation, which was sometimes assigned if a shortage of certain types of labor occurred.

Adopting the Khitan idea of ruling different types of people differently, the Yuan dynasty had separate types of administration for its varied peoples. Even though an increasing number of Mongols were literate, including Kublai who was the first Mongol great khan to read, the mandarin written exam system fell into disuse. Mongols were subject to the *yassa*, as were the next two classes, who were ruled over by administrators appointed by the chief local Mongol administrator or the emperor himself. The Song Chinese, who were at the bottom of the four-class system, were governed by two administrators, one a Chinese person and one a Mongol or non-Chinese person. Both were imperial appointees. The Chinese administrator was under the supervision of and responsible to his counterpart. People in all these positions were rotated periodically, so they could not build up a power base.

Some non-Chinese administrators over the Song had not intended to work in the Yuan government. They came seeking some favor, often the right to trade, in exchange for which the emperors required them to perform administrative tasks. Literate Europeans came to know of the riches of Yuan China through one of these bureaucrats, Marco Polo, a young merchant, and member of a Venetian trade caravan who, along with several of his family members, ended up spending almost twenty-five years in Mongol lands and who wrote a popular account of the merchants' experiences. While the Polos were the most famous of these hostage bureaucrats, serving for about twenty years, most were Muslim traders from other parts of the Mongol Empire. Regardless of how well they did their jobs, such bureaucrats were not likely to bond with the population and create a power base from which to challenge imperial authority.

Following Kublai's death in 1294, his system's flaws became apparent. In 1315, his great-grandson Buyantu reinstated the mandarin exam system, which now reflected the dual nature of the administration. Non-Chinese people took different (and shorter) exams than the Chinese people, and between 25 and 50 percent of those who passed had to be non-Chinese people. The effect of this quota was magnified because Song Chinese people made up more than 90 percent of the population, according to Yuan censuses. Between the differences in the exams and the quota system, it was much easier for Mongols and non-Chinese to pass than for Chinese.

Although travelers like Marco Polo, and to a lesser degree the North African Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta, wrote of the impressive wealth of Yuan China, economic growth had at best stagnated, thanks to a decline in consumer purchasing power caused by inflation and heavy taxation. The use of paper currency was a major contributor to inflation. While paper money was theoretically convertible to metal or silk, the Yuan government issued much more of it than it had metal or silk to redeem it with. Kublai decreed that currency must be used in transactions with the government, thus ensuring that paper money featured in at least some economic activity. This meant the population could not escape increasing inflation, however, as successive Yuan governments issued more paper currency to pay their bills and forced the population to obtain such money to pay their taxes. As more paper money entered the system without objects of value to back it up, ever more of it was required to purchase the same amount of goods and labor.

Link to Learning

Beyond official histories, we have descriptions of the Mongol Empire recorded by travelers through its domains, most famously Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta. This video contains a comparison of the men's accounts of China and their impacts on their respective civilizations. Note the differences in the purposes of their travel, the content of their accounts, and their impacts.

The increasing taxes that partly resulted from inflation were pumped back into the economy through narrow and unproductive sectors, draining wealth from the rest of the economy. The Yuan spent lavishly on grandiose but failed military ventures that bankrupted the government. These were mainly Kublai's projects. Kublai twice tried to conquer what is now Vietnam, and in even more costly ventures, he attempted complex sea invasions, two of Japan and one of Java. There were also periods of chaos and instability because of succession struggles. After Kublai's appointed successor and grandson died in 1307, seven emperors reigned over the next twenty-six years. Resentment, especially among the Song population, seethed beneath the surface as government extraction of resources increased and inflation eroded the standard of living. As if all that was not challenge enough for the Yuan, in 1331 people outside the capital in the Hebei area began to sicken and die in large numbers. Within three years, 90 percent of that area's population was dead from a strange new illness, later known as the Black Death. The Mongol Yuan government, like many of its people, did not survive long.

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12.5: Christianity and Islam outside Central Asia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the evolving relationship between the Western Christian church and the rulers and people of Europe
- Identify the factors that led to the strengthening of Muslim control over the Middle East
- Discuss the limits of Mongol expansion and the states in North Africa and South Asia that remained independent

Largely oblivious to events in the Inner Asian Steppe, the thirteenth-century followers of the teachings of Jesus and Muhammed continued their struggle for control of the once-mighty Roman Empire in Europe and the Middle East. Islamic rule was slowly ending in the Iberian Peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal), as new Christian kingdoms in the region rose and pushed the remaining Islamic states southward to a small strip around Granada. In the East, Christian forces continued their retreat before the successors of Salah al-Din (known in the west as “Saladin”), while Catholics of western Europe dealt near-fatal blows to those who considered themselves to be Rome’s true heirs in Byzantium.

The Christian Pope and the Papal States

Politically, thirteenth-century Europe was a series of confederations of warriors who had sworn oaths of *vassalage*, or loyalty, to one of the titular European kings. There were no real centralized governments, courts, or bureaucracies. The real power of kings rested on the resources they could draw from their own personal lands, and on the willingness of their vassals to provide them with the support they had pledged, which in turn depended on the willingness of lesser nobles who had sworn vassalage to *them*. The church was more unified, having a multinational bureaucracy ostensibly to meet the spiritual needs of the population, but also to extract society’s wealth for church leaders. This gave the church a direct and recurring relationship with the people that few lords had with the vassals on whom they relied for defense and order. Most people saw their parish priest much more often than their feudal lord.

In the 1230s, Pope Gregory IX created an Office of Papal Inquisition to centralize the persecution of heresy throughout Western Christendom. Thus began the Inquisition, a centuries-long effort to impose religious homogeneity on western Europe, through torture and execution, if necessary. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV authorized the use of torture on suspected heretics, who had to prove their innocence, confess, or face execution, sometimes by being burned at the stake. The fact that inquisitors could seize the lands and property of the condemned provided an unfortunate incentive to keep the persecution going.

Church-State Relations

Citing the precedent of Pope Leo III’s coronation of Charlemagne, the church argued that kings held their position because the pope granted it to them. The kings and their vassals did not see it that way. Some insisted they had the right to appoint and control church officials in their lands. While the church did not gain total control of the appointment and supervision of its officials, it obtained substantial protection against arbitrary monarchial rule and some leverage over kings in most countries.

The Hohenstaufen family ruled both the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which encompassed much of the southern half of the Italian peninsula and the island of Sicily. Thus, the papal lands in Rome were surrounded by the Hohenstaufens, causing recurring conflict between the two. In 1241, the Hohenstaufens gained the upper hand when two popes died in quick succession while Hohenstaufen armies were laying siege to Rome. As a result, the papacy remained vacant for two years. A new pope incited revolt throughout the Holy Roman Empire, however, and the last Hohenstaufens succumbed to malaria in 1254. Their fall ushered in a long period known as the Great Interregnum, in which no Holy Roman emperor existed and Germanic nobles swore oaths of vassalage to rival kings. With such divisions in place, the papacy on occasion intervened—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—in political matters as well.

The church-state conflict played out differently in the Two Sicilies, where the monarchy established secular political control through the 1231 Constitutions of Melfi, considered the oldest surviving written constitution in the world. The Constitutions of Melfi increased the power of the monarch by replacing vassals and church officials with royal bureaucrats as local administrators and judges. The bureaucracy was funded by revenue from royal monopolies on essential products like salt, iron, and copper, along

with tariffs and tolls. This revenue also allowed the king to build infrastructure, including fortifications in strategic parts of the kingdom staffed with soldiers paid from the royal coffers. The state created by the Constitutions of Melfi resisted church encroachment on its authority better than the Holy Roman Empire had.

Tension between the Rulers and the Ruled

A stronger central government also emerged in France over the thirteenth century. As in the Two Sicilies, this resulted from a restructuring of local government so that royal bureaucrats replaced vassals and church officials, and the monarchy had sufficient income to pay for their loyalty. Beginning with King Phillip II in the late twelfth century, French monarchs exploited opportunities to add to their royal holdings by taking land from their nobles. These new lands were managed by salaried royal appointees, not vassals who could pass their holdings to heirs. By the early fourteenth century, much of France was under direct royal control, greatly enhancing the resources French kings could call upon in conflicts with their vassals and the church.

By the reign of Phillip IV, which began in 1285, the French crown's relationship with the church had drastically deteriorated. The crisis escalated until 1303, when Phillip sent soldiers to Rome to remove Pope Boniface. This act so intimidated church officials that when it came time to select Boniface's successor in 1305, the cardinals picked a Frenchman allied with Phillip who then moved the papacy from Rome to Avignon, France, where it remained under the watchful eyes of French kings until 1376.

England developed differently than other European states. The monarch's power over its vassals and the church was limited from the thirteenth century onward, and the basic rights of commoners, generally interpreted to mean adult males not bound as servants or apprentices, were protected. After King John was forced to become the pope's vassal and pay him tribute, John's vassals, emboldened by his capitulation, compelled him in 1215 to reaffirm those rights and expand them in Magna Carta, a document that reiterated existing rights and relationships of vassals. The document confirmed the papal position that the church was above the state and "shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired . . . by our heirs in perpetuity." Among the rights spelled out in Magna Carta, perhaps the most important was that "no free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgment of his equals." This requirement created a precedent for trial by jury, which remains a staple of the judicial system in the West to the present day.

The other key development leading toward centralized government with limited and specified powers was the creation of a deliberative body of nobles, clergy, and commoners that replaced the Great Council of the king's vassals and high clergy. This new body evolved into Parliament, designed to represent the interests of the people. Membership was expanded to representatives elected by the vassals of the king's vassals, and starting in 1265, selected towns could send representatives to speak for the interests of merchants.

Parliament had two primary powers. One was to approve all tax increases. To establish uniform rule by the monarch, as opposed to a decentralized set of laws from the nobility and a potentially conflicting set from the church, Edward I asked Parliament to also approve laws. Parliamentary approval made the laws England's laws, not just the king's laws. Even if the king had drafted them, the nobles, clergy, and wealthy commoners had to agree to them. Edward I called his first Parliament in 1275, and the body met forty-six times during his thirty-five-year reign.

In the thirteenth century, the Iberian Peninsula was split between Christian kingdoms and parts of the Islamic Almohad Caliphate. The Christian kingdoms of Portugal, Leon, Navarre, Castile, and Aragon held about three-fifths of the land. Not only did these kingdoms fight each other and their Islamic rivals, but the same conflicts occurred between vassals and king and between monarch and church that existed in other Christian kingdoms. The church and vassals joined together to provide the king with revenue they deemed sufficient to keep the kingdom safe and orderly. Further resources had to be agreed upon by a council of vassals, clergy, and merchant representatives called the Cortes. As in England, the church and vassals were able to avoid being bypassed by kings and to assert checks on royal finances and power.

The Almohad Caliphate

Since the 1170s, Islamic Iberia had been ruled by the Almohad Caliphate, but they struggled to unify Muslims throughout the region and at times struggled to assert their authority. The Almohads were Imazighen (Berbers) from what is now southern Morocco. Leadership positions and economic advantage disproportionately went to members of the tribe from which the Almohad

movement originated, often causing resentment. Support for the Almohads among other Muslims in North Africa and Iberia was broad but not especially strong.

Pope Innocent III arranged a truce among the Iberian Christian kingdoms in the early thirteenth century, convincing them to crusade to restore Christian rule to Iberia. In 1212, the Christian kingdoms devastated the Almohads at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Within a year, the Almohad caliph died without an heir, plunging the Muslim states in Iberia into a civil war from which they never recovered.

Link to Learning

This four-minute animation depicts the back-and-forth between Christian and Muslim control of Iberia, from the first Muslim invasion in the early eighth century to the final Christian conquest of Granada in 1492. This final success of the Christians in the peninsula is often called the Reconquista (reconquest), but historians have been moving away from that term because it privileges a Western Christian worldview on the period.

Squabbling among Iberia's Christian kings caused their alliance to collapse. Nevertheless, over the next forty years or so, each kingdom expanded independently into what had been Almohad territory. By the late 1260s, only the area around Granada, about 5 percent of the peninsula, remained under Muslim control. Even there, however, the rulers swore vassalage to the secular kings of Castile.

Iberian Muslims now under Christian rule were generally not driven out and could work and practice Islam. The less fundamentalist Islamic law of pre-Almohad days was brought back for them, though church law called for discriminatory segregation in dealing with non-Christians. To ensure that minimal interaction occurred, for instance, Muslims were required to wear distinctive dress. They also had to pay taxes to the Christian church and observe Sabbath restrictions on Sundays, although they were not compelled to work on their own holy day of Friday. Muslims could work in Christian businesses but not in Christian households. Marriage between Christians and Muslims and Jews was forbidden, as was trying to convert Christians.

The Later Crusades and the Limits of Mongol Rule

Although Muslims lost ground to Christians in Iberia in the early thirteenth century, they were much more successful against them in their heartland. Despite incessant conflicts over which individuals should rule the Levant for Islam, Muslims rebuffed Christian attempts to reassert control of the Holy Land (modern Israel). Meanwhile, Catholic and Orthodox Christians killed each other in the struggle that mortally wounded Byzantium, known as the Fourth Crusade. By midcentury, several more crusades had been defeated, and Muslims seemed well positioned to expel Christians from the Levant and make gains against the dying Byzantine Empire.

After the Third Crusade, crusaders held only Tyre, Acre, and scattered fortifications in the interior of the Holy Land. Pope Innocent III, hoping to regain the Holy Land for western Christendom, and by virtue of that victory to convince the eastern churches to accept papal sovereignty, called for a Fourth Crusade soon after assuming the papacy in 1198. The plan was to attack the Muslims through Egypt to seize Jerusalem, as the last two (failed) crusades had attempted.

The Fourth Crusade never made it to Egypt, however, much less the holy lands of the eastern Mediterranean. The expense of transportation and supplies left the crusaders in debt to Venetian merchants, who insisted they settle the obligation by reconquering the city of Zadar (in modern Croatia, called "Zara" by the Venetians) for Venice. Pope Innocent was opposed to the idea. Not only was it a distraction from retaking the Holy Land, but Zadar was a Catholic city. Nevertheless, the crusaders agreed, taking the city in 1202.

While wintering in Zadar, the crusaders were offered the opportunity to make more money and recruit Byzantine soldiers for the crusade if they installed the son of a recently deposed Byzantine emperor on the throne in Constantinople. Perhaps to forestall Innocent's objections, the Byzantines' offer also included subordination of the Orthodox churches to Catholicism, a long-term goal of the western crusaders. Pope Innocent ordered the crusaders to go on to the Holy Land, but they accepted the Byzantines' offer and made their way to Constantinople instead (Figure 14.12).



Figure 14.12 The Fourth Crusade. This map shows the route of the Fourth Crusade in the early thirteenth century. Distracted by other goals in Zadar and Constantinople, the crusaders never reached the Holy Land. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

After a great deal of bungling and confusion on both sides, the crusaders were able to put their young patron on the throne of Byzantium as Alexius IV in the summer of 1203. It turned out, however, that Alexius could come up with only half the promised money, and his attempts to raise the remainder provoked a coup that ended in his death. As they awaited payment from the Byzantines, the crusaders found their expenses increasing, and getting to Egypt looked increasingly daunting. Defeating the heirs of Salah al-Din would be no easy task. The Byzantine army had already fled before them, and many crusaders had not seen their homes for almost three years. Clergy among them pointed out, however, that bringing a usurper (Salah al-Din) to justice was a holy cause that could fulfill their vows of fighting for causes aligned with Christian principles and God's will, and one that would guarantee their entrance into heaven. However, restoring a legitimate ruler to the Byzantine Empire became the mission of the Fourth Crusade, accomplished in short order in the spring of 1204.

This new mission of the Fourth Crusade was radically different from that of the previous crusades, which had focused on expelling Muslim rulers from formerly Christian lands. The First Crusade, near the end of the eleventh century, had been the most successful, reestablishing Christian control over areas of Palestine and Syria and creating four Christian-ruled sovereign states in the Levant. After Muslims reclaimed much of the area, two more crusades occurred in the late twelfth century. Neither was able to reassert Christian dominance over Jerusalem or other key Christian sites. The Fourth Crusade had sought to complete the mission, but now it shifted to righting the supposed moral wrongs of Byzantium's latest internal intrigues.

Once they had stripped Constantinople bare, the crusaders appointed a new Byzantine emperor and one of their own priests as Patriarch of Orthodox Christianity, thus putting the leadership of the Byzantine church in the hands of someone loyal to the papacy. Within a year, most of them had drifted back to their original homes, taking a share of Byzantium's wealth with them. As they expected, Pope Innocent accepted the reimposition of Catholicism on Eastern Christianity as sufficient for fulfilling a crusader's vows, even if not a single drop of Muslim blood had been shed or an inch of Islamic territory added to Christendom.

The Ayyubids and the Crusaders

The land the crusaders had intended to invade was ruled by the heirs of Salah al-Din and called the Ayyubid dynasty. Although Salah al-Din had directed that his empire be split among his brothers and sons upon his death in 1193, his brother al-Adil I had centralized it under his own control by around 1200. The actual power of any Ayyubid ruler rested on his ability to maintain the loyalty of mamluk armies; mamluks were soldiers, generally enslaved men taken from the peoples of the Eurasian Steppe as boys

or adolescents. They had limited property and marriage rights and could move into high administrative and leadership posts if talented. They had no loyalties to the populations they policed and defended, and they were much less likely to rebel than members of communities that might become unhappy with the caliph's rule. Their position and future completely depended on the continuation of their owner's rule. Many caliphs thus preferred mamluk armies to civilian ones.

With Jerusalem still in Muslim hands after the Fourth Crusade, Pope Innocent called for a Fifth Crusade, dedicating church funds to avoid the financial issues that had lured the Fourth Crusade off course. Reusing the intended strategy of the Fourth Crusade, the Fifth Crusade departed for Egypt in 1217. Taking advantage of the turmoil caused by al-Adil I's death in late 1218 and the ensuing rebellion against his son al-Kamil, the crusaders captured Damietta in 1219. With his lands in disarray, al-Kamil tried to bribe the crusaders to leave Egypt. He offered them all of what had been the former crusader state centered around Jerusalem and a thirty-year truce between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land.

Confident they could defeat him, the crusaders rejected al-Kamil's offer, a choice that proved unwise. By 1221, al-Kamil and his brothers had reasserted control over their father's empire and joined together to trap the crusader army in the Nile delta. Faced with the threat of death by arms or by drowning, the crusaders agreed to withdraw from their conquests and return to Europe, ending the Fifth Crusade in yet another failure.

To placate the papacy, Hohenstaufen ruler Frederick II agreed to lead a new crusade, but personal misfortune and lack of enthusiasm among Europe's vassals hindered his ability to get underway. The delays were so severe that the exasperated Pope Gregory IX excommunicated him, cutting him off from the church and its sacred rites. Even after Frederick set sail in 1228, Gregory condemned his venture as an unjust war, not a holy crusade.

Breaking with the strategy of the four previous crusades, Frederick landed in Acre, the main port still in Christian hands. His slow pace allowed word of his excommunication to precede him, causing him to be greeted with suspicion by his fellow Christians. Recognizing the power balance between Christians and the Ayyubids, Frederick fell back on his highly effective diplomatic skills to obtain the crusade's objectives, concluding the Treaty of Jaffa with Sultan al-Kamil in 1219 (Figure 14.13).



Figure 14.13 Al-Kamil and Frederick II. This image from a fourteenth-century Italian manuscript depicts the Holy Roman emperor, Frederick II (second from left), and the Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil (center) signing the Treaty of Jaffa decades earlier in 1229. Although the figures are similar in appearance, note the turban and curved swords that identify the two on the right as Muslims. (credit: "Friedrich II. mit Sultan al-Kamil" by I Villani illustrato/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The agreement allowed Frederick to be the titular king of Jerusalem, though with limited power. Muslims were under the rule of local Islamic scholars, not Christian officials; they could not be expelled or have their wealth confiscated, they could practice Islam, and the Islamic holy sites of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock remained under Muslim control. The treaty prohibited Jerusalem's city walls, destroyed in the course of the crusades, from being rebuilt, leaving the city defenseless if Muslims attacked. A ten-year truce between Muslims and Christians was put in place.

The agreement was widely seen as a capitulation by both Muslims and Christians. Frederick's decision to favor negotiation over battle sapped morale among the crusaders and furthered mistrust of him among the Holy Land's Christians. Nevertheless, a Christian was king of Jerusalem, more Christians were under Christian rule than had been the case for at least two generations, and all had been accomplished without spilling a single drop of human blood.

By the time the truce expired, al-Kamil's sons were fighting each other and ambitious generals for control. New crusaders arrived sporadically, augmenting Christian forces in the area. They tried to expand Christian territory by playing rival Ayyubid factions against each other, but it was all for naught. Al-Kamil's son al-Salih stabilized his rule over the Ayyubid Empire, retook Jerusalem, and pushed the Christians back to a strip of coastal ports by 1244. He owed much of his success to bands of wandering Turks who had been displaced by Mongol expansion into central Asia and whom he incorporated into the Ayyubid mamluk army. While helpful for the moment, however, these additional soldiers entered the status of mamluk as independent adult refugees, not as adolescents with no life experience to compare mamluk service to.

While al-Salih consolidated his power, the French king Louis IX called for another crusade to liberate Jerusalem from Islamic rule, hoping to repeat the initial successes of the Fifth Crusade by taking Damietta in Egypt. He succeeded, but while Salih's death in

1249 gave the crusaders hope, they met the same fate as their predecessors almost thirty years earlier. The Ayyubid mamluk army, led by al-Salih's son Turan Shah, trapped the crusaders in the unfamiliar terrain of the Nile delta, capturing Louis and much of his army in 1250. Those deemed sick or unworthy of ransom were killed. Louis and the vassals with him were held hostage until Damietta was abandoned by the crusaders and a ransom of 6.4 million ounces of silver (more than USD$134 million at 2020 prices) was paid in advance, with the crusaders pledging to pay an equal amount later. This and the later crusades were often failures for a variety of reasons, which included unfamiliarity with the land and its peoples and more than a century of distrust that had continued to build between the crusaders and the indigenous eastern Christians.

The Rise of Egypt's Mamluk Dynasty

Turan Shah did not live long enough to enjoy the fruits of his success. The wandering Turks turned mamluks who were the backbone of his army were convinced that the ransom money from the crusaders would be used to replace them with more traditional mamluks from Africa. To secure their position and gain control of the ransom money for themselves, they overthrew Turan Shah. His stepmother, al-Salih's surviving widow Shajar al-Durr, briefly assumed the throne, but the mamluks were not willing to follow a female sultan, so they forced her to marry their leader Izz al-Din Aybak and abdicate in his favor. Historians consider the ascension of Aybak to be the end of the Ayyubid dynasty and the beginning of the Egyptian Mamluk dynasty. The Ayyubids left important marks on the history of the Islamic Levant. They restored the primacy of Sunni Islam after over two hundred years of Shia Fatimid rule. They built new madrasas—Muslim schools of learning, often with an emphasis on studying the Quran—in Aleppo, Cairo, and Damascus.

While Christians and Muslims were fighting each other, Hulagu Khan and his troops were ready to return to expanding Mongol domains. Satisfied with their looting of Baghdad and the security of their supply routes, they moved north to lands more hospitable to the enormous herds the army required. Hulagu decided the Mamluk areas of Syria and Egypt would be his next targets and demanded the Mamluk sultan become his vassal and pay tribute. The sultan declined. In 1259, after securing cooperation (or at least noninterference) from Islamic forces in Anatolia and crusader forces in the area, Hulagu attacked the Mamluks. Initially he had great success, taking Aleppo, which was annihilated as Baghdad had been, and Damascus, which surrendered unconditionally and was largely spared. Hulagu's participation was short-lived, however. In early 1260, he received word that his presence was needed at a *kurultai* in Karakorum.

Hulagu appears to have underestimated Mamluk military prowess. Despite withdrawing possibly 90 percent of his forces as he returned to Karakorum, he still ordered Kitbuqa, one of his top generals and a Nestorian Christian, to take twenty thousand troops to conquer Egypt. Augmenting Kitbuqa's forces were Christian Armenians and some of the remaining crusaders. In the fall of 1260, the Mamluks attacked the invading Mongols at Ain Jalut and soundly defeated them, killing Kitbuqa and most of his force. While the loss was relatively small compared with Hulagu's overall force, it was enough to save parts of the unconquered Islamic world from further Mongol attack. Hulagu soon had his hands full defending his territory from his fellow Mongols, especially those of the Golden Horde. Meanwhile, the Mamluks were able to liberate Syria and Palestine from both the Mongols and the remaining crusaders and give some support to the Golden Horde in its conflicts with the Il-Khanate.

The Delhi Sultanate

There are many parallels between Mamluk Egypt and the Delhi Sultanate (in present-day India). The Delhi Sultanate had been created by the inhabitants of what is modern Afghanistan and was led by Muhammed of Ghur, who conquered the sultanate established by Mahmud of Ghazna in the late twelfth century. When the Mongols encountered it, the sultanate was ruled by a dynasty of former mamluks whose founder, Quṭb al-Din Aybak, had seized power after Muhammed's death in 1206. Perhaps his efforts served as inspiration for the mamluk general Izz al-Din Aybak, who led the overthrow of Egypt's Ayyubid dynasty almost fifty years later.

A feature the Delhi Sultanate shared with both its Mongol neighbors and the later Egyptian Mamluk dynasty was frequent bouts of civil war over succession. Aybak died from an injury after falling from a horse in 1210, leaving the task of stabilizing the sultanate to his son-in-law Iltutmish. Iltutmish did a remarkable job, asserting authority over other commanders of mamluk armies. After his death in 1236, however, decentralization and turmoil reigned for sixty years. During that time, there were ten sultans, only one of whom died from natural causes. The population suffered the disruption of economic activity and the destruction of crops, goods, and production centers during these multiyear struggles for leadership.

The conflict after the death of Iltutmish foreshadowed the turmoil of the Mamluk seizure of power from the Ayyubids and the role played in each case by a talented and forceful Muslim woman. Among the Mamluks this was al-Salih's surviving widow, Shajar al-Durr. In the Delhi Sultanate, it was Raziya, Iltutmish's daughter, whom he considered the most capable of his children to rule. A half-brother seized power with help from factions unwilling to accept a female sultan. Raziya, who had administered Delhi when her father was away on campaign, outmaneuvered her half-brother by directly appealing to the people of Delhi. When the army saw the public behind her, they deposed her decadent and incompetent brother.

Raziya ruled as sultana for four years and is remembered as a capable administrator, even leading successful military campaigns (Figure 14.14). Politically shrewd, she came to power despite the objections of nobles primarily because of popular support from her people. Breaking with Islamic convention, she dressed as a man, wore pants and no veil, and kept her hair short. This was too much for some Muslims in the sultanate. Another half-brother capitalized on their discontent and organized a rebellion of several military units, which drove Raziya into hiding. She was, however, cunning; she was eventually captured by one of the generals and married him; whether the marriage was a romantic alliance or a case of political opportunism is unknown. Ultimately, the couple was defeated and killed.



Figure 14.14 Sultana Raziya. This nineteenth-century painted miniature depicts Sultana Raziya in the center of the top row. Notice that she is the only female in the throne room, including her attendants, who appear to her right. (credit: modification of work "Sultana Razia Begum" by Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad/Museums of India, Public Domain)

To keep down rebellion and internal power struggles, the later Delhi sultans developed a series of authoritarian policies. For example, a secret police network was established to watch civilian administrators and military officials. Rules were so strict that these elites were banned from having celebratory gatherings with their peers, because sultans feared coups were planned at such events. Although already prohibited by the Quran, alcohol was officially outlawed, at least in the administrative area of Delhi.

Peasants were largely spared in an effort to prevent rebellions, but other classes lost their financial independence and were placed under state control. Land that had been given to soldiers and war widows was confiscated, and bureaucrats' salaries were kept low. Price controls limited merchants' profit potential, and high taxes prevented the accumulation of large amounts of private capital. All these policies deprived subjects of wealth to fund rebellions and gave the sultan the ability to control people by cutting off their income.

Despite frequent internal turmoil, the Delhi Sultanate performed well against external foes and expanded greatly during the hundred years after Iltutmish's rule. When he died in 1236, the sultanate controlled the area from the Himalayas through the Ganges River valley to the Narmada River at the northern edge of the Deccan Plateau. By the end of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq's conquests in 1336, it held almost all the subcontinent's land as well (Figure 14.15). This expansion not only enlarged the territory Muslims ruled from Delhi; it also facilitated the conversion to Islam of more of the Indian population. A per-person tax was imposed on Hindus, but it was graduated based on income. Those at the extremes of wealth and poverty, the Brahmans and the Pariah, respectively, were largely exempt. Furthermore, no sultan imposed sharia, which would likely have caused resentment. Those like the Pariah and Sudra, who felt caste discrimination, could easily find a home and increase their social standing by converting to Islam, and a good number chose to do so.



Figure 14.15 The Growth of the Delhi Sultanate. This map shows the growth of the Delhi Sultanate in the hundred years from 1236 to 1336. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Delhi Sultanate was also effective at repulsing Mongol attacks. While Chinggis Khan had bypassed it in his war against the Khwarazmians, both the Il-Khanate and the Chagatai Khanate, despite their own domestic turmoil and conflict with neighboring Mongol khanates, launched periodic raids against it for plunder. It was not until the 1290s that the Chagatai Khan Duwa made the first of several attempts not just to pillage but to conquer at least parts of the Delhi Sultanate. Duwa never led these efforts himself because he was engaged against the Yuan dynasty for most of this period. At least six attempts failed between 1296 and 1306, however, in no small part because Duwa had chosen to attack when the sultanate had one of its most capable rulers, Alauddin Khilji.

Tarmashirin made one last attack on the Delhi Sultanate for the Chagatai Khanate in 1327. Taking advantage of Sultan Tughlaq's moving his capital and the bulk of his forces south to the center of his expanded empire, Tarmashirin, while struggling to assume

the Chagatai Khanate throne, laid siege to Delhi. After extorting a great deal of tribute from Sultan Tughlaq, useful in raising an army to complete his own ascension to power back home, Tarmashirin withdrew his forces. Some scholars suggest his subsequent conversion to Islam was an attempt to minimize the possibility of a major retaliatory strike by the sultanate. Regardless, the fracturing of the Chagatai Khanate after Tarmashirin's death ended any serious efforts by Mongols to conquer the Delhi Sultanate.

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12.6: Key Terms

Constitutions of Melfi
the oldest surviving written constitution in the world, which increased the power of the monarch of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies by replacing vassals and church officials with royal bureaucrats

Golden Horde
the Mongol group that ruled over portions of central Asia, the former lands of the Rus, and northwest Asia

Inquisition
a centuries-long effort by the church to impose religious homogeneity on Western Europe through torture and execution, if necessary

kurultai
a proto-democratic gathering of a Mongol leader's followers, called to reach agreement on major political decisions

Magna Carta
an English document that reiterated existing rights of vassals, confirmed the papal position that the church is above the state, and spelled out some basic rights of commoners

mandarins
top officials in the Imperial Chinese bureaucracy, selected by a series of exams on Confucian texts

People of the Felt Walls
Temujin's name for his ethnically and linguistically diverse followers

sharia
Islamic religious law

yam
horse relay stations established by Chinggis Khan for long-distance communication on military campaigns; they were later expanded into rest areas and supply depots

yassa
Chinggis Khan's law code, designed to eliminate the sources of conflict in steppe society and bring harmony to his people

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12.7: Section Summary

14.1 Song China and the Steppe Peoples

The Song dynasty revived and strengthened Confucian civilization in the areas it ruled. Technology improved agricultural yields and laid the groundwork for a type of industrial revolution to occur long before the one that took place in the Western world. The emphasis on Confucius's pacifist vision led to a neglect of the military, however, at a time when China's neighbors were becoming more organized and powerful. The Khitan, Xia, and Jurchen all adopted elements of Chinese civilization but did not lose their appetite for raiding and war. Once the Jurchen Jin dynasty displaced the Liao, it realized the weaknesses of the Song and reduced it to an even smaller slice of China's traditional territory.

Meanwhile, in Mongolia, Temujin used military innovations to gain control of increasing numbers of commoners at the eastern end of the Eurasian Steppe, building a force loyal and powerful enough to bring about his vision of a better life for his people. By 1204, Temujin was the unchallenged ruler of the People of the Felt Walls.

14.2 Chinggis Khan and the Early Mongol Empire

Chinggis Khan ruled the Mongol Empire for twenty-one years. In that time, he established a law code, the *yassa*, that he hoped would allow his seminomadic people to live in harmony. He saw the people living in settled areas, such as the Xi Xia, Jin, and Khwarazmians, as a source of wealth and tribute. The empire changed enormously during Chinggis Khan's reign, becoming more inwardly peaceful but also much more materialistic in its tastes. The military changed as well, becoming a sophisticated war machine capable of surprise attacks and deadly sieges.

Chinggis Khan's son Ogedei steered the empire toward his father's vision of a united people, overseeing a peaceful Eurasia-wide exchange of goods and collection of taxes, and he expanded the empire to make it happen. Equally important, Ogedei undertook the development of the bureaucracy and infrastructure necessary to support trade on a large scale. Due to Ogedei's lack of foresight in planning for succession, however, the reign of Chinggis Khan's grandson Mongke marked the end of a united Mongol Empire. When Mongke's brother Kublai succeeded him as great khan, the empire was beginning to divide into those who preferred the old nomadic ways and those who had adopted a settled lifestyle of wealth and trade.

14.3 The Mongol Empire Fragments

While Kublai's Yuan dynasty reunited China and gave it the same ruler as the Mongol homeland and much of central Asia, it revived neither the prosperity of China nor the robustness of the steppe people. Trade continued to flow, and the effects of earlier economic growth were still apparent, but less wealth was subsequently produced. This meant less went to the steppe, and those producing wealth saw increasingly fewer returns on their labor. The seemingly invincible armies of the Mongol Empire had proven unable to conquer Southeast Asia and were even less skilled at long-distance sea invasions. Perhaps most contrary to Chinggis Khan's desired legacy, his descendants succumbed to a lust for power and were quick to abandon the strength of a unified Mongol people under one leader for their own bid to be that leader for a few years.

14.4 Christianity and Islam outside Central Asia

The forces of centralization and conformity in Western Christendom scored important victories, crushing heretical movements and formalizing institutions such as the Inquisition to keep them down. On the other hand, crusaders and kings alike often ignored the papal will with virtual impunity. Monarchs in France and the Two Sicilies laid the groundwork for strong royal bureaucracies to keep the nobility in check. In other areas, nobles and merchants in places like England and Iberia created institutional arrangements to protect their rights and resources from royal abuse.

The Muslim-held portions of the Mediterranean saw frequent struggles over who would govern as institutions to ensure orderly succession failed to develop. Whoever had the military strength to impose law and order did so until they were displaced. Perhaps nothing demonstrated this pattern more than the rise of the Mamluk dynasty, founded by the mercenaries long used in struggles by different descendants of Salah al-Din. In North Africa, this failure of succession and changing military realities led to a collapse of centralized power and a yielding of land in Iberia to growing Christian states. In both areas, however, Sunni Islam emerged stronger than it had been at the beginning of the thirteenth century, although the strength of Muslim governance in the Iberian Peninsula was on a precipitous decline from which it would not recover.

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12.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
The saying “Do not waste good iron making nails; do not waste good men making soldiers” reflects the attitude of the _____ toward their military.

a. Jin dynasty
b. Liao dynasty
c. Naiman Confederation
d. Song dynasty

2.
What caused the sizable population rise in Song China during the eleventh century?

a. the use of strains of rice that ripened quickly enough to allow for two harvests in a single year
b. Mongolian soldiers protecting trade routes that allowed more food to be imported
c. the invention of horse-drawn plows that allowed more land to be cultivated
d. the immigration of refugees from Chinggis Khan’s conquests

3.
What empire maintained a dual system of governance in which formerly seminomadic peoples were governed in their traditional manner, while Chinese populations were governed by mandarins?

a. Jin
b. Liao
c. Song
d. Tatar

4.
How did Temujin change traditional seminomadic practices for dealing with men captured from the clans or tribes he defeated?

a. He ordered all captured enemies killed, sparing no one regardless of class.
b. He ordered all captives enslaved.
c. He ordered commoners killed but spared the leadership of his defeated rivals.
d. He tried and executed the leaders but spared the commoners, even allowing them to join his army.

5.
What was the intention of Chinggis Khan’s *yassa*?

a. to reinforce the objectification of women
b. to force all Mongols to worship Tengri
c. to remove sources of conflict and strife among Mongols
d. to make the Mongolian economy self-sufficient

6.
Who ultimately conquered the Jin dynasty?

a. Chinggis Khan
b. Mongke
c. Hulagu
d. Ogedei

7.
What does the term *kurultai* mean?

a. a medallion carried by Mongol government officials to identify them as under the great khan’s protection
b. Chinggis Khan’s law code
c. rest areas that provided lodging, supplies, and fresh horses for those on official business
d. a proto-democratic gathering of a Mongol leader’s followers to reach agreement on major political decisions

8.

Why is Ariq Boke important?

a. because he conquered the Abbassid Caliphate
b. because his challenge to Kublai ended the unity of the Mongol Empire
c. because he conquered Song China
d. because he succeeded Chinggis Khan

9.
What Mongol khanate was the first to fragment beyond recovery after a succession struggle?

a. the Il-Khanate
b. the Khanate of the Golden Horde
c. the Chagatai Khanate
d. the Khanate of the Great Khan

10.
What was the only part of the Mongol world in which the rulers did not convert to Islam?

a. the Il-Khanate
b. the Khanate of the Golden Horde
c. the Chagatai Khanate
d. the Khanate of the Great Khan

11.
Economic growth in Yuan China was _____.

a. even greater than in Song China
b. less than in Song China
c. unchanged from Song China
d. hard to evaluate because no records were kept

12.
Jerusalem was temporarily restored to Christian control by _____.

a. the Fourth Crusade
b. the Treaty of Jaffa
c. the Fifth Crusade
d. the crusade led by Louis IX

13.
What was the purpose of the Constitutions of Melfi?

a. strengthen the king’s control over his vassals and the clergy
b. require the Cortes to meet every year
c. ensure all free adults were tried by juries of their peers
d. ensure that no free people were deprived of property without due process

14.
Where did the Almohads rule?

a. Mesopotamia and Persia
b. Byzantium
c. Iberia and North Africa
d. Egypt and the Levant

15.
Under what name did Salah al-Din’s descendants rule Egypt and Syria?

a. Almohads
b. Hohenstaufens
c. Ayyubids
d. Mamluks

16.

What Mongol khanate weakened itself in several failed attempts to conquer the Delhi Sultanate?

a. the Il-Khanate
b. the Khanate of the Golden Horde
c. the Chagatai Khanate
d. the Khanate of the Great Khan

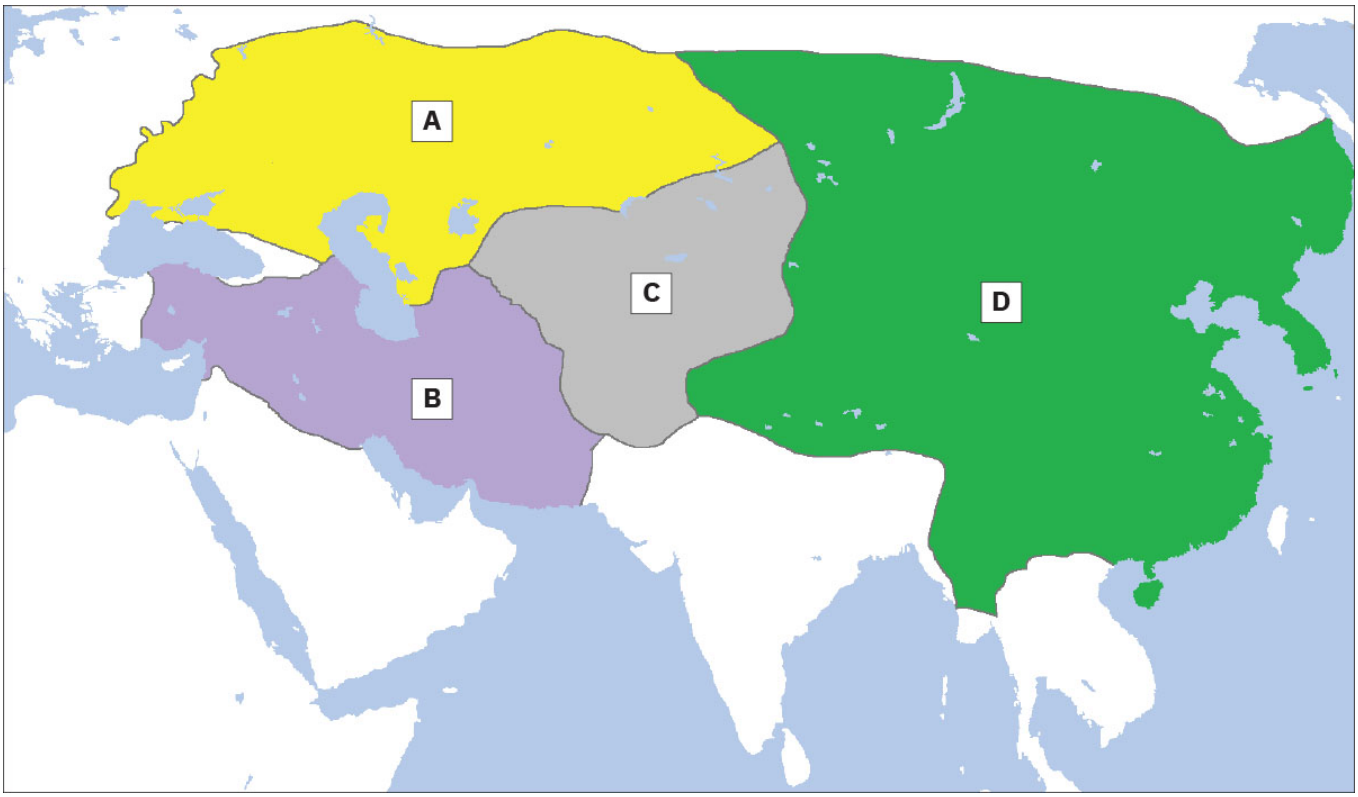
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12.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
To what degree were the emperors of the Song dynasty effective at running a thriving civilization? Why?
2.
How did the way the Khitan Liao lived, once they established a more settled empire, compare with that of the Jurchen Jin once they did so as well?
3.
Did succession to the position of great khan work out as Chinggis Khan had hoped in the decades after his death?
4.

Using the map provided, identify each part of the Mongol Empire. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Mongol Empire c. 1300, after its four subdivisions" by "Gabagool"/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)



5.
How did the rivers and hydraulic infrastructure of China allow the Song dynasty to prolong their rule and stave off defeat by the Mongols for many years?
6.
Why did the Mongol Empire break apart?
7.
What was a common source of instability among both Christian and Islamic monarchies in the thirteenth century?
8.
Why were the Ayyubids and Mamluks able to repel the crusades of the first half of the thirteenth century?
9.
Why might members of the Sudra and Pariah castes convert to Islam under the Delhi Sultanate?

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12.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
How did the Song dynasty differ from earlier periods of unified Chinese history such as the Tang and Han dynasties, and how did these differences change Chinese society for the better?

2.
How was Chinggis Khan able to unify the peoples of the eastern end of the Eurasian Steppe?

3.
What were some of the factors that prevented the Mongols from conquering more lands in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East?

4.
How did Chinggis Khan's *yassa* change the traditional practices of the Mongol people, and what motivated him to make these changes?

5.
To what degree did Yuan dynasty government and policy differ from the administration of the Song dynasty?

6.
What effect did the Mongol conquests have on the spread of Islam?

7.
Did the crusading movement, both in Iberia and the Levant, do more to help or harm the relationship between the Christian church and the rulers of western Europe in this period? Why?

8.
What were some of the reasons the Mongols failed to make meaningful inroads in South Asia? What may have helped make their attempts more successful?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

13: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa

13.1: Introduction
13.2: Culture and Society in Medieval Africa
13.3: Medieval Sub-Saharan Africa
13.4: The People of the Sahel
13.5: Key Terms
13.6: Section Summary
13.7: Review Questions
13.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
13.9: Application and Reflection Questions

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13.1: Introduction



Figure 15.1 Mansa Musa. This composite of images from the fourteenth-century *Catalan Atlas* depicts several pages of maps in the background, with a detail from the left-most page superimposed on top that shows the Malian king Mansa Musa enthroned, holding a golden scepter and orb and wearing a gold crown as symbols of his wealth and power. (credit background: modification of work "Catalan Atlas" by Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit center: modification of work "Detail from the Catalan Atlas Sheet 6 showing Mansa Musa" by Gallica Digital Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

15.1 Culture and Society in Medieval Africa
15.2 Medieval Sub-Saharan Africa
15.3 The People of the Sahel

"This king is the greatest of the Muslim kings of the Sudan. He rules the most extensive territory, has the most numerous army, is the bravest, richest, the most fortunate, the most victorious over his enemies, and the best able to distribute benefits." So wrote al-Umari of the fourteenth-century Malian king Mansa Musa. An official of the Mamluk Sultanate and Mansa Musa's contemporary, al-Umari was in a unique position to describe the great Sudanic king of West Africa and his legendary wealth. At this time, Mansa Musa's kingdom was the latest state in the history of West Africa to exploit its strategic location astride the trans-Saharan trade routes (Figure 15.1).

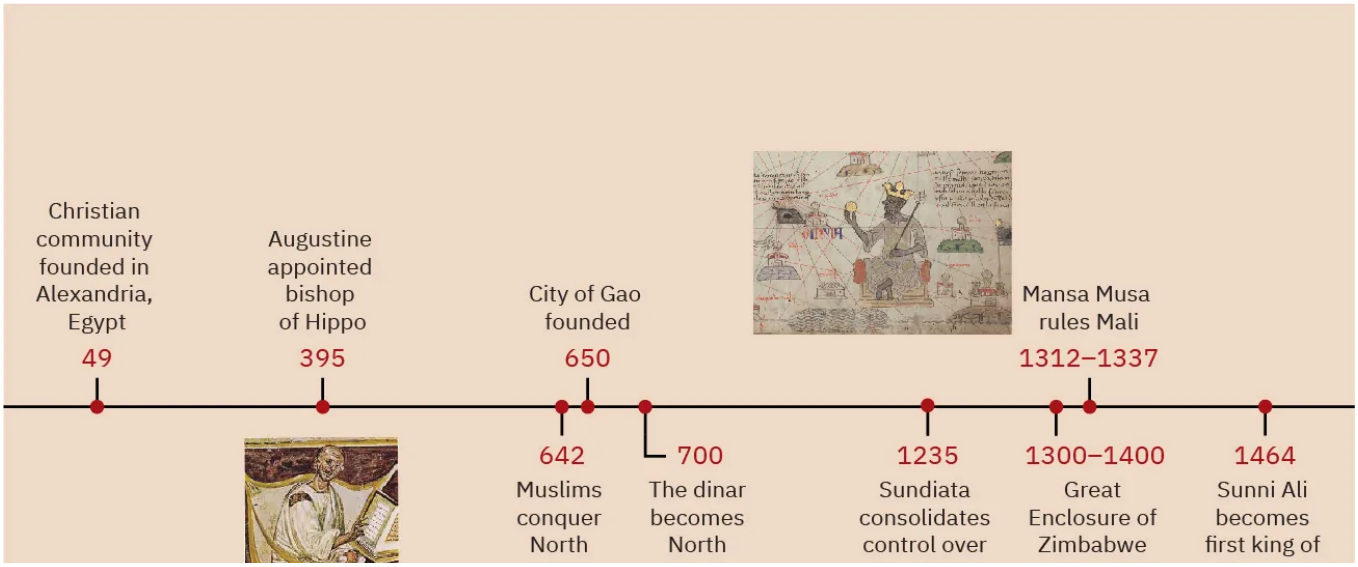


Figure 15.2 Timeline: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. (credit “395”: modification of work “Augustine Lateran” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1312–1337”: modification of work “Detail from the Catalan Atlas Sheet 6 showing Mansa Musa” by Gallica Digital Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1300–1400”: modification of work “Great Zimbabwe, Main enclosure entrance” by “damien_farrell”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)



Figure 15.3 Locator Map: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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13.2: Culture and Society in Medieval Africa

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Analyze the relationship between the physical geography of Africa and the migration of peoples like the Bantu
- Discuss how Christianity and Islam arrived and spread throughout western Africa

As the second-largest continent on the planet, Africa's vast landmass possesses a great variety of different terrains and climatic regions. In some cases, these regions have inhibited the movement of people, technologies, languages, cultures, and religions. For example, the Sahara stretches from the Atlantic coast of northwest Africa to the Red Sea in Egypt and forms a nearly impassable barrier between the Mediterranean world and sub-Saharan Africa. Only with considerable effort have some groups been able to penetrate this arid zone. For this reason, the people of North Africa have historically had stronger cultural, political, and religious connections to the Mediterranean world than the peoples south of the desert. Other regions like the Sahel (the environmental threshold that is the southern portion of the Sahara) and the tropical woodland savanna are spread across large portions of the continent and have in some ways encouraged the migration of groups. The migrating Bantus, for example, spread their languages and ironworking technology throughout this region.

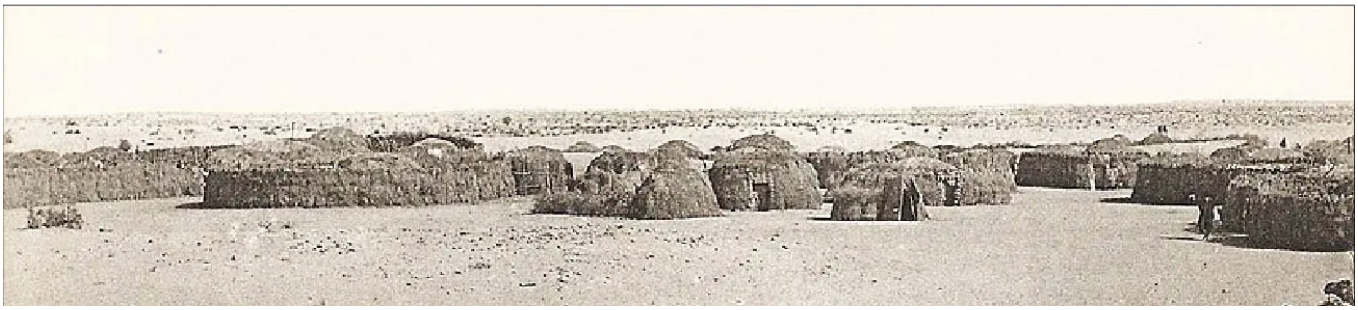
African Geography, Migrations, and Settlement

North of the Sahara is a thin strip of forest and scrubland hugging the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Like other parts of the Mediterranean world, it has a relatively mild climate with sufficient rainfall, wet winters, and dry summers. For this reason, the arable land there is suitable for growing grains like wheat and barley, originally domesticated in the Fertile Crescent and disseminated around the sea over thousands of years. Likewise, this northern African region has had a long history of cultural contact with other Mediterranean cultures like the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Romans. As a result, the cultural practices, religions, and languages of the larger Mediterranean world have had, and continue to have, a huge impact on this region.

South of the Sahara is the Sahel, a semiarid belt of land that separates the desert in the north from the savanna in the south. The Sahel is a transitional zone that stretches some 3,300 miles across the continent. The farther south, the longer is the rainy season (four months on average), the more temperate is the climate, and the greater is the abundance of pasturage and forage plants for livestock (especially cattle and sheep), including grasses, thorny shrubs, and baobab trees. The word *Sahel* is derived from the Arabic *sahil*, meaning "shore." This is a reference to the view held by many that the Sahara was a vast sea of sand that could be navigated only with great difficulty.

The Sahara's extremely dry conditions are hostile to both plants and animals, so only small-scale human settlements are possible. These are clustered around the desert's oases, which amount to a fraction of a percentage of its total landmass. During the Middle Ages, these oases were crucial hubs connecting trade routes across the desert, nowhere more so than in West Africa, where medieval kingdoms competed for control over markets and the movement of goods across the region.

During the medieval period, the Sahara provided powerful West African kingdoms with a vital commodity: salt. Almost completely unobtainable in the inland regions south of the Sahara, salt was mined from sites such as Taghaza and transported in enormous slabs on the backs of camels in caravans that crossed the desert to West African villages and beyond (Figure 15.4). Salt became the second most prized good traded across the Sahara—the first being gold. Indeed, salt was such a valuable commodity that the king of Ghana stored it in the royal treasury alongside gold nuggets.



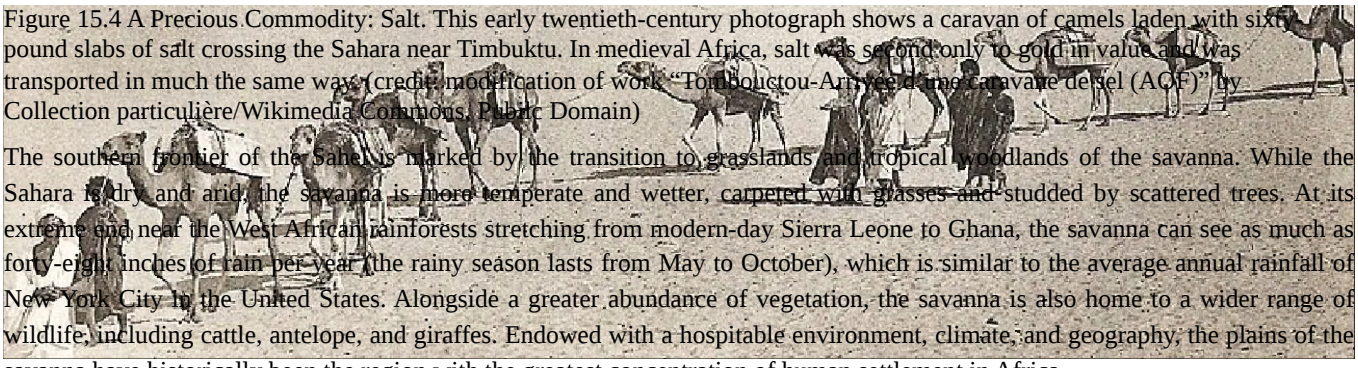


Figure 15.4 A Precious Commodity: Salt. This early twentieth-century photograph shows a caravan of camels laden with sixty-pound slabs of salt crossing the Sahara near Timbuktu. In medieval Africa, salt was second only to gold in value and was transported in much the same way. (credit: modification of work "Tombouctou-Arrivee de la caravane de sel (AOF)" by Collection particulière/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The southern frontier of the Sahel is marked by the transition to grasslands and tropical woodlands of the savanna. While the Sahara is dry and arid, the savanna is more temperate and wetter, carpeted with grasses and studded by scattered trees. At its extreme end near the West African rainforests stretching from modern-day Sierra Leone to Ghana, the savanna can see as much as forty-eight inches of rain per year (the rainy season lasts from May to October), which is similar to the average annual rainfall of New York City in the United States. Alongside a greater abundance of vegetation, the savanna is also home to a wider range of wildlife, including cattle, antelope, and giraffes. Endowed with a hospitable environment, climate, and geography, the plains of the savanna have historically been the region with the greatest concentration of human settlement in Africa.

Winding through the savanna and Sahel regions of West Africa is the Niger River. Along its fertile banks, people have grown staple crops like sorghum, African rice, and millet for hundreds of years. Approximately 2,500 miles in length, the Niger is West Africa's longest river. It was critical to the development of medieval West African kingdoms, both for its ability to sustain intensive agriculture and as a crucial transport conduit for goods and commodities (Figure 15.5). It was in the areas drained by the Niger River where West Africa's great empires emerged, profiting from the flows of salt from the north and gold from the south. In this way, these empires grew fabulously wealthy.



Figure 15.5 The Niger River. From its source in the Guinea Highlands, the Niger, the third-longest river in Africa (after the Nile and the Congo), travels through a great part of the interior of West Africa before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean in southern Nigeria. As the major source of water for both the western Sahara and Sahel, the Niger was crucial to the establishment and development of trading centers at Gao and Timbuktu. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

To the south of the savanna lies the tropical rainforest, Africa's third major environment alongside the desert and the savanna. Relative to the Sahara, the African rainforest covers a far smaller geographic footprint: some two million square miles, or roughly 10 percent of the continent's total landmass. Nevertheless, the rainforest is rich in biodiversity, including pygmy hippopotamuses, giant forest hogs, canopy monkeys, and chimpanzees, as well as thousands of species of plants. In West Africa, dense stretches of rainforest can be found in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. In this area, the Bantu initially encountered the Nok people, from whom they acquired the metallurgical knowledge that enabled them to move into and later emerge from the equatorial rainforest between 500 and 1000 CE. The gradual dispersal of the Bantu throughout much of southern Africa followed.

Bantu speakers had been migrating from this area possibly since as early as 3000 BCE. But with the adoption of ironworking technology from the Nok, these ironworking farmers were able to travel throughout much of the eastern, western, and southeastern regions of the subcontinent. Their Iron Age economy was dominated by farming, mostly of sorghum and millet, with some

livestock including cattle, pigs, and chickens, although animal husbandry tended to be secondary to farming. Because the regions into which they moved were only thinly populated by roving bands of hunter-gatherers, the Bantu were able to choose the most suitable land for farming. Early Iron Age Bantu settlements tended to be small, typically consisting of a dozen or so round houses encircling a livestock pen of cattle or goats. Larger settlements (sometimes in the range of several hectares) could be found in regions such as Natal, favored by large Bantu kinship groups because of the combination of rich biodiversity and sparse population. Settlements were placed close to iron ore and wood for the smelting of carbon steel. The early Iron Age Bantu economy necessarily focused on self-sufficiency with little potential for trade, although some small-scale trade did take place, particularly of sought-after commodities like copper and salt in regions of the Congo and Tanzania.

Until about the eighth century CE, the Bantu developed and exploited the resources of the more favorable areas and adapted the local environments. Throughout, they remained a stateless society organized along kinship lines. Women tended crops, prepared food, and minded the smaller children, while men tended livestock, hunted for meat and for animal skins for clothing, and engaged in trade with other villages. Women leaders were the exception; archaeological evidence of male dominance is considerable. Authority was decentralized in any case, with no rigidly hierarchical power structure to exercise central authority.

From the tenth century, relatively powerful Bantu kingdoms began to appear in the savanna to the south of the Central African rainforest, and in the plateau between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers in the interior of southern Africa. Their large settlements displaced the region's earlier inhabitants. This revolution in the ancient African political landscape was the combined result of the introduction of Neolithic cultivation and animal husbandry on the one hand, and the adoption of Iron Age technologies, tools, and weapons on the other. The succession of medieval Bantu kingdoms that emerged dominated these regions economically, politically, and culturally.

Migrating originally from West Africa, the Bantu would have recognized much of the geography and climate of southern Africa: there is desert, such as the Kalahari and Namib in southwest Africa, and vast savanna. Entire regions of the modern countries of Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique are blanketed by grassland, as is a large area that extends from southern Mozambique into northeastern South Africa. Both the vegetation and wildlife of the southern African savanna resemble that of West Africa in many ways. The southern African climate also has much in common with that of West Africa, encompassing everything from semiarid to temperate zones, with each experiencing varying amounts of rain. Broadly speaking, the eastern area of the region (including Mozambique and eastern South Africa) is wetter than the western area. The west is sapped of moisture, in part by the Atlantic Ocean's cold Benguela Current. The resulting dryness of western South Africa was a key factor in the development of the Kalahari and Namib Deserts (Figure 15.6).



Figure 15.6 The Kalahari Desert. Parts of the Kalahari Desert are especially dry, making life there quite a challenge. (credit: modification of work “Kalahari” by Quinn Norton/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Throughout the Middle Ages, the river systems of southern Africa were exploited by the large civilizations developing there. For example, the Limpopo River basin spreads across the southern reaches of today’s Mozambique and Zimbabwe, the northern extreme of South Africa, and the eastern edge of Botswana. The basin’s temperate climate and well-watered landscape encouraged the migration of San hunter-gatherers from southwestern Africa and the settlement of Bantu peoples. The Bantu, who arrived from the north, brought with them the knowledge of ironworking, farming, and livestock herding they had acquired over generations of migrations throughout sub-Saharan Africa. From the tenth century onward, they used this knowledge to cultivate farms across extensive field systems along the basin and to accumulate large herds of cattle.

As the settlements around the Limpopo River grew, so too did the need to manage the basin’s resources and govern the affairs of the people there. As a result, centralized systems of governance emerged among the Bantu peoples in the region, particularly in the Iron Age culture of Leopard’s Kopje in Zimbabwe. This cattle-keeping culture, whose name derived from the site where it was identified (*kopje* means “small hill”), dominated the area for nearly two centuries, but by the thirteenth century, it had given way to an even larger and more complex state, Great Zimbabwe.

The Expansion of Christianity in Africa

Throughout its history, North Africa’s fate and fortunes have been connected to the Mediterranean Sea and the peoples who share its borders. Whether economic, political, or spiritual, changes and innovations occurring in this region have had lasting and important consequences for Africa. These changes often went hand in hand; as the Roman Empire grew and expanded, for instance, so did Christianity.

Christianity emerged as a distinct religion in the second half of the first century and soon spread into communities around the Roman-controlled Mediterranean world. Being part of the Roman Empire, North Africa became home to some of the world’s earliest Christian communities. According to Christian tradition, Saint Mark traveled to the Egyptian city of Alexandria and founded the first Christian community in Africa there around the middle of the first century. Regardless of whether we accept this

tradition as factual or not, it is indisputable that by the third century Alexandria was a major center of Christianity. By that time, the influential School of Alexandria was an important center for theological research, and the bishop of the Church of Alexandria was held by Christians to be as important as the pope (the bishop of Rome). It was from Alexandria that Christianity spread south along the Nile, penetrating the reaches of Upper Egypt.

The growth of the church in Africa mirrored its expansion across the Mediterranean and drew the attention of Roman officials. In general, the Roman Empire was not interested in persecuting the followers of the many religions practiced around the empire, even members of new religions like Christianity. However, some actions of early Christian communities were seen by Roman officials as disruptive to peace and stability in the empire. For example, Christians refused to participate in the state cults that honored the Roman gods and protected Roman society. Such refusal was interpreted as treason and occasionally punished accordingly, such as under Emperor Nero, who ruled from 54 to 68. But during the reign of Emperor Decius in 250, official empire-wide persecution noticeably increased, reaching its height under Emperor Diocletian in 303. During this time, Rome undertook a series of official persecutions meant to restore the primacy of ancient pagan religious worship and practice throughout the empire.

In Africa, these persecutions prompted many orthodox Christians to flee the relative security of the Nile and seek refuge in the western desert. There, some chose to dwell in solitude as hermits while others chose to build monasteries and live as part of communities of the faithful. One of the latter was Antony of the Desert, who, around the year 300, chose to end his life of isolation and welcomed the company of those who wished to live with him and follow his teachings. Soon, numerous religious settlements cropped up throughout the desert (Figure 15.7).

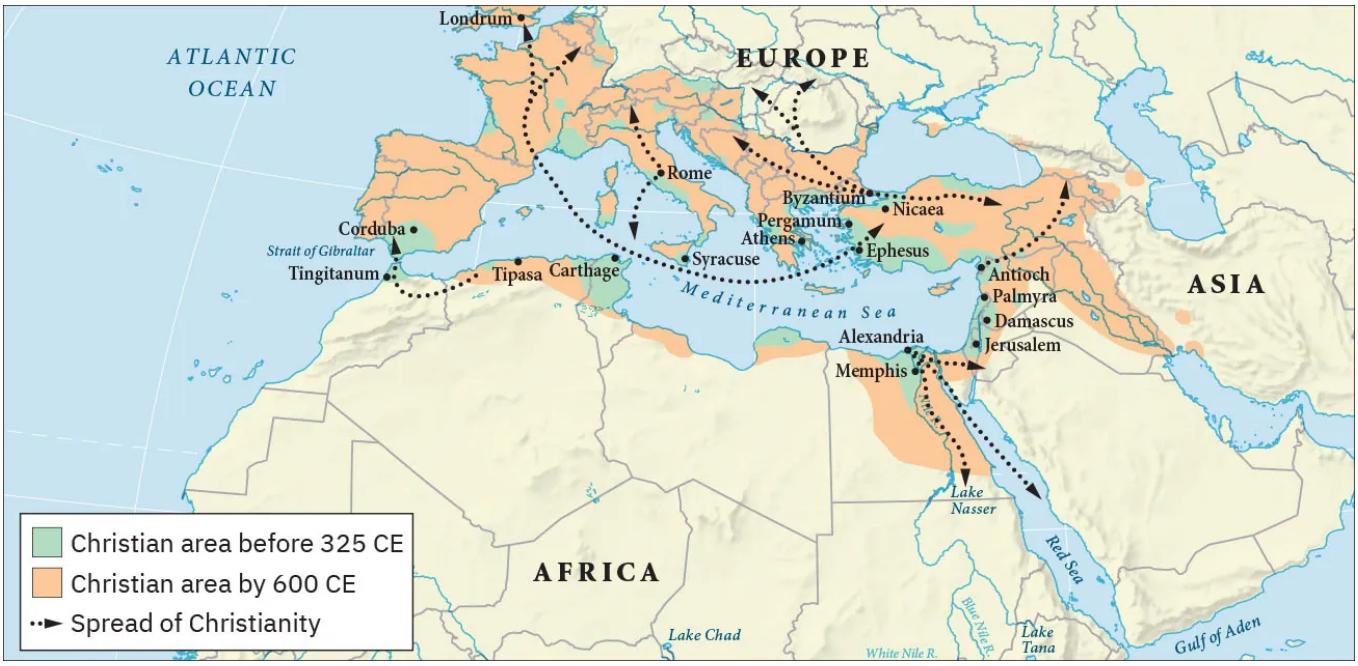


Figure 15.7 The Early Spread of Christianity. The Christian faith spread widely throughout the Mediterranean world, including in northern Africa, from the first through the sixth centuries. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Within a hundred years, three distinctive forms of monasticism had emerged in northeast Africa. Many isolated hermits continued to dwell in northern Egypt. In southern and northwestern Egypt, however, religiously devout men and women preferred to live a communal existence. Monks in southern Egypt gathered together as bands of “brothers” who lived together and shared their daily work. Another type of monasticism emerged in northwestern Egypt. West of the Nile delta monasteries were more hierarchical in structure. At the head of the monastery was a man known as the abbot (“father”). Around him he gathered other men willing to live according to his directions and his teachings. Religious women also chose to engage in the monastic lifestyle. Like men, some chose to live in communities of the faithful, where they sometimes assumed leadership roles. Others, like Amma (Mother) Sarah, preferred a more solitary existence. According to legend, for sixty years Amma Sarah lived a severely ascetic existence in a small dwelling beside a river, probably the Nile, at which she never looked because she was so focused on the state of her soul that little else held interest for her. The way of life pioneered by the devout men and women of North Africa would be imitated by Christians in Europe and elsewhere.

Christianity quickly spread beyond Egypt southward to Ethiopia. The eventual rise of the Christian Kingdom of Aksum was due in large part to the efforts of the missionary Frumentius. Shipwrecked on the Eritrean coast, Frumentius was brought to the royal court and in the role of tutor converted King Ezana, then a devout polytheist. Following his baptism, Ezana sent Frumentius to Alexandria to ask that the head of the Christian Church in Egypt name a bishop for Ethiopia. The bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, duly appointed Frumentius, who assumed the name "Selama." It was likely Bishop Selama who founded Ethiopia's first Christian monastery.

It was also from Egypt that Christianity spread westward in the second and third centuries along the North African coast to the Maghreb, the region of northwest Africa lying between modern-day Morocco and Libya and encompassing a vast tract of the Sahara. One of the places in this region where Christianity appears to have flourished was Carthage. Like Christians in Egypt, the community in Carthage was also subject to Roman persecution during the third century. Most of the evidence we have of this community comes to us in the form of martyr stories. One such story, passed down through a diary, tells of the life of Perpetua, a young Christian mother imprisoned along with her infant and her pregnant servant Felicitas, who gave birth while in prison. Perpetua and Felicitas were executed with other Christians in the arena at Carthage.

To avoid a similar fate, many Christians in North Africa chose to renounce their faith openly while still practicing it in safety. Often the Roman authorities would be satisfied if church leaders simply handed over their scriptures. While this practice seemed preferable to execution for some Christians, others found the refusal to accept martyrdom for their faith an inexcusable offense. Once the persecutions ceased in 313 with the Edict of Milan, which granted religious toleration to Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, many in North Africa refused to recognize those who had renounced their faith as leaders. They further held that any sacramental acts performed by these leaders after they had renounced the faith were invalid, including baptisms, weddings, and even the consecration of clergy. This caused a huge rift in the North African Christian community that became known as the Donatist controversy, named after a Carthaginian bishop named Donatus who led the movement. The problem grew to such proportions that Emperor Constantine had to intervene. Yet even after Donatus was exiled to Gaul (modern France) in 347, the controversy in North Africa continued.

The man who ultimately brought an end to the Donatist rift was one of Christianity's most influential thinkers, Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was born to a Roman colonist father and indigenous African mother in Tagaste, Roman Numidia (present-day Souk Ahras, Algeria). At the age of seventeen, he took up his studies in Carthage and then went on to become a teacher of rhetoric at the imperial court in Milan. During his time in Italy, Augustine read an account of the life of Antony of the Desert, the famous Egyptian hermit, and was inspired to convert to Christianity (Figure 15.8).



Figure 15.8 St. Augustine. An influential Christian philosopher and theologian who was later made a saint, Augustine was born in Roman Numidia in the fourth century. This image from a sixth-century fresco, the earliest known of him, shows him as darker skinned, an acknowledgment of his origins as a Romanized African. (credit: "Augustine Lateran" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Augustine returned to North Africa and was appointed bishop of Hippo (present-day Annaba, Algeria) in 395. By this time, the Donatist controversy had been roiling North Africa for approximately a century. A fierce critic of the Donatist view, Augustine was determined to wipe it out. He was the chief opponent of the Donatists at the 411 Council of Carthage, assembled by the emperor to finally resolve the thorny issue. As a result of Augustine's efforts, the council ordered the Donatists expelled from the church. Despite this fatal blow, elements of the Donatist sect persisted in North Africa until the seventh century.

In addition to his success in combating the Donatists, Augustine left an indelible mark on the early church by writing hundreds of works about Christian doctrine. Perhaps the most influential of these was *The City of God*, which he wrote in response to the Visigoths' sack of Rome in 410. In this work, Augustine argued that any kingdom created by humans—including Rome—could fall, but the Kingdom of God, composed of the people who embraced the Christian faith, would persist forever. In effect, Augustine was reassuring the Christians who had witnessed the near-destruction of Rome that it was not the end of the world. The Christian society that had been created over the centuries—the Kingdom of God—would carry on.

Link to Learning

Learn more about Augustine's concept of the two cities—the earthly and the heavenly—by reading excerpts from his early work of Christian philosophy, *The City of God*.

Augustine was a major force in helping Christianity assume a more uniform character across the empire. Also, as the Roman Empire became more Christian, religious persecution by Christians against pagans became more common throughout the empire.

One of the most violent acts of Christian persecution occurred in Alexandria. In 415, a mob of Christians set upon Hypatia, a pagan philosopher, as she traveled the streets of the provincial capital in her chariot. Pulled from the cart, she was dragged to a nearby temple where she was tortured, flayed alive with shards of roof tiles, and then dismembered. Her body parts were carried to a nearby site and burned. Hypatia's murder in Roman North Africa was a signal event in the assertion of Christian dominance in the empire, which had witnessed a dramatically violent shift in the tide of persecution throughout the Mediterranean world. So recently pagan, the Christian Roman state now embarked on pogroms and persecutions of pagans and unbelievers meant to eradicate every semblance of the ancient Roman belief systems. An essential feature of this program was the fact that violence against pagans was both actively and passively tolerated by the central administration and provincial governors, leading to the abuse and murder of pagans and the destruction of their temples, altars, and sanctuaries by Christians across the Roman world.

The persecution of pagans in the empire coincided with efforts by the church leadership to reel in aspects of the faith that some considered unorthodox. This process culminated with the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and its decision concerning the nature of Christ. Since the early years of the church, the faithful had been of two minds about the precise nature of Jesus. Some believed he was both fully divine and fully human—the Dyophysite position—while others believed Jesus's humanity was inseparable from his divinity—the Monophysite position. The Monophysite position dominated in Egypt, but the council decreed it heretical, triggering a schism that brought the ejection of monks and church members throughout Egypt. From that point, the Christian Church in Egypt followed a more independent path and gradually became more isolated from the wider Christian world. It became known as the Coptic Church, reflecting the acceptance of Coptic as both the major literary language and the language of public worship in Egypt at the time.

By the eighth century, following the direction of the patriarch of Alexandria, the Coptic Church had uniformly adopted Monophysite Christianity and was flourishing in the upper reaches of the Nile valley. The Christian Kingdom of Aksum thrived until its final destruction by the Zagwe queen Gudit in the tenth century. Queen Gudit and her descendants established the Zagwe Kingdom with its capital at Roha. Later, under King Lalibela, who ruled from 1181 to 1221, Roha became a major pilgrimage center for Christians, styled "the new Jerusalem." Lalibela renamed the stream flowing through his capital the River Jordan and built new churches by having them carved out of solid rock. By the thirteenth century, Monophysite Christianity was well-established in northeastern Africa.

The Expansion of Islam in Africa

By the start of the seventh century, Christianity seemed firmly entrenched across Egypt and the Maghreb. But by the end of that century, the situation had changed dramatically as the religion of Islam swept across the region. Founded in the early seventh century, within a few decades, Islam had gathered armies that consolidated control of the Arabian Peninsula and the region of the Levant and established a bridgehead in Byzantine Egypt from which to launch the conquest of North Africa. As Muslim conquerors advanced across the region, they established settlements that eventually developed into the towns and cities that would house the officials of the Islamic Caliphate, the area ruled over by the leader of the Islamic state, the caliph (Figure 15.9).

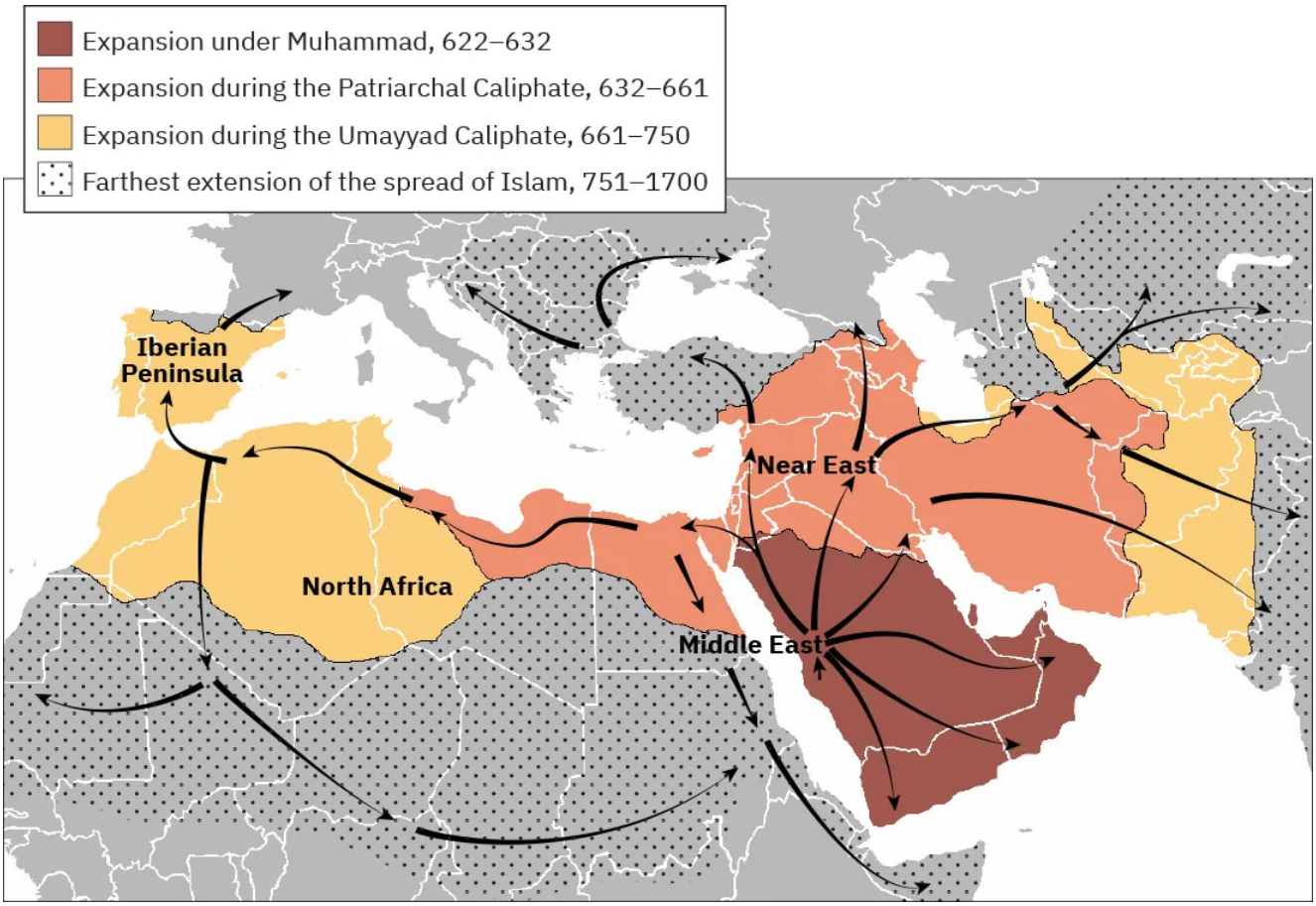


Figure 15.9 The Spread of Islam. This map shows the spread of Islam over time and across North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Near and Middle East. (credit: modification of work “Age of the Caliphs (version with more surrounding space)” by Brian Szymanski/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In 661, the Umayya family of Mecca assumed control of the caliphate and combined the previous conquests into a functioning state with a capital at Damascus in Syria. Under their rule, the position of caliph changed from being a family member or close associate of the prophet Muhammad into a dynastic, heritable position passed from father to son. The Umayyad dynasty extended the reach of the caliphate through military conquest until it encompassed all of North Africa's Mediterranean coast. With Egypt as its launching pad, the Muslim conquest of Byzantine-controlled territories in the Maghreb region of North Africa proceeded in three stages between 642 and 709.

The earliest Arab accounts of the conquest date from some two hundred years later and are not very detailed, although they serve as the basis of our understanding of these events. After Egypt was conquered, the Islamic advance across North Africa stalled because of the thousand-plus miles of desert between the Nile delta and the Byzantine province of Africa centered on Carthage. But by 647, tens of thousands of Muslim soldiers had begun their march to the Maghreb. That same year, they engaged with and defeated the forces of the Byzantine governor at Tripolitania (in modern-day Libya).

By 665, a second invasion of North Africa was underway. Once again, an army of tens of thousands of Arab soldiers marched from Egypt, this time determined to take Carthage. Reinforced later by forty thousand soldiers from Damascus, the Islamic advance established a beachhead at Kairouan in modern-day Tunisia. Kairouan, which became the capital of the Islamic province of Ifriqiya, was the center of Islamic operations that plunged Arab armies into the heart of North Africa, including Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. After prolonged campaigns against indigenous tribes and the forces of the Byzantine provincial government, Carthage finally fell to a third Arab invasion in 698.

After taking Carthage, Arab armies continued their sweep across North Africa. Along the way, their numbers were swelled by African soldiers. Many were forced to join the Arabs while others volunteered, hoping to share in the spoils that would result from a planned invasion of Spain, which took place in 711. That year, armies of the Umayyad Caliphate sailed across the Strait of

Gibraltar and invaded the Iberian Peninsula. A few years later, Islamic forces had occupied all the major towns in the peninsula and advanced as far north as Narbonne, France. In less than a century, Islam went from being a novel religious movement centered on the Arabian Peninsula to an empire that stretched from Iraq in the east to the Atlantic coast of North Africa in the west. Despite its spectacular success, however, the Umayyad dynasty was unable to hold onto power and fell to revolution in 750. That year, the Abbasid family from Mecca seized control of the Islamic Caliphate and relocated its capital from Damascus to Baghdad, where it would remain for five centuries.

The Islamic military conquest of North Africa might have ended in the eighth century, but the spread of Islam did not. Islam was diffused throughout West, East, and sub-Saharan Africa primarily by merchants, traders, scholars, and missionaries. Muslim Berbers (Amazigh) carried the ideas of Islam from North Africa along the many trans-Saharan trade routes they used. In this way, the ideas of the religion penetrated the arid desert and reached West African trading towns like Gao and Koumbi Saleh, the capital of the Ghana Empire. Over time and through increased exposure, some ruling sub-Saharan African elites began to adopt it, and in some cases, they blended it with their traditional beliefs. Although the Ghanaian kings themselves did not convert, they recognized the importance of the Muslim-led trans-Saharan trade to their economy and so tolerated Islam. In acknowledgment of this fact, they allocated a second town of their capital to Muslim merchants and traders. This district took on a distinct Islamic character, a fact borne out by the presence of mosques within it.

By the eleventh century, the broader Islamic world extended across North Africa and the western Sahara into Ghana in the western Sudan. However, even by this late date, Islam had made only a limited impact in West Africa, and many Amazigh groups tended to mingle both Islamic traditions and native African religious practices. Some more orthodox Muslims in the region found this less than satisfactory and sought to rectify the problem. What emerged were reformist Islamic kingdoms in West Africa. The earliest was the Almoravid state, which arose in the eleventh century. Centered in Morocco and led by a radical Islamic scholar, the Almoravid state grew rapidly through Islamic fervor and military conquests. By the 1070s, the Almoravids controlled a vast portion of West Africa from the Mediterranean coast of Morocco to the edges of the Ghana Empire. In the process, many groups in these areas were more thoroughly Islamized. In this period, Islam truly began to expand among the people of Ghana.

By the middle of the twelfth century, the religious enthusiasm of the early Almoravid conquests had largely died down. The descendants of the early founders preferred the peace and luxuries of settled life in Morocco to jihad (war on behalf of Islam). This situation was unsettling to some of the Amazigh, who then launched a successful war of religious reform against the Almoravids and established their own reformist West African kingdom, the Almohad Kingdom. The empire forged by the Almohad Caliphate was short-lived, however, and by the thirteenth century, it had been fatally weakened by internal rebellions.

As the geopolitical configuration of the West African kingdoms changed, the center of the regional economy shifted away from Ghana. By the thirteenth century, the kingdom of Mali had become the dominant political and economic force in the region. Unlike the rulers of Ghana, the Malian elite—including the *mansa* or king—converted to Islam. Mansa Musa, perhaps the most famous ruler of Mali, drew the attention of observers from Arabia to Spain when he went on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324–1325. Renowned for the wealth of his kingdom, Mansa Musa distributed so much gold during a stopover in Cairo that the Egyptian economy suffered high inflation for more than a decade according to some reports. On his return to Mali, Mansa Musa brought with him Muslim scholars, architects, and books, all of which helped deepen the Islamic character of Mali. At Timbuktu, for example, the Djinguereber Mosque was built, and schools and universities specializing in the study of the Quran were established, cementing that city's growing international status as a place of Islamic scholarship and learning (Figure 15.10).



(a) (b)

Figure 15.10 The Djinguereber Mosque. (a) (b) Fourteenth-century Timbuktu was a great center of learning specializing in Islamic law, philosophy, and science. These photos show two views of the famous Djinguereber Mosque, built there in 1327. (credit a: modification of work “Djinguereber Mosque, Timbuktu” by “upyernoz”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work “Timbuktu Mud Mosque, Mali, W. Africa” by Emilio Labrador/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

By the end of the fourteenth century, West African rulers from Mali to Hausaland (present-day Nigeria) had adopted Islam and completed the Islamic encirclement of sub-Saharan Africa. Islam also spread throughout East Africa, although its progress there was checked by entrenched Christianity among the kingdoms of Nubia and the Ethiopian Kingdom of Aksum. By the 1200s, however, such resistance had been severely weakened, and many Christian kingdoms had become Muslim. An important exception was the Kingdom of Abyssinia, the Christian successor state of Aksum and Zagwe. Farther east, in the African Horn, the Muslim sultanates of Ajuran and eventually Adal rose.

Islam faced less competition farther south. In the eighth century, Muslim traders from Arabia and Egypt began to settle in towns and trading centers along the Swahili coast, the part of eastern Africa that stretches along the Indian Ocean. By this time, it was home to countless settled Bantu communities, many of which prospered thanks to their role in connecting regional and burgeoning international trade. The Arab incomers intermingled and mixed with the Bantu peoples, creating a unique blended language and culture in an urban, trade-based society.

By the tenth century, the Swahili coast was acknowledged as an important commercial center. Writing in 915, the Arab traveler al-Masudi described the area’s vigorous trade, which included exports of everything from ambergris and ivory to gold and leopard skins and such imports as stone bowls, Islamic pottery, and glass vessels. By the 1200s, a distinct Swahili civilization had emerged, speaking a distinct Arabic-Bantu dialect, oriented toward the sea rather than the African interior, dominated by independent city-states that specialized in trade, and Islamic in faith. This Swahili language and culture had a powerful influence in the towns of the east African coast. Yet despite Islam’s success along the coast during the medieval period, it made virtually no impact on the peoples of the East African interior until many centuries later.

The spread of monotheistic belief systems like Christianity and Islam throughout Africa proceeded along many fronts, including military conquest, commercial exchange, and cultural diffusion. At no time was the process straightforward and uncomplicated, and conquerors and merchants alike confronted unique challenges. While people adopted these religions for different reasons, whether a firm belief in a better afterlife or the tangible commercial benefits that accompanied conversion, the medieval period of African history nevertheless witnessed a revolution in the nature of belief. This is not to say that ancient African belief systems were eradicated. Indeed, while Christian missionaries and Muslim teachers had little respect for traditional religious practice in Africa, the adoption of Christianity or Islam was often the product of adaptation to the traditional practices and rituals of African peoples.

The Africanization of these faiths was largely circumstantial, of course. For example, whereas Christianity emphasized monogamy, Islam allowed a man to take several wives. Thus, Islam would find a more receptive audience among African societies that already practiced polygamous marriages, which were otherwise forbidden in the Christian tradition. The cross-pollination of religious tradition helped to perpetuate ancient African belief systems in both rural and urban communities. Indeed, the Africanization of Islam among the peoples of the Swahili coast produced a distinctive form of the faith, one that included ancestor worship and the

appeasing of spirits, as well as the development of unique grave-marking habits and the placement of traditional offerings in mosques.

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13.3: Medieval Sub-Saharan Africa

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the uniqueness of West African civilization in the premodern world
- Explain the source of wealth and power held by Ghana and Mali
- Describe how Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe developed as a result of the Bantu migrations

For nearly seven hundred years, medieval empires and kingdoms dominated the economies and politics of West Africa and southern Africa. The wealth of these states and thus their power came from their control of trade in commodities such as gold, ivory, salt, silk, horses, and enslaved people. In West Africa, the empires of Ghana and Mali moved these goods along a sprawling network of trade that stretched across North Africa, eastward into Ethiopia, and southward as far as the grassland savanna, connecting West Africa to the Mediterranean world, Europe, the Near East, southwest Asia, and beyond. In southern Africa, Mapungubwe and then Great Zimbabwe consolidated their control over local and regional trade and connected their economies with the coastal civilization of the Swahili peoples through a network of waterways that included the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers. In so doing, they linked the southern African interior with the distant and overlapping nodes of oceanic commerce that connected East Africa with Asia and Arabia.

The Ghana Empire

By the turn of the ninth century, Arab rulers in Morocco were minting gold coins called dinars on behalf of the Islamic Caliphate. The official currency of the Muslim world since the end of the seventh century, the dinar was an important link connecting the sprawling Arab empire then centered on Baghdad. The gold used to mint those coins in Morocco came from a kingdom south of the Sahara known as Ghana, a realm the Arab governor of Morocco attempted and failed to conquer (and not to be confused with the modern nation-state of Ghana).

The Ghana Empire dominated the region between western Mali and southeastern Mauritania from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries. Although ancient trade-based societies had existed in the region for some time by enriching themselves on the area's lucrative salt and gold, the introduction of the Arabian camel by the Romans between the third and fifth centuries CE, and the consequent regularization of trade between Morocco and the Niger River, allowed larger political entities to emerge. Until then, the development of farming and ironworking technology had supported West African clan-based societies in small, simple villages. Sometime around the fifth century, however, a group of chiefdoms in the Sahel grassland south of the Sahara formed a loosely knit empire—that is, the empire or kingdom of Ghana (Figure 15.11).



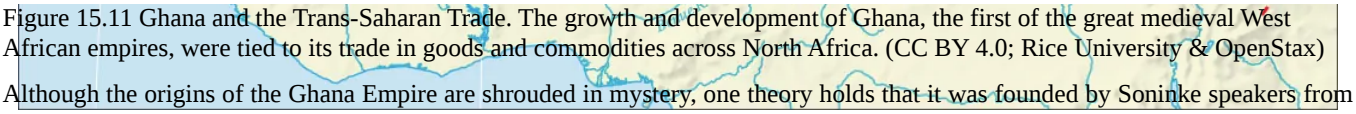


Figure 15.11 Ghana and the Trans-Saharan Trade. The growth and development of Ghana, the first of the great medieval West African empires, were tied to its trade in goods and commodities across North Africa. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Although the origins of the Ghana Empire are shrouded in mystery, one theory holds that it was founded by Soninke speakers from Senegal who referred to their kingdom as Wagadu (Ghana, the name by which it was known to outsiders, was one of the titles of its king). Soninke oral tradition tells us that the kingdom was founded by Diabe Cisse, a powerful figure whose father Dinga, a nomadic mystic, was said to have conquered a female water genie. Dinga subsequently wed the genie's daughters. Sons resulted from the union of these women and Dinga, and their descendants established important Soninke families. Cisse's arrival as a son of Dinga, an outsider, marked a turning point in the history of the region, then subject to the destabilizing effects of nomadic raids.

With the drying out of the Sahara, the Sanhaja people of southern Morocco pressed deeper into the Sahel in their search for water and seasonal grazing land. During drought years, their migrations took the form of violent raids on settled agricultural communities, including those of the Soninke. In response, Soninke cavalry commanders turned to Cisse; tradition holds that Cisse unified the Soninke in a loose federation to combat the raiders and to expand the kingdom.

The early growth of Ghana was a slow process of conquering independent chiefdoms and kingdoms and then absorbing them into the empire. At the empire's core were four central provinces established by Diabe Cisse when he first unified the Soninke. Conquered vassal chiefdoms and kingdoms occupied the periphery of the kingdom. Some of these vassal states operated fairly independently of the central administration and paid only a small amount of tribute; other states were controlled to some extent by the capital. As the kingdom expanded, so too did its military. When Ghana reached the apex of its power in the early eleventh century CE, its king had some 200,000 soldiers at his command.

The Soninke response to nomadic raiders was only one factor that may have stimulated unification during the early period of Ghanaian history. Historians believe Ghana's position with regard to trade was another. Ghana grew powerful, and its kings became wealthy on the strength of the trans-Saharan trade, which the Soninke were ideally placed to exploit. Situated in the western Sahel, they stood halfway between the desert—the principal source of salt—and the territory of Bambuk—where goldfields were located along the upper reaches of the Senegal River. Initially, the Soninke had exchanged their gold surplus for salt harvested by the Taghaza people of the Sahara, but soon cross-desert traffic by camel allowed North Africans access to West African gold. As the trans-Saharan demand for gold increased, the Soninke were able to act as intermediaries, passing Saharan salt to the gold producers of the savanna woodland to their south.

Despite stories that celebrate Ghana as a "land of gold," its kings' control over the Bambuk goldfields was tenuous. Located far to the south, the goldfields were beyond Ghiyaru, the kingdom's southernmost trading post. The chief of the nearest village had local authority over the mining area, and while Ghanaian rulers were able to enforce a strict monopoly on gold nuggets above an ounce in weight, the difficulties of digging mine shafts up to sixty feet deep and transporting the gold to the capital at Koumbi Saleh (southern Mauritania today), which could take upward of eighteen days, made Ghanaian dominance precarious. Yet the empire's wealth was legendary, and its reputation spread throughout North Africa and into Europe and reached Muslim scholars as far away as Baghdad.

In Their Own Words

Eleventh-Century Islamic Eyewitnesses to the Ghana Empire

Arab writers and Soninke oral tradition emphasize that the Ghana Empire derived much of its power and wealth from gold. Al-Hamdani, a tenth-century Arab scholar, described Ghana as having the richest goldmines on earth. al-Bakri, his near-contemporary who spent most of his life in Cordova and Almeria in Islamic Spain, wrote about Ghana after gathering information from merchants and visitors. In the following excerpt from the *Book of Roads and Kingdoms* (1067–1068), al-Bakri describes Koumbi Saleh and the appearance and customs of the king and the court.

> *Ghana consists of two cities situated on a plain. One of these, which is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques, in which they assemble for the Friday prayer. There are salaried imams [prayer leaders] and muezzins [prayer callers], as well as jurists and scholars. In the environs are wells with fresh water, from which they drink and with which they grow vegetables. The king's town is six*

> *miles distant from this one [. . .] In the king's town, and not far from his court of justice, is a mosque where the Muslims who arrive at his court pray. Around the king's town are domed buildings and groves and thickets where the sorcerers of these people, men in charge of the religious cult, live. In them too are their idols and the tombs of their kings. [. . .]*
>
> *The king's interpreters, the official in charge of his treasury, and the majority of his ministers are Muslims. Among the people who follow the king's religion, only he and his heir apparent (who is the son of his sister) may wear sewn clothes. All other people wear robes of cotton, silk, or brocade, according to their means. All of them shave their beards, and women shave their heads. The king adorns himself like a woman, wearing necklaces and bracelets, and he puts on a high cap decorated with gold and wrapped in a turban of fine cotton. [. . .] When the people who profess the same religion as the king approach him they fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their head, for this is their way of greeting him. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands . . . .*
>
> *—al-Bakri, Book of Roads and Kingdoms*

- What does this reading suggest about the expansion of Islam into this area by this time?
- What aspects of this excerpt suggest that the king of Ghana was both wealthy and powerful?

Ghanaian wealth derived from other commodities as well, including copper (on which the king levied a hefty custom duty) and captives. Many captives were often prisoners of war. Others had been seized in enslavement raids. In the twelfth century, the Moroccan geographer al-Idrisi, recounted a Ghanaian slave raid on a region named Lamlam: "The people of . . . Ghana make excursion in Lamlam bringing natives into captivity, transporting them to their own country and selling them to merchants." Al-Idrisi's observations were confirmed by his contemporary, al-Zuhri. Scholars have estimated that during the height of the Ghana Empire, some five thousand captives were transported across the Sahara to slave markets in North Africa every year.

During the eleventh century, the Ghanaians' tolerance was sorely tested, however. The people welcomed Muslim traders, but radical reformist Islamic sects in Morocco threatened their peace and prosperity. Early in the century, the kingdom had expanded to take over the Islamic town of Awdaghost, an oasis north of the capital. At about the same time, a militant Islamic Almoravid movement emerged among the Sanhaja people of the southern Sahara, who soon established an empire centered on Morocco. In 1055, they captured Awdaghost, and in the ensuing religious strife and sectarian warfare, the Soninke Ghanaians converted to Islam. The wider destruction caused by violence had so weakened Ghana's trading links that by the end of the twelfth century, it had lost its dominant position over the region's trade. Having been thoroughly Islamized, Ghana began to produce Muslim scholars, lawyers, and Quran readers of some repute, many traveling to Islamic Spain to study or going on pilgrimage to Mecca.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a transitional time in the history of the kingdoms of West Africa. As Ghana expanded and was in turn conquered, new goldfields were opened at Bure in the woodland savanna south of Bambuk, well beyond Ghana's commercial reach. Itinerant Soninke traders transported the gold from Bure to the Middle Niger region on new trans-Saharan trade routes east of Awdaghost that bypassed the Ghanaian capital and shifted the caravans of North Africa to Oualata (Walata). These changes provided the southern Soninke and Malinke chiefdoms the chance to assert their independence. In the early 1200s, the southern Soninke chiefdom of Sosso took over most of former Ghana as well as the Malinke people. This set the stage for a struggle for Malinke independence against the Sosso, which ultimately led to the creation of the Sudanese kingdom of Mali.

The Mali Empire

The kingdom of Sosso benefited the most from the dissolution of the Ghana Empire, a process furthered by the collapse of the Islamic Almoravid state in present-day Morocco in the mid-twelfth century. Yet the Sosso Kingdom was short-lived; it was

defeated by Sundiata Keita in 1235. Five years later, Prince Sundiata (also spelled Sunjata) captured Koumbi Saleh, laying the foundation for the great Mali Empire, the largest and richest that medieval Africa had yet seen (Figure 15.12).



Figure 15.12 The Ghana and Mali Empires. This map shows the extent of the two great medieval West African empires: Ghana and Mali. At its height, Mali extended farther west and south than Ghana. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

In the twelfth century, the main source of gold in West Africa had shifted from Bambuk to Bure, located to the southeast in the savanna country. This shift not only ended Ghanaian control over trans-Saharan trade, it also brought new groups into the great Sudanese trading network of West Africa, notably the southern Soninke and Malinke-speakers of the savanna. The Sosso, a branch of the southern Soninke, were the first to take full advantage of these changed circumstances. Sometime around 1200, they broke away from Ghana and established a successor state under Soumaoro, their sorcerer-king. During its brief existence, their Sosso Kingdom earned a grim reputation for violence by raiding and conquering neighboring kingdoms, killing their rulers, and seizing tribute. During the 1220s, the Sosso army made raids on the Malinke-speaking Mande people to the south and then attacked the northern Soninke of Ghana, sacking their capital in about 1224.

In response to the incursions against the Mande, Prince Sundiata of the Keita clan, a survivor of one of Soumaoro's raids, rallied several of the region's small Mande kingdoms and united them against the invaders. The exploits of Sundiata Keita, a near-

mythical figure in the Mande oral tradition, have been passed down by generations of bards. Beginning around 1235, Sundiata set about consolidating his control over the heartland of the Mande people, a region centered on the upper reaches of the Senegal and Niger Rivers. He then moved to expand the kingdom of Mali by taking control of all the Soninke peoples recently conquered by the Sosso. Their territory comprised much of the former kingdom of Ghana and its nominally independent vassal states, including Mema and Wagadu. These newly conquered territories were often administered indirectly, leaving friendly puppet regimes in place to do the bidding of the Malian monarch (a political strategy that bred resentment among certain of the Malian vassal states, including Takrur and Songhai).

When forming alliances against the Sosso, Sundiata convinced the other Malinke kings to surrender their title, *mansa*, to him. He thus became the sole *mansa*, the religious and secular leader of all the Malinke people. In a few short years, he had built up a vast realm. Its imperial capital was advantageously situated at Niani, in the southern savanna country of the upper Niger valley near the goldfields of Bure. Within Sundiata's lifetime, the Mali Empire extended from the forested margins of the southwest through the grassland savanna country of the Malinke and southern Soninke to the Sahel of former Ghana.

Awdaghost, the one-time trade center at the western extreme of trans-Saharan trade, remained in the hands of nomads, and its role was taken by the more easterly commercial center of Oualata, now the main southern desert port for trade traversing the Sahara. The kings of Mali were less interested in conquering the various small kingdoms and chiefdoms of the grasslands than in taking the Sahelian trading towns that linked the regional economy to the vast trans-Saharan trade. These towns were key prizes and included Oualata, Gao, Timbuktu, and Djenné.

Control of the towns and the trade routes they connected was one of several components in Mali's diverse economy, which included access to the Bure goldfields and the agriculturally rich rural areas, particularly those around Niani in the south of the country. Unlike in Ghana, rainfall in Mali, located in the southern savanna, was more abundant, and the farmers of Mali had no difficulty growing enough food to sustain the population. Different areas of the empire specialized in different crops. For example, sorghum and millet grew on the savannah, and rice flourished in the Gambia valley and around the upper Niger floodplain. Meanwhile, the more northerly and drier Sahelian grasslands specialized in the grazing of camels, sheep, and goats.

Control over the gold-producing towns could present challenges for Mali's rulers. When a king conquered a region and attempted to spread Islam, the gold producers who refused to convert ceased mining operations, thereby threatening the Malian gold supply. This posed a serious risk to the imperial economy, so Malian rulers allowed gold areas to remain quasi-independent vassal states. Mali's gold trade was bolstered by events taking place elsewhere in the world. European kingdoms were again producing gold coins as the medieval economy improved. To meet the new demand, merchants from southern Europe sought to buy gold from their counterparts in North Africa. At the same time, new southerly trade routes were opened into the goldfields of the Akan forest (in present-day Ghana), from which sellers brought gold to the settlements of the Middle Niger. These developments to the north and south of Mali allowed the trans-Saharan gold trade to attain its greatest heights in the fourteenth century.

Dueling Voices

Perspectives on Mali

What was life like for the people living and trading in West Africa in the fourteenth century? These two excerpts describe life in the Mali Empire. In the first, al-Umari, a Syrian scholar employed by the Mamluk sultan in Cairo, describes an aspect of Malian rule. In the second, Arab traveler Ibn Battuta describes the salt-mining center at Taghaza.

> *[The kingdom] is square, its length being four or more months' journey and its width likewise. It lies to the south of Marrakesh and the interior of Morocco and is not far from the Atlantic Ocean. . . . Under the authority of the sultan of this kingdom is the land of Mafazat al-Tibr. They bring gold dust [tibr] to him each year. They are uncouth infidels. If the sultan wished he could extend his authority over them, but the kings of this kingdom have learned by experience that as soon as one of them conquers one of the gold towns and Islam spreads and the muezzin calls to prayer, there the gold begins to decrease and then disappears, while it increases in the*

> *neighboring heathen countries. When they had learned the truth of this by experience, they left the gold countries under the control of the heathen people and were content with their vassalage and the tribute imposed on them.*
>
> *—al-Umari, Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History, translated by J. F. P. Hopkins*

> *After twenty-five days, we arrive at Taghaza. . . . One of its marvels is that its houses and mosque are of rock and salt and its roofs of camel skins. It has no trees, but is nothing but sand with a salt mine. They dig in the earth for the salt, which is found in great slabs lying one upon the other. . . . A camel carries two slabs of it. No one lives at Taghaza except the slaves of the Massufa tribe, who dig for the salt [. . .] The people [of Mali] possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan [the mansa] shows no mercy to any one guilty of the least act of it. . . . Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence.*
>
> *—Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa*

- What do these excerpts suggest about traveling in the Mali Empire?
- What do they suggest about the Malian king's access to commodities such as gold and salt?
- What happened to the goldfields when Malian kings conquered gold-producing areas?

The pilgrimage of Mansa Musa to Egypt and Mecca in 1324–1325 represents the golden age of the Mali Empire. Mansa Musa, the most famous of the Malian kings and reputed to be fabulously wealthy, arrived in Cairo at the head of a huge caravan that accounts tell us included sixty thousand soldiers, five hundred captives, and a hundred camel-loads of gold. Received with great respect by the sultan of Egypt as a fellow Muslim, Mansa Musa spent lavishly, giving away so many gifts that the value of gold in Cairo fell and did not recover for twelve years.

Link to Learning

At the ARCGIS website, trace the caravan route of Mansa Musa and consider the legacy of his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Mansa Musa's journey captured the attention of people from Spain to Syria, including the Muslim geographer Ibn Battuta, who, after years traveling throughout Asia, visited Mali during the reign of Mansa Musa's brother Mansa Suleyman. Ibn Battuta's account has become a major source of our knowledge about fourteenth-century Mali.

As a marker of Mali's enduring fame in the fourteenth century, the Majorcan mapmaker Abraham Cresques featured it in *The Catalan Atlas* in 1375. One of the maps, which in part depicts the trade routes of North Africa, shows Mansa Musa enthroned (Figure 15.1). His royal status is proclaimed by his gold crown and scepter. In one hand he holds an immense piece of gold, proof of his kingdom's wealth. The caption reads, "The black lord is named Mussa Melly, lord of the Blacks of Guineas. This king is the richest and most noble lord of all this country by reason of the abundance of gold taken out of his land."

The strength and success of the Mali Empire depended on its ruler. During the late fourteenth century, a series of weak rulers, brief reigns, and dynastic civil wars opened the empire to conquest. With their power weakened, the *mansas* of Mali were unable to maintain unchallenged control of the trade routes on which they depended. Opposition from the Mossi people in the country south of the Niger, coupled with attacks from the Tuareg to the north of the Niger bend and regular uprisings by the Songhai people who controlled the city of Gao (on the edge of the empire), led Mali to abandon both Gao and Timbuktu in 1438. At the same time, Mema, one of the kingdoms that had formed an alliance with Sundiata, broke away and became independent once more. Although weakened, Mali retained control of the Mande heartland and the nearby southern grasslands. However, the emerging Songhai Empire centered on Gao was beginning to take control of the lucrative trade across the Sahara.

The Zimbabwean Plateau

In the Later Iron Age (c. 900–1600), the Bantu who migrated to southern Africa developed several polities around the Zimbabwean plateau. These included the kingdoms of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe. Although scholars debate which aspects of these societies are derived from the Bantu, the region's linguistic heritage and archaeological record (in the form of ironwork, enclosure walls, and burial customs) show clear links to the eastern Bantu subgroup.

The Kingdom of Mapungubwe

The precise relationship between them remains controversial, but Mapungubwe, which flourished between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, is often considered the initial stage in the development of Great Zimbabwe. It has been called southern Africa's first state (Figure 15.13). The origins of Mapungubwe date to around the tenth century with a cattle-keeping culture known as Leopard's Kopje. In a region of relatively high rainfall near present-day Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, the people of Leopard's Kopje developed a complex mixed economy of livestock-keeping and herding and agriculture. Like other kingdoms in southern Africa, theirs produced ample food and a surplus they traded for other goods. A unique feature of their farming was a method of terracing the hillsides on the southern slopes of the large sandstone plateau to prevent soil erosion. One such site was Mapela Hill, where during the twelfth century extensive hillside terracing featured dry stone-walling (without mortar) for housing, defense, and cultivation.



Figure 15.13 Mapungubwe. This map shows the location of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe in the interior of southern Africa. (credit: modification of work “Topographic map of Africa” by NASA/JPL/NIMA/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Archaeological investigation of the region has revealed the presence of large cattle herds from around the ninth century. Because cattle were the traditional source of wealth and political power in southern Africa, the finding is suggestive of the influence the people of Leopard’s Kopje could exercise. In the tenth century, the economy underwent several important changes, including significant growth in the number of cattle, the development of cotton cultivation and weaving (as indicated by the discovery of spindles), and the introduction of gold mining. The western plateau was rich in gold-bearing rock and was worked intensively by Later Iron Age miners. Narrow shafts were sunk deep into the ground, following the course of seams some ninety feet down. The rock was cracked by alternating use of fire and water and broken out with iron wedges.

Although little is known about the organization and control of this mining work, it is probable that it was largely forced labor. The mining of gold led to a flourishing production of goods for local consumption by elites as well as trade farther afield. A unique type of gold ornamentation found at Mapungubwe (and elsewhere only at Great Zimbabwe) is beaten gold sheets. Decorated with geometric patterns, the sheets seem to have been used to cover wooden pieces, although these have long since rotted away. Other gold objects found at the site include beads, bangle bracelets, and animal figurines.

Despite its setting in the southern African interior, Mapungubwe engaged in long-distance trade. Large finds of ivory splinters and animal hides indicate these were being stockpiled for trade (elephants were plentiful in the region). The most probable route for trade was up the Limpopo River to the coastal areas toward Sofala, one of the southernmost regions of the Swahili coast. Other finds, including glass beads from India and fragments of brightly colored India cloth and Chinese celadon (green-glazed) pottery, support this connection with the Swahili coast and its seaborne trade with Arabia, China, and East Asia. While it is possible that Mapungubwe was a terminus for this type of international trade, it was certainly a hub for interregional trade in southern Africa.

Because the Mapungubwean people left no written record, scholars rely on the physical remains of the site to glean hints of its social structure. Mapungubwe is thought to be the first class-based social system in southern Africa, with sharp distinctions between wealthy rulers and their subjects. Commoners lived in mud and thatch dwellings in low-lying areas, district leaders occupied small hilltops on the outskirts of the capital, and the chief or king resided with his court in a stone enclosure at the capital atop Mapungubwe Hill, an imposing structure some 98 feet high and 328 feet in length. The royal wives lived in separate dwellings removed from the king, and the entire royal complex was surrounded by a wooden palisade (Figure 15.14).



Figure 15.14 Mapungubwe Hill. Mapungubwe Hill became the center of the Mapungubwe kingdom in the eleventh century, after the population outgrew the earlier center at Leopard's Kopje. (credit: modification of work "Mapungubwe, Limpopo, South Africa" by South African Tourism/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Mapungubwe fell into terminal decline around the end of the thirteenth century. The precise cause is a matter of speculation, though evidence suggests that the region was subject to a dramatic period of climate change at this time that led to a series of intense droughts. As weather patterns changed and rainfall became less predictable, it caused the land to dry and lose fertility. Pasturage used for livestock dwindled, and the surrounding agricultural farmland, which had once supported a large population, shrank. The failure of crops meant that the once-abundant farms could no longer support the same number of inhabitants, leading to overpopulation and resource scarcity. Around the turn of the fourteenth century, the center of medieval southern African civilization shifted northward where a new polity emerged: Great Zimbabwe. In Bantu, *Zimbabwe* (*dzimba dzamabwe*) means "stone buildings," a telltale marker of the debt the Zimbabweans owed to their southern Mapungubwean neighbors, who had a tradition of building in stone.

Great Zimbabwe

Great Zimbabwe was founded by the Shona, an Iron Age Bantu-speaking people who first migrated to southern Africa around the second century CE. As at Leopard's Kopje and Mapungubwe, the first settlers were livestock-herders drawn to the location by its abundant natural resources and location on the southwestern edge of the Zimbabwean plateau. Here, amid temperate grasslands ideal for seasonal grazing, the Shona found ample supplies of timber for firewood and for building, as well as well-watered fertile soil for cultivation. There is some evidence that they had domesticated goat, sheep, and cattle as early as the third century. The Shona were not the first inhabitants of the region; that distinction belongs to the small bands of hunter-gatherers who stalked game and foraged the plain in the centuries before the Bantu speakers' arrival. Despite having superior iron technology, the Shona were unable to completely dislodge these hunter-gatherers, resulting in tension and conflict that persist to the modern era.

The five hundred years between the fourth and ninth centuries witnessed the development of Bantu communities that farmed the valley and mined and worked iron. They lived in reed thatch or mud houses and represent the earliest Iron Age settlers in the area so far identified by archaeologists. During this period, the Shona manufactured simple pottery and produced leather for clothing, jewelry from copper and gold, and weapons and farming tools from iron. Many of these goods they traded with members of coastal settlements for commodities like salt, glass beads, and seashells. By the eleventh century, the society of the Zimbabwean plateau was thriving, and drystone buildings—that is, buildings constructed using interlocking stones rather than mortar—began to emerge. The people had established a prosperous mixed farming economy, engaging in animal husbandry and hunting the region's abundant game.

Above all, trade was the most important factor in Great Zimbabwe's wealth and power. Situated at the head of the Sabi River valley, the capital was ideally positioned for exploiting the long-distance commerce between the goldfields of the western plateau and Sofala, a Swahili center that connected Zimbabwean trade goods to the island of Kilwa. Zimbabwean gold made Kilwa the wealthiest of all the Swahili city-states. In exchange for gold, copper, and ivory, Swahili merchants bartered such exotic luxury goods as Chinese Ming porcelain and carved faience (ceramicware) from Persia at the markets and fairs established on the Zimbabwean plateau.

Construction of major stone buildings began sometime in the eleventh century and continued for about three hundred years. These stone structures are the most famous ancient ruins in southern Africa. The oldest is the Hill Complex. Located on a natural rise approximately 260 feet high, this citadel likely provided the Shona people with a space to perform rituals and find safety in uncertain times; however, the exact purpose of the site is still a matter of debate. Some scholars have suggested it functioned as a religious site for ancestor worship, while others have suggested it was a burial ground for chiefs or possibly even the site of a royal palace. Whatever its intended purpose, the site is an impressive one, and its prominence certainly ties it to some important aspect of Zimbabwean culture.

The ruins of Great Zimbabwe have impressed visitors for centuries. The Great Enclosure at the heart of the civilization dates from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries and is still partially intact today, a massive elliptical building with drystone walls thirty-five feet high and as much as seventeen feet thick. Located in the area of the valley below the Hill Complex, it is the largest ancient monument in Africa south of the Sahara (Figure 15.15). Upon seeing the ruins, the sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Vicente Pegado wrote, "Among the gold mines of the inland plains between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers there is a fortress built of

stones of marvelous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them [. . .] This edifice is almost surrounded by hills, upon which are others resembling it in the fashioning of stone and the absence of mortar, and one of them is a tower more than twelve fathoms high. The native of the country call these edifices Symbaoe, which according to their language signifies court."



Figure 15.15 The Great Enclosure. The Great Enclosure at the heart of the Zimbabwean civilization, which dates from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries and is still partially intact today, is the largest ancient monument in Africa south of the Sahara. (credit: "Photo of the Great Enclosure from the hilltop Great Zimbabwe" by Amanda/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Great Enclosure underwent major renovation, most notably the addition of its elliptical drystone wall. The wall pitches slightly inward at the top and is punctured by a main entrance doorway that looks out across the valley toward the Hill Complex. The existence of multiple other doorways suggests the wall was not a fortification. Inside the Great Enclosure, a subsidiary wall forms a corridor and channels visitors to a conical stone tower some sixteen feet across and thirty-two feet high. The purpose of the Great Enclosure, which has a total circumference of 820 feet, is unknown, although its size suggests it was a royal residence and the tower was a granary (grain was a common form of tribute used by Shona rulers). Between these two sites—the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure—archaeologists have found the most impressive and luxurious artifacts, including figurines made of soapstone, elaborately worked ivory, copper ingots, and bracelets.

Numerous other stone buildings lie in the valley between the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure. These ruins are enclosed by high stone walls, along with the remains of imposing circular mud houses approximately thirty-two feet in diameter and nearly twenty feet high. The existence of these Valley Ruins suggests that the settlement along the valley floor grew significantly as Great Zimbabwe flourished. All told, the three sites cover some 1,700 acres, and the spatial organization of their structures suggests a hierarchical civilization of around eighteen thousand people ruled by an elite class or some type of central authority.

Beyond the Book

Architecture and Urban Design in Great Zimbabwe

The ruins of the massive stone structures of Great Zimbabwe are among the largest and oldest in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 15.16). Much debate surrounds the identity of those who built the sprawling complex and why they did so. Some scholars have suggested that the site was used for religious purposes, while others believe it was a military fortification or even a palace.

Whatever the reason, the drystone technology used to erect these magnificent structures is deceptively simple. The structures are enormous and have stood for hundreds of years.

The walls of the Great Enclosure, the structure at the heart of the settlement, measure dozens of feet in height and encircle an area some 820 feet in circumference. A second set of walls on the interior of the enclosure traces the outside wall, creating a channel that directs visitors toward a massive tower some thirty feet high. In addition to the Great Enclosure, the older Hill Complex includes ruins of mud houses with stone foundations and an enclosing wall; a further valley settlement, with remains of mud houses measuring as much as thirty-two feet in diameter, radiates away from the Great Enclosure and Hill Complex. All told, it is an impressive site.



(a)



(b)

Figure 15.16 Great Zimbabwe Walls. (a) The Zimbabwean plateau features many impressive ancient structures constructed of drystone, that is, walls that do not rely on mortar. (b) The interior of the Great Enclosure can be seen in this photo of the entrance to the main enclosure. (credit a: modification of work “Great Zimbabwe 8” by Mike/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0; credit b: modification of work “Great Zimbabwe, Main enclosure entrance” by “damien_farrell”/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

- What do you believe the Great Enclosure’s purpose was?
- What evidence leads you to this conclusion?
- What additional evidence might be useful in helping you interpret the site?

Link to Learning

Watch the video clip about Great Zimbabwe titled “The City of Great Zimbabwe: Africa’s Great Civilizations,” and consider what the archaeological remains of Great Zimbabwe suggest about Zimbabwean culture and the organization of its society.

Great Zimbabwe flourished between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Like many other aspects of the civilization, the exact makeup and nature of its government and society are unclear. Scholars have argued that it was male dominated, and that male heads of family competed for power and influence based on the size of their cattle herds. Herd size also correlated to the number of wives and thus the amount of labor at a man’s disposal. Women in this society were expected to tend and harvest crops, prepare food, and get water. Single men hunted, herded animals, and made clothing. Males without property often became dependent on the wealthier men in the society.

Politically, Zimbabwean society was led by a chief or a king who was also likely the wealthiest member, although Shona tradition held that the position was hereditary, so being chief may not have indicated great wealth. That the chief had no army suggests that he had to govern by reaching consensus with the community’s leading male figures and whatever subordinated chiefs may have existed. All this is speculative, but the existence of grandiose stone monuments is indicative of some sort of political authority—at least the kind that could organize and control resources and labor.

Medieval African society developed along similar lines in both West Africa and southern Africa. Beginning in the sixth century, regions with small groups of livestock-herders and keepers became home to growing and increasingly complex political entities. Agricultural and metallurgical innovations supported societies around the Niger River in West Africa and the Limpopo River in

South Africa. The growth of these settlements was linked to the expansion and exploitation of trade, beginning with localized segments of trade routes connecting trading centers and culminating in control over vast territory. Although some of these kingdoms were short-lived (Mapungubwe, for example, lasted only about eighty years), they were vitally important to the development of medieval Africa, connecting it to peoples, places, and cultures thousands of miles away. In the end, these kingdoms linked local and regional African economies to a network of trade and commerce that touched Europe, Asia, and Arabia.

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13.4: The People of the Sahel

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the development of the Gao and early Songhai states
- Explain why the people of the Sahel were able to take advantage of long-distance trade routes
- Explain why some nomadic African tribes settled at the edges of the Sahara

Among the peoples of the Maghreb and Sahel in West and North Africa, a group known as the Berbers (Amazigh) played an outsized role in the region's history. This assortment of nomads, settled agriculturalists, and merchants and traders who in ancient times inhabited modern-day Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia, Mali, and northern Niger, included many ethnic tribes—such as the Sanhaja, Masmuda, Zenata, Kutama, and Tuareg, among others—who called various pockets of the Maghreb, Sahel, and Sahara home. Each had a distinct culture, and often unique language and social structures. These Amazigh groups were crucial to the creation and longevity of the trans-Saharan trade, the control of which led to the rise and ultimately the fall of multiple medieval African kingdoms and empires. Eventually these peoples Islamized and became great empire builders themselves.

The Gao Dynasty and Early Songhai

In the seventh century CE, the region of the Middle Niger was home to a number of different peoples including the Gabibi, Gow, and Sorko, all of whom had migrated to the area to live off its abundant resources. Each group exploited the region for different reasons: the Gabibi were settled agriculturalists who farmed the fertile banks along the Niger; the Gow hunted the river's animals, including crocodile; the Sorko were warrior fishers and hunters of hippopotamus. The different purposes for which these peoples used the river and its resources ensured a relative balance between themselves and their environment.

Of these groups, the Sorko were best positioned to exercise control over the area. The canoes from which they hunted and fished gave them mastery of the river, which they used as a trading route to exchange food along this section of the Niger. They soon extended their territory upstream toward the Niger bend, establishing villages along the banks to help facilitate trade. From these trading post villages, the Sorko dominated the nearby communities of Gabibi farmers, raiding their granaries and pillaging their settlements. The dynamic in the region changed sometime in the ninth century, with the arrival of a nomadic horse-riding people who spoke Songhai, a dialect of the Nilo-Saharan language family. Gradually, the Sorko, Gabibi, and Gow peoples adopted the language of their conquerors, and collectively their cultures formed the basis of Songhai identity and the state of Songhai, with its capital at Kukiya. As the emerging Songhai state coalesced, its people were in steady contact with Muslim traders at Gao in the north.

At the eastern edge of the Niger bend, an area of historical significance to both the Ghana and Mali Empires, the trading city of Gao was founded in the seventh century by African and Egyptian merchants attracted by the Bambuk gold trade in Ghana. It soon became an important link in the trans-Saharan trade of gold, copper, enslaved captives, and salt in the eastern and central regions of the Sahara. The earliest mention of Gao dates from the ninth century; by the 870s, it had already grown into a regional power.

By the tenth century, Arab travelers had noted Gao's strategic location as a hub in the trans-Saharan trade route between Egypt and ancient Ghana. As Gao grew, so too did its needs. Songhai farmers and fishers provided the city's merchants with food in exchange for salt, cloth, and other products from North Africa. As a result of their contacts with Muslim traders, the rulers of Songhai were exposed to Islam and converted in the eleventh century, making theirs one of the first West African states to do so. This conversion marks the beginning of the Gao imperial period.

The earliest dynasty of kings of the Songhai state was the Za dynasty, which tradition and later historical record suggest ruled the kingdom during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Za are an obscure dynasty; what evidence exists comes to us in the form of myths and legends, the seventeenth-century *History of the Sudan*, the oral tradition of the Songhai written down by Abd al-Sadi, and some tombstone inscriptions dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. According to al-Sadi's history, the mythical founder of the dynasty was Za Alayaman, who settled in Kukiya sometime before the eleventh century. Za Alayaman and his immediate successors bore the title *malik* or "king." Evidence suggests that later rulers, possibly a second dynasty, bore the title *zuwa*, hence the name Zuwa dynasty.

Tradition holds that the first fourteen rulers of the Songhai state, which was initially centered on Kukiya, were *jahiliyyah* (literally "in ignorance [of Islam]"). Sometime in the 1000s, the dynasty Islamized, possibly under Za Kusay, whom the *History of the Sudan* remembers as the first Muslim ruler of Songhai. This timeline is contested, however. Modern scholars believe the Islamization of the Songhai rulers occurred toward the end of the eleventh century with the arrival of the Sanhaja Almoravids from Morocco. In any event, it was sometime during this period that the political focus of the kingdom shifted from Kukiya to Gao. Due in large part to its position as a terminus in the caravan route connecting the northern Sahara, Gao became the center of a significant Islamized kingdom (Figure 15.17).



Figure 15.17 The Songhai Empire. This map shows the location of the medieval Songhai Empire in West Africa. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

As goods such as kola nuts, dates, enslaved captives, ivory, salt, leather, and of course gold passed through the capital on their way to and from the kingdom of Ghana, traders and merchants, including the Songhai themselves, prospered. Gao's prosperity also drew the attention of the new and expansionist West African kingdom of Mali, which annexed Gao around 1325. This was the golden age of imperial Mali, and for the next century, its rulers profited from Gao's trade and collected taxes from its kings. When

the explorer Ibn Battuta arrived at Gao from Timbuktu in 1353, he described it as a “great town on the Nile [Niger], one of the finest, biggest, and most fertile cities of the Sudan.”

The annexation of Gao greatly expanded the Mali Empire, but only temporarily. Periodic rebellions by the peoples of Timbuktu, Takedda, and Gao, coupled with civil war, a struggling economy, and incursions by Almoravids from the north, caused Gao’s Malian rulers to withdraw in the 1430s. The leader of the Songhai rebels, Sunni Ali, became the first king of the Songhai Empire. Under him, Songhai became one of the greatest empires of medieval Africa. From his capital at Gao in the heart of the kingdom, Sunni Ali engaged in a war of conquest against his Muslim neighbors. Marshaling his massive cavalry and fleet of war canoes, the king extended his empire deep into the desert in the north and as far as Djenné in the southwest. His near-constant harassment and pursuit of the Tuareg nomads resulted in his capture of Mali’s great religious and scholarly center in Timbuktu, the trading town of Djenné, and almost the whole of the Middle Niger floodplain and the Bandiagara uplands.

Despite being Muslim himself, Sunni Ali campaigned against Muslim forces. This and his general lack of respect for Islam led to his being highly criticized by Arabic historians. In the *History of the Sudan*, al-Sadi characterized Sunni Ali as “a great oppressor and notorious evil-doer” and reported that he “tyrannized the scholars and holy men, killing them, insulting them, and humiliating them.” As a result, many of the scholars in Timbuktu fled to Oualata, leading to a significant diminishment in Islamic scholarship in the city (Figure 15.18). Nevertheless, in Songhai oral tradition, Sunni Ali is remembered as a great general and conquering hero, as well as the founder of the Songhai Empire. Through his domination of important trade routes and urban areas, he enriched his kingdom and enabled it to become even wealthier than Mali.

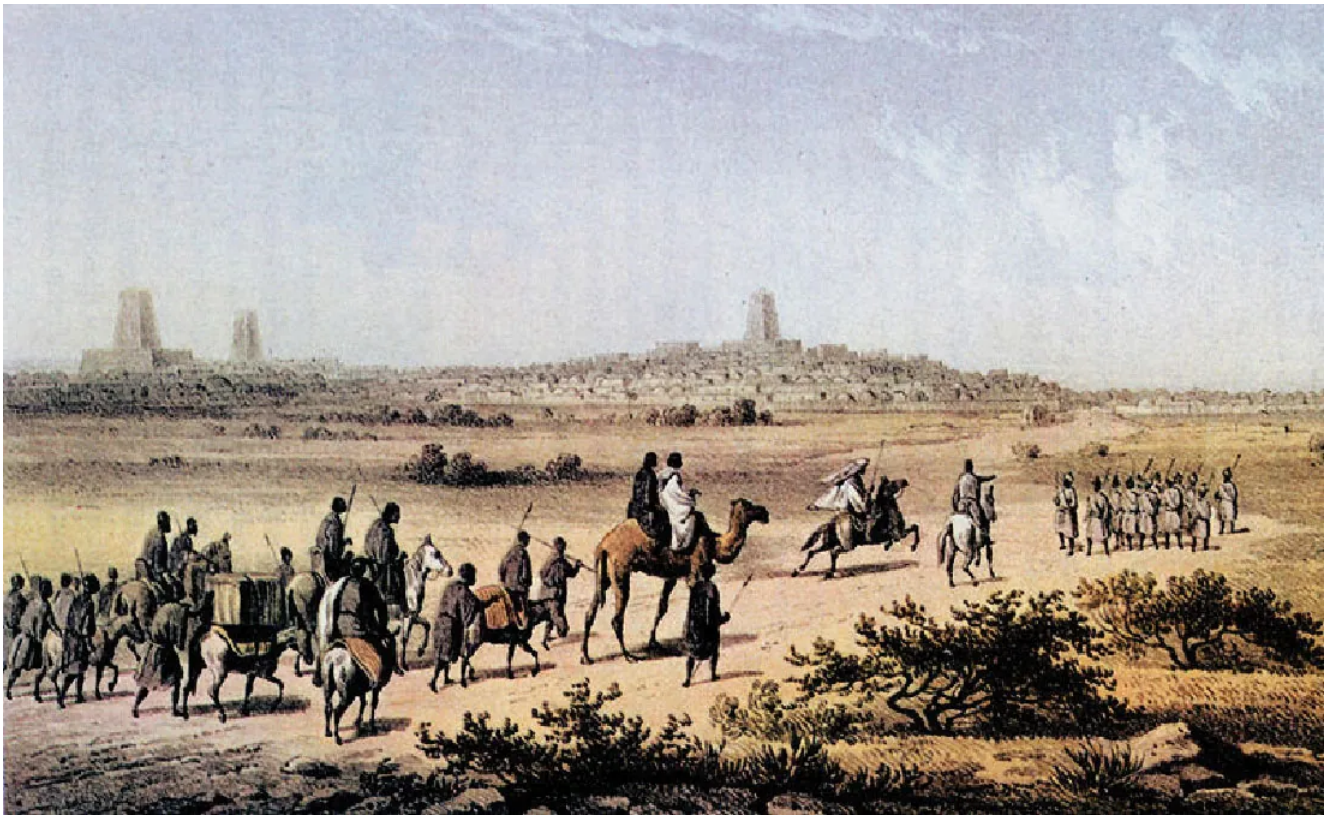


Figure 15.18 Timbuktu. This artist’s rendering shows the German scholar and explorer Heinrich Barth approaching Timbuktu in 1853, one of the first Europeans to do so. Note the city’s baked-mud mosques and centers of learning in the background. The image was published in Barth’s famous five-volume travel journal of Africa. (credit: “Timbuktu seen from a distance by Heinrich Barth’s party, September 7, 1853” by Heinrich Barth, Reisen und Entdeckungen. Gotha 1858, vol. 4./Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In Their Own Words

Timbuktu in the Sixteenth Century

Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Zayyati, known as Leo Africanus, was born in Spain in 1485, educated in Fez (a city in present-day Morocco), and traveled widely in North Africa, including Ghana. Returning from Mecca in 1518, he was captured and enslaved by Christian pirates before being presented to Pope Leo X because of his education and abilities. Leo X baptized him and commissioned him to write a detailed survey of Africa in Italian. This survey, published in 1526, was the basis of European knowledge of Africa for the next several centuries.

> *The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered wattles with thatched roofs. In the center of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, built by an architect named Granata, and in addition there is a large palace, constructed by the same architect, where the king lives. The shops of the artisans, the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported from Europe to Timbuktu, borne by Amazigh merchants.*
>
> *The women of the city maintain the custom of veiling their faces, except for the slaves who sell all the foodstuffs. The inhabitants are very rich. [. . .] There are many wells containing [fresh] water in Timbuktu; and in addition, when the Niger is in flood, canals deliver the water to the city. Grain and animals are abundant, so that the consumption of milk and butter is considerable. But salt is in very short supply because it is carried here from Tegaza, some five hundred miles from Timbuktu. [. . .]*
>
> *The royal court is magnificent and very well organized. When the king goes from one city to another with the people of his court, he rides a camel and the horses are led by hand by servants. [. . .] When someone wishes to speak to the king, he must kneel before him and bow down; but this is only required of those who have never before spoken to the king, or of ambassadors. The king has about three thousand horsemen and infinity of foot-soldiers armed with bows made of wild fennel which they use to shoot poisoned arrows. This king makes war only upon neighboring enemies and upon those who do not want to pay him tribute. When he has gained a victory, he has all of them—even the children—sold in the market at Timbuktu. [. . .]*
>
> *The people of Timbuktu are of a peaceful nature. They have a custom of almost continuously walking about the city in the evening (except for those that sell gold), between 10 pm and 1 am, playing musical instruments and dancing. The citizens have at their service many slaves, both men and women.*
>
> *—Leo Africanus, Description of Africa*

- What can you tell about Timbuktu from this description?
- What can you tell about the economic connections between Timbuktu and North Africa and Europe?

Cross-Cultural Interaction in the Sahel

From the late seventh century, the African communities of West and North Africa were under increasing pressure from the forces of Islam. Home to some Christian communities since the second century, as well as to groups of settled and nomadic pagans, North Africa lay in the path of the powerful and expansionistic new Muslim power centered on the Arabian Peninsula. Egypt, an early bastion of Coptic Christianity and a bulwark of Christian Roman power in North Africa, was conquered by the armies of Islam around the middle of the century. From there, Muslim Arab armies marched steadily across the northern quadrant of the continent. When Byzantine Carthage fell to Umayyad armies in 698, Islamic forces turned to al-Kahina, “the Queen of the Berbers” and likely

a Christian convert, who forged a coalition of indigenous African forces against the Islamic onslaught. With her power based in Algeria, al-Kahina roundly defeated an Islamic army sent from Egypt in 698, but five years later, a more determined Islamic vanguard bested her at Tabarka in Tunisia. The way was now clear, and with the help of pockets of Islamized Africans, Arab control of North Africa was achieved in 709.

Link to Learning

A great deal of art originated during the Islamic period, but archaeologists have also discovered troves of pre-Islamic art in the Sahel, including beaded jewelry, pottery, and figures. Follow this link to explore the Sahel collection at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Conversion of the nomads did not mean their submission, however. Heavily taxed subjects in conquered provinces whose daughters were sometimes enslaved, the Islamized Africans were treated as second-class Muslims. Nevertheless, many Africans regarded themselves as better Muslims than their elite Arab rulers, whom they believed had been corrupted by wealth and luxury and were no longer devoted to Islam. They insisted that cruel rulers be removed from power and replaced by pious men. Widespread opposition took the form of revolts that erupted across North Africa in 739 and 740 and shattered the Islamic Caliphate. In the end, control over the region fell to a variety of Islamic sects and ruling families. It took nearly two hundred years for North Africa to unite under Muslim rulers again. These rulers were known as the Fatimids, Shia Muslims who did not recognize the authority of the Abbasids who had succeeded the Umayyads in 750.

The Fatimids

Fatimid missionaries had long been active in Iraq and Syria before converting the Kutama in Algeria. Beginning in the tenth century, the Fatimids started capturing Muslim strongholds throughout the Maghreb. By the end of the century, armies had captured Egypt and seized control of Palestine, Syria, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula including Mecca and Medina. The Fatimids established a Shi'ite caliphate in Cairo, but their ultimate goal was to conquer the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and establish a caliphate that was the center of the Muslim world.

The founder of the Fatimid Caliphate, Abdullah al-Mahdi Billah, had relied on indigenous African soldiers in his conquest of the Maghreb. These soldiers, so crucial to victories in Africa, were no match for the Turkish soldiers of the Abbasid Caliphate, who were often enslaved captives. Taking a page from the Abbasids, the Fatimids diversified their army, enlisting free and enslaved Turks alongside indigenous African soldiers and transforming their tribal force into a multiethnic one. In the short term, this proved a decisive strategy, but in the long term, competition for positions within the military manifested along ethnic lines and resulted in a civil war in Egypt in the 1060s.

Having experienced persecution and status as outsiders, the Fatimids were religiously tolerant and did not attempt to forcibly convert Christians, Jewish people, or Sunni Muslims. Coptic Christians even continued to dominate the financial and administrative realms of the Fatimid Caliphate. The Fatimids sought the spread of Shia Islam through education (they built many madrasas) and an increase in Shia mosques, such as the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, where students could study Islamic law and jurisprudence, astronomy, philosophy, and Arabic grammar. These were effective steps, for by the end of the tenth century, the majority of people in Egypt were Muslim.

Unable to directly rule over the region of the Maghreb, the Fatimid rulers at Cairo appointed emirs or governors from the Zirid family. Like the Fatimids, the Zirids followed Shia Islam. At first, they ruled in the name of the Fatimids, but in the middle of the eleventh century, they declared their independence and aligned themselves with the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate. The Fatimid caliph attempted to reassert Shia Muslim control by encouraging tens of thousands of Arabs to migrate westward, pressuring the frontiers of the breakaway Ziridi state and causing war. Although enormously destructive, the Fatimids failed to achieve their desired ends, and the Maghreb had gone beyond their control.

In addition to their western troubles, the Fatimids faced challenges from Europe in the form of Christian crusaders, who captured Jerusalem from them in 1099. Gradually, the caliphate of the Fatimids shrank to only Egypt. The Fatimids were further weakened in the 1160s when they were divided by a power struggle between two competing factions. One of the contenders appealed to Christian crusaders for assistance, and Egypt subsequently became a crusader protectorate for a short time as a result. His rival reached out to a Sunni Muslim army for aid. By 1169, the Muslim army, under the leadership of a Kurdish general named Saladin,

had expelled the crusaders. When Saladin pledged allegiance to the Abbasids a few years later, this brought Egypt back into the Sunni-dominated Islamic Caliphate.

The Almoravids

As the Fatimid Caliphate tried to wrest control of the Maghreb back from the Zirid family, the center of power in the region shifted away from the coast and toward the Atlas Mountain range in Morocco. This part of West Africa was occupied by the Sanhaja, Islamized Africans subdivided into distinct ethnic tribes including the Djuddala and the Lamtuna. It was among these groups that the Islamic jurist Ibn Yasin settled in 1039 at the instigation of Yahya ibn Ibrahim, who sought to reform the tribes to the "true" Islamic religion (that is, Sunni Islam as he saw it). Ibn Yasin worked for over a decade to impose on the Djuddala the Malikite interpretation of Sunnism, which was based on a literal reading of the Quran and the *sunna* (the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad). Anyone who fell short of Ibn Yasin's strict demands for discipline and the observation of religious duties was severely punished.

After more than a decade among the Djuddala, during which time he alienated several leading members of the tribe, Ibn Yasin himself was expelled. While in exile, he received a steady stream of followers from both the Lamtuna and Djuddala Sanhaja, forming a group he soon came to call the Almoravids. Under Ibn Yasin's direction the Almoravids became zealous reformers committed to imposing his version of Islam on the people of the Maghreb. In 1052, Ibn Yasin and the Almoravids embarked on a years-long campaign to defeat the other tribes of the region, assembling an impressive army in the process.

By 1054, the Almoravids had captured the trans-Saharan trading route between Sijilmasa and Awdaghost. After the death of Ibn Yasin in battle in 1059, his followers continued their northward advance all the way to Fez (in modern-day Morocco), which they captured in 1069. In 1070 they established their capital at Marrakesh. After tightening their grip on Morocco, the Almoravids launched an invasion of Umayyad Spain, conquering the Islamic states of Al-Andalus to create the Almoravid Empire. From 1085, the Almoravid Empire, ruled by the Sanhaja, encompassed all the territory from Awdaghost in the southern Sahara to Zaragoza on the Ebro River in Spain (Figure 15.19). Maliki legal doctrine dominated interpretations of Islam, and study of the Quran and the prophetic traditions contained in the *sunna* were largely abandoned. Unlike the Fatimids of Egypt, the Almoravids were intolerant of any other faith, including mystic Islamic Sufism and sects of Sunni Islam.



Figure 15.19 The Almoravid Empire. The Almoravid Empire was founded in the early eleventh century. At its height around the end of the century, it stretched from Zaragoza in the north to the oasis town of Awdaghost in Mauretania to the south. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

The Almohads

The Almoravids did not remain in power for long. Ibn Tumart, a member of the Masmuda (an Amazigh tribe) from the Atlas Mountains, launched a countermovement that rejected the legalistic formality of the Almoravids. Through his studies at mosques and madrasas across the Muslim world, Ibn Tumart had developed a broader outlook than Ibn Yasin, and Ibn Tumart's cosmopolitan approach challenged Ibn Yasin's scriptural literalism. A reformer, he sought a return to what he believed was the original, uncorrupted Islamic faith and rejected all of the schools of Islamic law because he considered their pronouncements to be heretical interpretations of the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. Ibn Tumart's followers adopted the name Almohads, meaning "those of the oneness," a reference to their belief in the transcendental unity of God. Despite the more cosmopolitan outlook of his movement, Ibn Tumart was no less strict than Ibn Yasin in insisting upon what he considered to be the appropriate way to practice Islam. He once pulled his sister off the horse she was riding because she was not wearing a veil. He was also a frequent visitor to Marrakesh, where he routinely mocked Almoravid government officials and ridiculed their beliefs.

The reach of the Almoravids in the southern extreme of their empire was tentative. Their mounted armies encountered difficulties fighting and maneuvering in the heights of the Atlas Mountains, so the Masmuda nomads who lived there largely escaped Almoravid control. It was among these nomads that Ibn Tumart began to recruit the Masmuda tribes into a force to oppose the Almoravids. By 1130, his control extended across the region. Those groups initially reluctant to join the Almohad cause were persuaded into an alliance by Ibn Tumart's military. In 1147, the Almohads captured Marrakesh, destroyed what they believed were the symbols of a decadent and corrupt empire, including the Almoravid mosque, and moved on to the coastal region of the

Maghreb, which they conquered as far as Tripoli by 1160. At the end of the century, the Almohad Empire extended across all of Muslim Spain (Figure 15.20).



Figure 15.20 The Almohad Empire. At its height around the year 1200, the Almohad Empire stretched from the Atlas Mountain range in the south eastward across the Mediterranean coast to Tripoli in Libya, and north to Granada in Spain. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Like the Sanhaja before them, the Masmuda dominated both the administration and the military of Almohad Spain. The manuals of Malikite legal doctrine were banned and later burned, to be replaced by the teachings of Ibn Tumart, who died in 1130. Like their predecessors the Almoravids, the Almohads made no attempt to integrate the conquered and subject peoples of Spain into the administration. Almohad dominance turned out to be short-lived, however. No sooner did it reach its peak around 1200 than the empire of the Masmuda started to crumble, due in part to pressures from Christians to the north. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Christian forces had captured all of Spain north of Granada (which fell in 1492). Meanwhile, insurgencies in the Maghreb and the sacking of Marrakesh by rebels in 1275 brought the Almohad Empire to an end.

For two hundred years, the Almoravids and Almohads controlled the Maghreb. Despite being rivals, they had much in common: they shared militant reformist origins, they were independent of Arab rulers (Fatimid Egypt in the case of the Almoravids, Abbasid Baghdad in the case of the Almohads), and they both retained indigenous African cultural attributes (Sanhaja continued to be veiled, Masmuda maintained their Council of Fifty chiefs that adjudicated tribal matters). Yet they were also very different: the Malikite legalism of the Almoravids was in contrast to the cosmopolitanism of Ibn Tumart's ideology. In the end, although both empires were relatively short-lived, they left lasting legacies in North Africa and along the Mediterranean coast in the form of the spread of Islam and the Arabic language.

Link to Learning

The article, “These West African Artifacts Tell Stories of Great Forgotten Empires but Also the Battle to Own Africa’s Art,” looks at the ownership of African art found in collections held in European museums.

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13.5: Key Terms

Donatist controversy

the Christian schism in North Africa springing from the belief that church leaders who had renounced their faith to avoid persecution held no authority to perform sacraments

drystone

a construction method that uses interlocking stones rather than mortar

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13.6: Section Summary

Review Questions

1.
What made cultural contact between the Sahel and the Mediterranean peoples of North Africa difficult?

a. Red Sea
b. Kalahari Desert
c. Sahara
d. the Nile

2.
In what African ecological system did the migrating Bantus likely adopt ironworking technology from the Nok?

a. tropical rainforest
b. desert
c. semiarid grassland
d. savanna

3.
What is the name of the branch of Christianity that emerged in Egypt?

a. Maghrebi
b. Visigothic
c. Sufi
d. Coptic

4.
What does the “Africanization” of Christianity and Islam in the medieval period refer to?

a. the process of converting African communities to monotheism
b. the development of holy books written in indigenous African languages
c. the blending of traditional African beliefs with those of Christianity and Islam
d. the diffusion of traditional African beliefs among the Abrahamic faiths of the Near and Middle East

5.
The Ghana and Mali Empires were centered on what two capital cities, respectively?

a. Ouagadougou and Accra
b. Koumbi Saleh and Niani
c. Koubmi Saleh and Bure
d. Niani and Cairo

6.
Who was Mansa Musa?

a. a Christian ruler of the Swahili coast who traveled to China
b. a Muslim ruler of the Ghana Empire who followed the trans-Saharan trade route to Egypt
c. a pagan tribal chief who led a revolt against Islamized Africans in West Africa
d. a Muslim ruler of the Mali Empire who made a pilgrimage to Mecca in the fourteenth century

7.
What were the two principal goods the medieval empires of West Africa were renowned for trading in?

a. furs and ceramics
b. gold and salt
c. metalware and textiles
d. porcelain and ivory

8.
What characterized the political systems of the West African empires?

a. A formerly independent kingdom incorporated into a larger empire often retained its identity and internal political structure.

b. When empires declined in power, they left anarchy behind.
c. Empires were indivisible organizations with stable borders.
d. Empires were synonymous with chiefdoms and engaged in nearly constant tribal warfare.

9.
Bantu-speaking peoples brought innovations to southern Africa that led to the foundation of which medieval kingdoms?

a. Songhai and Mali
b. the Swahili coast and Natal
c. Mapungubwe and Zimbabwe
d. Mozambique and Lesotho

10.
The Sanhaja and Masmuda founded what West African kingdoms, respectively?

a. Mali and Ghana
b. Ghana and Egypt
c. Almoravid and Almohad
d. Almohad and Al-Andalus

11.
The Fatimid Caliphate followed _____ Islam.

a. Shia
b. Sunni
c. Sufi
d. Al-Wabbi

12.
Gao was the capital and important trading center of what kingdom?

a. Ghana
b. Songhai
c. Maghreb
d. Almoravid

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13.7: Review Questions

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13.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
Why was the Sahara vital to the prosperity of medieval West African kingdoms despite its hostile environment?
2.
What were some of the controversies that gripped Christianity in medieval Africa?
3.
Which were the most important factors that helped spread Islam in Africa?
4.
What explains the origins of Ghana, the earliest Sudanic West African kingdom?
5.
How did the success of Mali differ from that of Ghana?
6.
In what ways did medieval African societies in West and sub-Saharan Africa develop along similar lines?
7.
Why were nomadic Africans essential to the operation of the trans-Saharan trade?
8.
What circumstances led to the rise of the Fatimid Caliphate?

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13.9: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
How might the history of Africa have been different if the Sahara did not exist and the savanna region extended up to the Mediterranean coast?

2.
Which African groups likely benefited most from the spread of new belief systems during the Middle Ages? Which probably benefited least? In both cases, why?

3.
How did trade connect West Africa to a wider network that included Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East? What did this mean for the development of the region?

4.
What evidence do we have of the wealth and power of the medieval kingdoms in southern Africa? Why are these kingdoms important?

5.
Compare the territory of Songhai to that of Ghana and Mali. Why are the three empires oriented differently and different in size?

6.
How were the Almoravid and Almohad movements both reformist and reactionary?

7.
In what ways were the Bantu kingdoms of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe similar and dissimilar to the West African Sahelian kingdoms?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

14: Climate Change and Plague in the Fourteenth Century

14.1: Introduction
14.2: Asia, North Africa, and Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century
14.3: Famine, Climate Change, and Migration
14.4: The Black Death from East to West
14.5: The Long-Term Effects of Global Transformation
14.6: Key Terms
14.7: Section Summary
14.8: Review Questions
14.9: Check Your Understanding Questions
14.10: Application and Reflection Questions

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14.1: Introduction



Figure 16.1 The Bubonic Plague. Thanks to modern scientific tools, the remains of fourteenth-century bubonic plague victims, such as those being buried in this image, have yielded much insight into the course and impact of historical pandemics, and their short- and long-term consequences on human society. This painting is a miniature from a manuscript of the mid-fourteenth century. (credit: modification of work “Gilles li Muisis, Antiquitates Flandriae (Tractatus quartus)” by Belgian Art Links and Tools/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

16.1 Asia, North Africa, and Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century
16.2 Famine, Climate Change, and Migration
16.3 The Black Death from East to West
16.4 The Long-Term Effects of Global Transformation

Climate change, global pandemics, and political upheaval may seem more characteristic of the modern era than of the premodern world, but the first decades of the 1300s did in fact witness a rapid succession of such crises, prompting historian Barbara Tuchman to dub the period “the calamitous fourteenth century” in her book *A Distant Mirror*. From the ravages of the so-called Little Ice Age to the bubonic plague (Figure 16.1) and the rapid decline of the once-mighty Mongol Empire, the 1300s were marked by an array of extraordinary challenges that not only radically altered the world’s demographic and political landscape but also showcased the strength and vigor of human resilience.

Although any one of these catastrophes might have crushed the societies upon which they descended, in each case, people adapted, rebounded, and rebuilt. Due to their remarkable grit, the fourteenth century offers an unprecedented opportunity for historians to understand critical facets of the human experience, such as the impact of environmental change, infectious disease, and the ravages of military conflict.



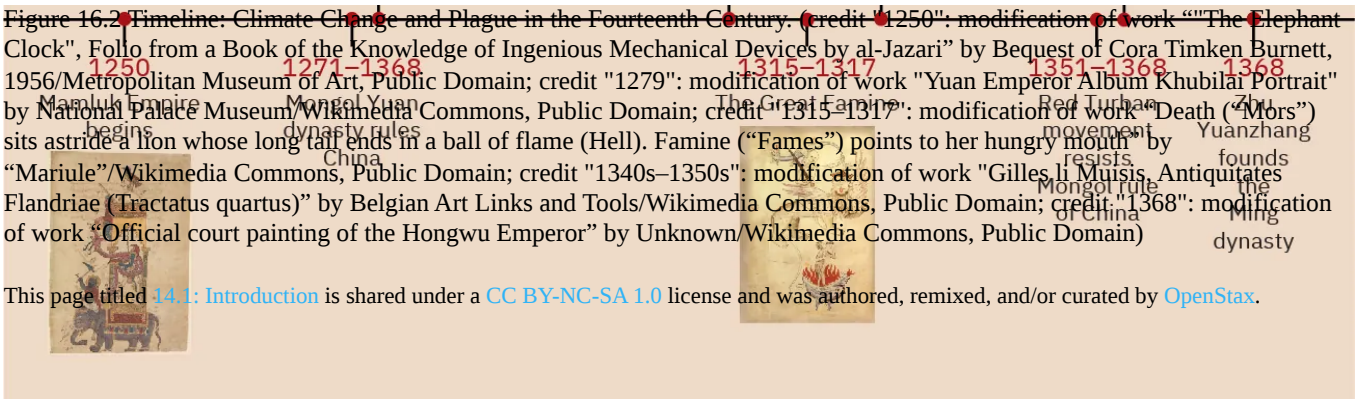


Figure 16.2 Timeline: Climate Change and Plague in the Fourteenth Century. (credit "1250": modification of work ""The Elephant Clock", Folio from a Book of the Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices by al-Jazari" by Bequest of Cora Timken Burnett, 1956/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain; credit "1279": modification of work "Yuan Emperor Album Khubilai Portrait" by National Palace Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1315–1317": modification of work "Death ("Mors") sits astride a lion whose long tail ends in a ball of flame (Hell). Famine ("Fames") points to her hungry mouth" by "Mariule"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1340s–1350s": modification of work "Gilles li Muisis, Antiquitates Flandriae (Tractatus quartus)" by Belgian Art Links and Tools/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1368": modification of work "Official court painting of the Hongwu Emperor" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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14.2: Asia, North Africa, and Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Analyze the impact of the Mongol conquest on China
- Describe changes that took place in Mongol rule of the Middle East in the fourteenth century
- Identify the causes of instability in Europe in the fourteenth century

The fourteenth century was a period of great instability in Asia, North Africa, and Europe. Although much of this precariousness was caused by climate change, famine, and epidemic disease, these natural phenomena might not have been so devastating if strong political and social institutions had existed to provide support for the people affected by these events. However, in China, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, war and conquest, conflicts among rulers, and the weakness of political and religious institutions affected the ability of kingdoms and empires to respond effectively to these challenges.

China in the Early Fourteenth Century

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Mongol realm had expanded its reach through a broad swath of Eurasia, effectively becoming the largest land-based empire in history. First uniting the Mongol tribes into a common fighting force with a goal of expanding their control beyond their homeland, the Mongols extended their conquest into China across the North China plain in 1212–1213, leaving many cities in ruin. It was not until Chinggis Khan's grandson Kublai Khan came to power, however, that the Mongol invasion of southern China was complete (Figure 16.3).



Figure 16.3 Mongol China and Beyond. This map depicts the Mongol conquest of Chinese regimes over the course of the thirteenth century, as well as the movement of Mongol armies westward toward the Middle East and beyond. Notice how the movement of the Mongol conquests varies, owing to both the geographic size of China and the resistance within each region. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Having transferred his capital from Karakorum in Mongolia to what is now Beijing in 1264, Kublai Khan began his conquest of China by adopting the Chinese name Yuan for his empire in 1271. Meaning “origin,” the term *Yuan* cemented the Mongols’ political legitimacy in China by reinforcing their connection to the Mandate of Heaven, an ancient political philosophy that emphasized the divine source of governmental authority. After fully conquering the Song dynasty in 1279, Kublai Khan became the first ruler over all of China who was not of Chinese origin. In addition to his role as Yuan emperor, he claimed the title of “great khan,” asserting his claims to supremacy over the entire Mongol Empire, even though the Mongols had regional khans responsible for their own territories.

The Yuan dynasty not only incorporated China into the vast Mongol domain, but it also made it a nominal capital of the empire. China had long been a target of Mongol conquest. Its combination of strategic placement at the terminus of the interconnected Eurasian trade routes known as the Silk Roads, its abundant croplands, and a sophisticated bureaucracy provided a ready-made foundation for Mongol governance. The Mongols’ traditional nomadic ways had given them little experience in managing sedentary agriculture, so they began by absorbing many Chinese practices of taxation and administration into their government, which they staffed mainly with foreigners rather than with their Chinese subjects. Although some Chinese officials maintained their positions at the local level, the most lucrative and prestigious jobs were primarily held by Mongols and non-Chinese outsiders. Mongol leaders favored those of Mongolian descent, but they also exhibited tolerance for those they considered outsiders and supported the ethnic and religious diversity of Yuan China, particularly in urban areas. By developing policies favorable to trade, adopting the practice of Buddhism, and expanding the circulation of paper money, Mongol leadership fostered economic expansion and a cosmopolitan spirit that attracted many foreign traders to China (Figure 16.4).



Figure 16.4 An Early Passport. This late-thirteenth-century iron and silver plaque, known as a *paiza*, served as one of the world’s first passports. The writing appears in the script used to record the Mongol language in Yuan China and was derived from that used by the Uyghur tribes of central Asia. *Paizi* such as this were carried by Mongol diplomats or officials to permit them safe passage

and access to supplies wherever they traveled in the Mongol realm. (credit: “Safe Conduct Pass (Paiza) with Inscription in Phakpa Script” by Purchase, Bequest of Dorothy Graham Bennett, 1993/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

An initiative called “The Mongols in China” is presented by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University. It includes links to an interactive timeline of the Mongol presence in China. It also contains an introduction to the Mongol influence on Chinese society and narratives and visual depictions of life in China under Mongol rule.

Although Yuan rulers incorporated some elements of Chinese political culture into their governmental organization, such as the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and the veneration of ancestors, they also sought to maintain cultural distance from their Chinese subjects by forbidding them to adopt Mongol dress or learn the Mongol language. They enforced rigid hierarchies based on ethnicity and capitulation to their rule. Their four-tiered social structure placed Mongols at the top, followed by non-Mongol foreigners known as *Semu ren*. Their ethnic Chinese subjects were relegated to the bottom two categories; those who had submitted to Mongol rule earlier, the Han Chinese in the north, were ranked higher than those in the south who held out longer.

Although the social policy of the Mongols generated a great deal of resentment from their ethnic Chinese subjects, in other respects, the Yuan rulers instituted more benevolent policies. By creating granaries that provided food in times of famine, forgiving the tax burden for villages hit by natural disasters, and reducing the number of crimes that had traditionally resulted in the death penalty, for example, Mongol rulers likely alleviated the hardships faced by many of their subjects. By reducing banditry and making trade safer, particularly along the Silk Roads, they also boosted commerce and improved the lives and fortunes of merchants.

Despite Kublai Khan’s dominance in China, his attempts to hold a unified Mongol Empire together were largely in vain. The realm had already begun to unravel by the time he took the reins of power in China. Not only had a sharp divide occurred when some Mongols converted to Islam, but the empire itself had splintered into four separate sections known as khanates, each governed by a military ruler or governor known as a khan and who linked his ancestry to the sons of Chinggis. Yuan rulers also faced unrest from their Chinese subjects, particularly when a string of weak emperors after Kublai Khan’s death in 1294 resulted in a succession crisis that left Yuan leadership vulnerable to revolt.

Mongol taxation practices and the expropriation of agrarian land had proved financially ruinous for many Chinese peasants and farmers, though taxation benefited merchants and artisans. Despite modest efforts to shore up roads, bolster the postal service, and rebuild the Grand Canal, which provided a means of trade and transportation between northern and southern regions of China, Mongol attempts to bolster infrastructure did not reduce the resentment of their Chinese subjects. Aside from the implementation of some favorable economic and social policies, the notion of foreign rule was an affront to Chinese subjects, who were also offended by Mongols’ dietary and bathing practices. Many Chinese people likely felt affronted by their subjugation to a people they would have viewed as lesser for having such different cultural practices.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, aversion to Mongol rule had led to widespread local rebellions that ultimately hastened the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. Rapid inflation, the devastating impact of the bubonic plague, and intensifying Mongol factionalism all contributed as well. In 1368, the Yuan dynasty officially came to an end when rebel forces triumphed over the Mongol leaders and established the Ming dynasty in its stead.

The Middle East and North Africa in the Early Fourteenth Century

Although China served as the heart of the Mongol Empire, in the early fourteenth century, the Mongol presence also extended across the Middle East and central Asia. Political instability and shifting relationships with conquered peoples increasingly characterized the remaining khanates. For example, in the Il-Khanate, a division of the Mongol Empire that extended from the northern border of the Indian subcontinent to the eastern edge of Anatolia in modern Turkey, the nature of Mongol leadership had shifted from remote detachment to embedded assimilation by the early 1300s (Figure 16.5).



Figure 16.5 The Mongol Empire. This map depicts the four khanates that made up the Mongol Empire in 1335: the Khanate of the Golden Horde, the Il-Khanate, the Chagatai Khanate, and the Khanate of the Great Khan, or Yuan dynasty. Although each was nominally under the control of the Great Khan of the Yuan, their rulers had relative independence and autonomy; in some cases, they rivaled each other for influence. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

When the Mongols occupied portions of the Middle East, their regional leader, Chinggis Khan's grandson Hulagu, used the title *il-khan* (lesser khan); his realm, therefore, became known as the Il-Khanate. Founded in 1256, the Il-Khanate was primarily centered in Persia, and its rulers resurrected the ancient title of "Iran" for this core of their domain, where they sought to maintain Mongol nomadic ways and generally neglected the khanate's economic welfare. Early on, Mongol leaders largely imposed their traditions and practices as the dominant culture, little appreciating the cultural traditions of their subjects. In addition to experiencing this cultural alienation, many peasants found the first decades of Il-Khanate rule financially disastrous as they lost their livestock and farmlands to Mongol nomads. However, after Mahmud Ghazan, the seventh ruler of the Il-Khanate, converted to Islam in 1295, the *il-khans* became increasingly embedded within the Muslim communities they governed.

Although Ghazan's conversion may have been based solely on religious conviction, it also enabled him to appeal to the growing numbers of Mongols and members of the Persian elite who had become Muslims. Mongols living in the Il-Khanate had already begun intermarrying with their Muslim subjects, but this practice greatly increased as they gradually became less culturally distinct from them. This transformation marked a significant shift in the cultural identity of Mongols, who now increasingly became part of the sedentary societies they conquered and eventually abandoned their roles as military conquerors.

Eventually the transition from foreign interlopers to fully integrated members of the community shifted Il-Khanate priorities. Although the northern regions of the khanate had been badly damaged in the early years of Mongol invasions, Ghazan and his successors focused on rebuilding the agricultural infrastructure in the southern portions of their territory, including the Iranian provinces of Fars and Khuzistan. They channeled resources into rehabilitating the empire's economy and cosmopolitan urban life through the construction of schools, mosques, and bazaars. These policies not only enabled Islamic culture and scholarship to flourish, but they also further cemented the cultural bond between Mongol rulers and their subjects in Persia.

Despite the success of early attempts to rehabilitate the empire's economy, by the middle of the fourteenth century, the Il-Khanate began to succumb to struggles for supremacy after the *il-khan* Abu Sa'id died in 1335. Clashes between Mongol, Arab, Persian, and Turkic factions ultimately split the former Il-Khanate into several successor states. Although fragments of the Mongol Empire, such

as the Golden Horde, persisted in name until the sixteenth century, after the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, the Mongol Empire ceased to exist as a unified political entity.

Beyond the Book

Depictions of Royalty across Borders and Cultures

Portraiture has long served to legitimize political leaders and convey an image of their character as rulers. Each image in this selection (Figure 16.6) is associated with a ruler from a different region of the Mongol Empire in the fourteenth century: from left to right, Mahmud Ghazan of the Il-Khanate; Ayurbarwada, the fourth emperor of the Yuan dynasty in China; and Jani Beg, khan of the Golden Horde.

Although all three rulers were tied genealogically and politically to the Mongol Empire, they each adapted to the unique cultural contexts of their jurisdictions by recognizing and embracing the dominant religious and intellectual views of their subjects. This included having themselves depicted in a way that their indigenous subjects would see as befitting the power and status of their royalty. The differing character of their reigns and the distinctive relationship each developed with the traditions of their respective regions are reflected in the three images presented. Whereas Ghazan, who was born a Buddhist, converted to Islam shortly after ascending to the Il-Khanate throne, Ayurbarwada embraced the Confucian practices of his Chinese subjects. Jani Beg, by contrast, remained a Muslim, but he also granted concessions to the Christian Church toward the end of his reign when, according to tradition, his mother Taidula's blindness was cured by a Christian bishop named Alexius. Look closely at the images, and consider the differing messages they might convey and the ways in which they reflect the unique circumstances of each region.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 16.6 Imperial Rulers. This depiction (a) of Ghazan's conversion from Buddhism to Islam shortly after ascending to the throne of the Il-Khanate appears in Rashid al-Din's fourteenth-century masterpiece of world history, the *Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh*. (b) The silk painting of Ayurbarwada, the Yuan emperor Renzong, first appeared in a fourteenth-century album of Yuan imperial portraits. Renzong, who was strongly influenced by Confucian political culture, reinstated the civil service examination system in China after previous Mongol emperors had shunned the Confucian educational model. (c) The last image depicts Alexius, metropolitan bishop of Kyiv, curing the blindness of Taidula Khatan, the mother of Jani Beg, khan of the Golden Horde. (credit a: modification of work "Conversion of Ghazan to Islam" by Rachid Ad-Din, Claude Mutafian/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of work "Renzong a.k.a. Ayurbarvada a.k.a. Buyantu Khan" by National Palace Museum in Taipei/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit c: modification of work "Metropolitan Alexis healing Queen Taidula from blindness" by Tretyakov Gallery/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- How do these depictions of the rulers differ?
- Why might two of the images depict religious events? Drawing upon what you know about religion in China, explain why a Mongol ruler of that country might have chosen not to depict himself as affiliated with a particular religious tradition?

As the Il-Khanate regime began its steady decline in the fourteenth century, one of its chief rivals, the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, rose to a position of greater influence in the eastern Mediterranean. Founded by formerly enslaved soldiers of Turkish origin who first emerged as elite fighters in the Abbasid Caliphate, the Mamluk Sultanate eventually became the foremost center of Muslim scholarship and learning in the fourteenth century (Figure 16.7). The Mamluks' reputation for military prowess gained them the respect of Muslims throughout North Africa and the Middle East, especially after they repelled the Mongol army at the Battle of Ain Jalut in Syria in 1260, stopping Mongol southwestern expansion. The Mamluks, under their military commander Baybars, then gained control of Egypt and Syria. In the process, they not only managed to protect their empire from subsequent Mongol attacks, but they also made significant contributions to the Islamization of Africa.



Figure 16.7 Muslim Scholarship in the Mamluk Sultanate. This page from a 1315 treatise on mechanical devices by Syrian author al-Jazari depicts the high sophistication of Islamic scientific scholarship and mechanical knowledge at the height of the Mamluk Empire. The image depicts a fantastical elephant clock that was to generate a chain reaction every half hour in which the bird at the top would whistle, the man would drop a ball into the dragon's mouth, and the driver would prod the elephant with a goad. (credit: ""The Elephant Clock", Folio from a Book of the Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices by al-Jazari" by Bequest of Cora Timken Burnett, 1956/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

During the period between 1260 and 1341, Cairo, the capital of the Mamluk Sultanate, became a prominent center of Muslim intellectual culture and architecture, drawing many merchants and scholars fleeing Mongol attacks in their Persian and Iraqi

homelands. The age of Mamluk prosperity and prominence eventually came to an end with the death of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in 1341, which initiated a period of instability worsened by the onslaught of the bubonic plague in the late 1340s. While the Mamluks remained in power until their defeat by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century, a period of marked decline had begun.

Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century

While its eastern and southern neighbors struggled to overcome the challenges of the early fourteenth century, Europe was also undergoing widespread crises of authority and shifting axes of power in the face of famine, war, and eventually pestilence. At the beginning of the century, a period of worsening weather resulted in crop failures and food shortages that left Europe vulnerable to the ravages of the bubonic plague, a deadly bacterial disease. These crises resulted in demographic changes and economic troubles that signaled profound transformations in the religious and political foundations of medieval society. Not all regions of Europe experienced the same level of upheaval and economic decline—some areas such as the Italian Peninsula and the French city of Bourges continued to prosper—but the fourteenth century was generally an era of chronic conflict and instability for most of the continent (Figure 16.8).



Figure 16.8 The Fourteenth Century Begins. This map depicts the patchwork of kingdoms and political entities in Europe and beyond at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The many divisions ensured that political fragmentation rather than centralization defined the region throughout the medieval period, and many states depicted here still lacked a strong, centralized rule entirely. (credit: "Europe in 1328" by Lynn H. Nelson/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In contrast to the stability that had defined much of the thirteenth century for the European Christian Church, it began experiencing significant destabilization in the beginning of the fourteenth century, when tensions between the pope and national monarchs led to a weakening of papal authority and division within the church. A notable conflict occurred between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV of France, after Philip sought to impose taxes on the clergy in his country without papal approval. As a result, Boniface

issued an edict reinforcing papal supremacy over secular rulers, to which Philip responded by attempting to kidnap the pope in 1303. Although the papacy retained its political autonomy and independent bureaucratic structures after a series of pontiffs came to settle in Avignon, France, the time they spent there tarnished the pope's spiritual prestige and led many to question the integrity of the church's administrative structures.

Although Pope Gregory XI brought the papal court back to Rome in 1377, continuing disagreements between church factions about papal legitimacy led to the simultaneous appointment of three popes and inaugurated a period known as the Great Western Schism (1378–1417). Although this crisis of authority was eventually resolved when the Council of Constance (1414–1418) persuaded two of the popes to resign, by then the reputation of the papacy had deteriorated significantly.

The decline in respect for the Roman Catholic clergy can be seen in an English satirical poem known as *The Land of Cockaigne*. The poem calls attention to the church's purported gluttony during a time marked by food insecurity by depicting a monastery made of mouthwatering pastries and breads. The image of a church made of food suggested the greed of the clergy: "There is a fair abbey for monks, white and grey, and its chambers and halls have walls made of pies filled with fish and rich meats, the most delicious man can eat. The shingles on the church, cloisters, bowers and hall are wheat cakes, and the pinnacles are fat puddings, rich enough for princes and kings. All may be rightfully eaten without blame, for it is shared in common by young and old, strong and stern, meek and bold."

In the midst of the church's crisis of authority and status, many areas of Europe were further racked by political and military conflict through much of the fourteenth century. The Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) erupted between England and France over claims to French lands held by the English monarch. The tension was heightened in 1328 when King Charles IV of France died without a son. The crown was given to his nephew Philip, the Count of Valois, the son of Charles's younger brother. However, King Edward III of England, the son of Charles's sister and the older of the two claimants, maintained that he had the greater right to the throne of France. The conflict caused widespread political factionalism and devastation, particularly in France where most of the fighting occurred.

Although the war lasted 116 years, its periods of conflict alternated with times of truce. The new military technologies of the late medieval period shaped much of the conflict and rendered combat especially savage. While the English longbow, prized for its ability to send arrows farther and faster than the French crossbow, dominated the first decades, later in the war the use of firearms and gunpowder became more widespread and more destructive, thanks to the ability of these weapons to dismantle the protective walls of castles and cities. Despite England's dominance early in the conflict, the war's conclusion in 1453 ultimately left France in control as the dominant kingdom of western Europe.

Link to Learning

The British Library learning timeline provides an interactive chronology including brief descriptions, sources, and images of key events in fourteenth-century European history, such as the Hundred Years' War.

Another center of political instability during this period was the Holy Roman Empire. In the fourteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire, which had been founded by Charlemagne in 800, comprised four main entities—the Kingdom of Italy, the Kingdom of Germany (including lands that now are part of Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), the Kingdom of Burgundy (a region in southeastern France), and the Kingdom of Bohemia (what is now the Czech Republic and part of Poland) under the nominal control of an elected emperor. Each of these kingdoms, in turn, was composed of a loose coalition of independent territories with different hereditary rulers. The emperor was chosen by a handful of these rulers known as electors.

Competition between noble families vying for the role of emperor often created instability. In 1314, for example, one group of electors chose the ruler of Austria to be emperor, but another group gave the title to the ruler of Bavaria. Later in the century, the Golden Bull, proclaimed by the emperor Charles IV in 1356 (*bull* is the Latin word for "seal"), attempted to simplify and clarify the process by which the emperor was elected. The document asserted that emperors would be selected by seven specific prince-electors, the secular rulers of four principalities and the archbishops of three cities within the empire. This practice of electing emperors stood in stark contrast to the hereditary monarchies of other European kingdoms such as France and England.

Rather than adopting a common currency, legal system, or representative assembly, the Holy Roman Empire remained a patchwork of semiautonomous principalities. Although each of these became relatively stable, the empire itself was a weak and decentralized

political entity. By the end of the fourteenth century, it included more than one hundred principalities, each with varying degrees of power and autonomy. The emperor was now beholden to both the rulers who elected him and the pope, who in theory bestowed the imperial crown.

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14.3: Famine, Climate Change, and Migration

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how climate change affected Afro-Eurasian societies in the fourteenth century
- Discuss the reasons medieval people migrated and how they did so

Rising sea levels, extreme hurricanes, and seismic disruptions may call to mind apocalyptic scenes from sci-fi movies, but global climate change, adverse weather, and natural disasters all played a real and significant role in shaping the course of human history in the fourteenth century. Environmental conditions have consistently had a profound impact on the availability of resources and the development of human settlements, trade, and migration across the globe.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration between historians and paleo-scientists has yielded vital information about environmental change in the premodern world. Even subtle shifts in climate and temperature have historically resulted in widespread demographic and ecological transformations that now shed light on the ways in which forces of nature and human activity intersected in the past. Understanding these connections enables us as modern historians to track the short- and long-term causes and consequences of historical plagues, famines, and environmental events, such as those that defined much of the fourteenth century. Learning about the ways in which past societies adapted to environmental challenges also provides vital context for modern debates about the effects of climate change and ways in which the environment affects the continued settlement and development of peoples around the world.

The Effects of Climate Change in the Fourteenth Century

Perhaps the greatest challenge in grasping the impact of climate change on the past is the limitations of traditional historical sources. Texts and other written source materials often provide scant information about environmental fluctuations of earlier centuries. To overcome these barriers, the field of historical climatology focuses on reconstructing and analyzing climates of the past and comparing them with modern conditions, allowing scholars to expand the traditional source base of historical research. Historians study references to crop yields and weather fluctuations in weather journals and tax records, along with scientific data drawn from tree rings and organic material trapped beneath ice sheets in different parts of the world, which offer information about past temperature fluctuations and rainfall patterns (Figure 16.9).

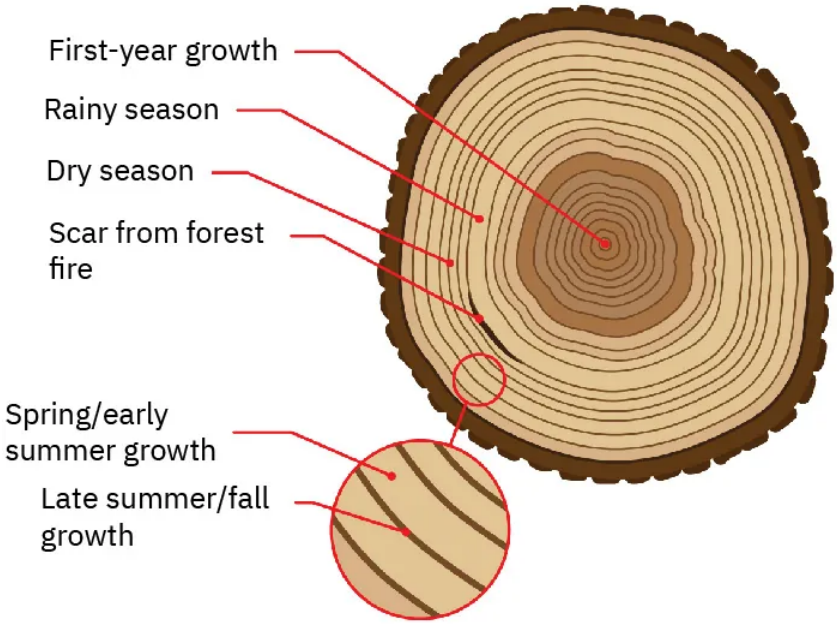


Figure 16.9 Hidden Clues to History. Because trees can live for hundreds or even thousands of years, during which they experience a variety of environmental fluctuations, clues about these changing conditions are often hidden within the rings in their stumps, which historical climatologists can analyze. (credit: modification of work “The color and width of tree rings can provide snapshots of past climate conditions” by /NASA Climate Kids, Public Domain)

The investigation of such historical clues hidden in the natural world has enabled scholars to identify the ways in which environmental conditions and patterns of human migration and settlement have together shaped the course of human history. In the case of the calamitous fourteenth century, a series of unusual climatic changes led to a chain reaction of competition for resources and desperate attempts to mitigate the damage and despair that defined the century’s first decades.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, subtle shifts in global mean temperature and rainfall had a profound impact on the climate of the Northern Hemisphere, unleashing devastating famines and plagues across Afro-Eurasia. These events caused significant human hardship, disrupted commerce, and contributed to the decline of once-great empires, even the seemingly impenetrable Mongol dynasty. Although premodern people did not understand these extraordinary environmental shifts, their lives were no less affected by them. In an era during which many people survived on subsistence agriculture, even the slightest change in seasonal weather patterns could devastate crops and result in widespread malnourishment and starvation. Poor nutrition weakens human immune systems, which—together with poor sanitation and the close quarters in which people lived in medieval towns—undoubtedly left many more vulnerable to the ravages of epidemic diseases. This was especially the case when the bubonic plague struck much of Afro-Eurasia by the middle of the century.

To place the dramatic meteorological changes of the fourteenth century in context, we must understand how they relate to larger climate patterns. Long-term weather fluctuations, during which periods of relative warmth and cold alternated over hundreds of years, have long been part of Earth’s ecological landscape and the narrative of environmental history. Within these longer periods of gradual climatological change, however, less predictable short-term fluctuations have also resulted from rapid changes in wind patterns, ocean currents, and seismic activity. From time to time, such erratic climatological shifts resulted in devastating reversals of typical weather patterns.

In the fourteenth century in particular, the Little Ice Age, a period of unusually cold weather that affected most of the Northern Hemisphere (Figure 16.10), led to significant variations in normal rainfall and a general drop in the mean annual temperature. Preceded by a Medieval Warm Period, a span of more temperate climate across the globe from the tenth through the thirteenth century, the cool temperatures and, in some areas, droughts radically reduced available resources and food supplies. Aggravated by rising population levels and declining agricultural productivity, food shortages caused significant hardship and financial distress as famine became commonplace and competition for resources intensified.

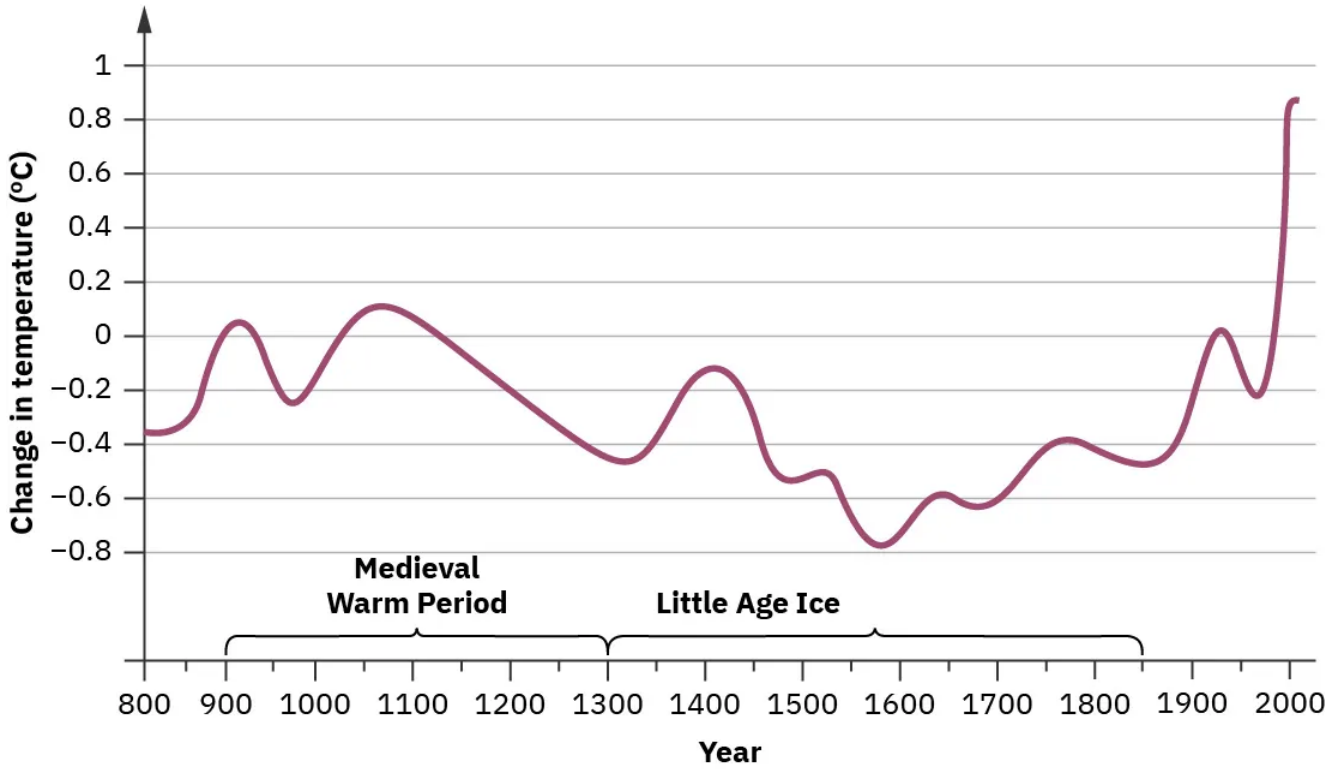


Figure 16.10 The Little Ice Age. This chart depicts the shift in the Northern Hemisphere's temperature over the last millennium, including the Medieval Warm Period that began in the tenth century and the Little Ice Age that ran from the fourteenth century to approximately 1850. (data source: Northern Hemisphere Temperature Reconstruction by Moberg et al., 2005) (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

Link to Learning

An overview of the field of historical climatology is provided in "Little Ice Age Lessons: Towards a New Climate History." This overview includes a section about the ways in which the fourteenth-century Little Ice Age offers lessons about past, present, and future relationships between climate change and human affairs.

If you have a scientific background and would like to explore the subject in greater depth, a compilation of scientific information about the causes and impact of the Medieval Warm Period is provided by this ScienceDirect web resource. Charts and graphs are included that demonstrate the temperature and meteorological fluctuations of this period.

Although a consensus about the causes of the Little Ice Age remains elusive, possible triggers may have included changes in ocean circulation patterns, shifts in the earth's orbit, and several massive volcanic eruptions in the tropics that released clouds of sulfate particles into the atmosphere and reflected solar energy back into space at the end of the thirteenth century. Ultimately, these environmental changes resulted in an advance of mountain glaciers and an overall mean global temperature decrease of 0.6°C (with some areas experiencing as much as a two-degree drop in annual temperature). This decrease may seem insignificant, but in the absence of modern agricultural and irrigation techniques, it led to catastrophic crop failures and widespread famine in many parts of the Northern Hemisphere within the first few decades of the fourteenth century. The increase in glacier growth, moreover, affected many regions of the world, because the more water turned to ice, the less was available to evaporate and turn into rain. As a result, even areas far from glacial mountains suffered prolonged periods of drought.

Despite their global impact, the effects of the Little Ice Age were not the same everywhere. In the Mediterranean and West Africa, irregular rainfall and periods of drought dramatically reduced crop yields, whereas in China and northern Europe, cold weather and the freezing of lakes and rivers were especially pronounced. Elsewhere in Europe and Asia, in 1314, extraordinary rains began to fall that introduced a period of abnormally cold and wet winters. This deluge of precipitation resulted in poor harvests as people struggled to cultivate already overworked land. Outside Afro-Eurasia, evidence suggests that the North American interior also

suffered when established agricultural systems faltered under hotter summers with less rain and colder winters, leading to severe population loss in the southwestern region.

Although the Little Ice Age was especially devastating in the 1300s, its effects persisted for many centuries. In addition to its immediate impact on crops, late medieval climate change led to longer-term deforestation because more wood was used for heating, in the Northern Hemisphere in particular. The climate shift not only altered building designs and clothing styles, which became adapted to colder temperatures, but in some places it also ultimately precipitated the eventual adoption of coal for heating and the beginning of human reliance on fossil fuels.

Link to Learning

"The Little Ice Age: Weird Weather, Witchcraft, Famine and Fashion" is a podcast discussing the historical climatology of the Little Ice Age and its connection with some of history's most critical events, such as the Black Death and the French Revolution.

The period known as the Great Famine of 1315–1317 was a direct result of the Little Ice Age in much of Europe north of the Alps, an area of roughly 400,000 square miles. This widespread and prolonged food shortage prompted one of the worst population collapses in Europe's recorded history. It is virtually impossible to know the actual death toll, but it is likely that up to 10 percent of northern Europe's population of more than thirty million perished. Even though crop yields began to rebound in 1317, it took several more years for them to return to prefamine levels. Beyond the devastating loss of lives and human suffering, prolonged food shortages also led to widespread political and economic instability. The prices of necessary food staples like grain skyrocketed, and competition for resources generated social tension, conflict, and an increase in crime. Ultimately, the Great Famine led many to question the ability of church officials and monarchs to respond effectively to crises and catastrophes, which had long-term effects on public trust in these institutions (Figure 16.11).



Figure 16.11 An Allegory of the Great Famine. This image from a fourteenth-century manuscript created in Erfurt, Germany, at the time of the Great Famine depicts Death sitting atop a legendary creature known as a manticore, with famine perched on the fires of hell at the end of the manticore's tail. (credit: "Death ("Mors") sits astride a lion whose long tail ends in a ball of flame (Hell). Famine ("Fames") points to her hungry mouth" by "Mariule"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In Their Own Words

Johannes de Trokelowe

In 1315, Johannes de Trokelowe, an English monk and chronicler in the reign of King Edward II, wrote the following account of the impact of the Great Famine. Note how daily life was affected by rapidly rising prices and scarcity of food in the wake of devastating rains over northern Europe during the Little Ice Age.

> *In the year of our Lord 1315, apart from the other hardships with which England was afflicted, hunger grew in the land. . . . Meat and eggs began to run out, capons and fowl could hardly be found, animals died of pest, swine could not be fed because of the excessive price of fodder. A quarter of wheat or beans or peas sold for twenty shillings [in 1313 a quarter of wheat sold for five shillings], barley for a mark, oats for ten shillings. A quarter of salt was commonly sold for thirty-five shillings, which in former times was quite unheard of. The land was so oppressed with want that when the king came to St. Albans on the feast of St. Laurence [August 10] it was hardly possible to find bread on sale to supply his immediate household. . . .*
>
> *The dearth began in the month of May and lasted until the feast of the nativity of the Virgin [September 8]. The summer rains were so heavy that grain could not ripen. It could hardly be gathered and used to bake bread down to the said feast day unless it was first put in vessels to dry. Around the end of autumn the dearth was mitigated in part, but toward Christmas it became as bad as before. Bread did not have its usual nourishing power and strength because the grain was not nourished by the warmth of summer sunshine. Hence those who ate it, even in large quantities, were hungry again after a little while. There can be no doubt that the poor wasted away when even the rich were constantly hungry. . . .*
>
> *Four pennies worth of coarse bread was not enough to feed a common man for one day. The usual kinds of meat, suitable for eating, were too scarce; horse meat was precious; plump dogs were stolen. And, according to many reports, men and women in many places secretly ate their own children. . . .*
>
> *—Johannes de Trokelowe, Annales, 1315*

- How does Trokelowe describe the change in food prices, and to what does he attribute the poor harvests of 1315?
- Salt was an important staple for food preservation. How might a significant rise in the price of salt affect everyday life?
- How did people attempt to cope with food shortages? Why do you suppose Trokelowe came to believe that some even resorted to eating their own children?

With very few options to remedy the devastation wrought by years of poor weather and famine, most people had little practical recourse other than migrating in search of better conditions. The collective anxiety and social tension of the era sometimes led to scapegoating, including persecutions of supposed witches based on the premise that they had the ability to control the weather as a means of causing others harm. Historians have traced connections between peaks of the Little Ice Age and spikes in witch-hunting activities. Although this type of persecution was by no means universal, it demonstrates the desperation many people must have felt in the face of unrelenting strife.

Mobility and Human Society

Throughout history, economic opportunity and access to new and varied resources have inspired merchants and traders to travel. In the premodern world, this was especially the case along the trade routes of North Africa and the Silk Roads, an active network of trade and commerce that attracted merchants and traders from across Afro-Eurasia (Figure 16.12).

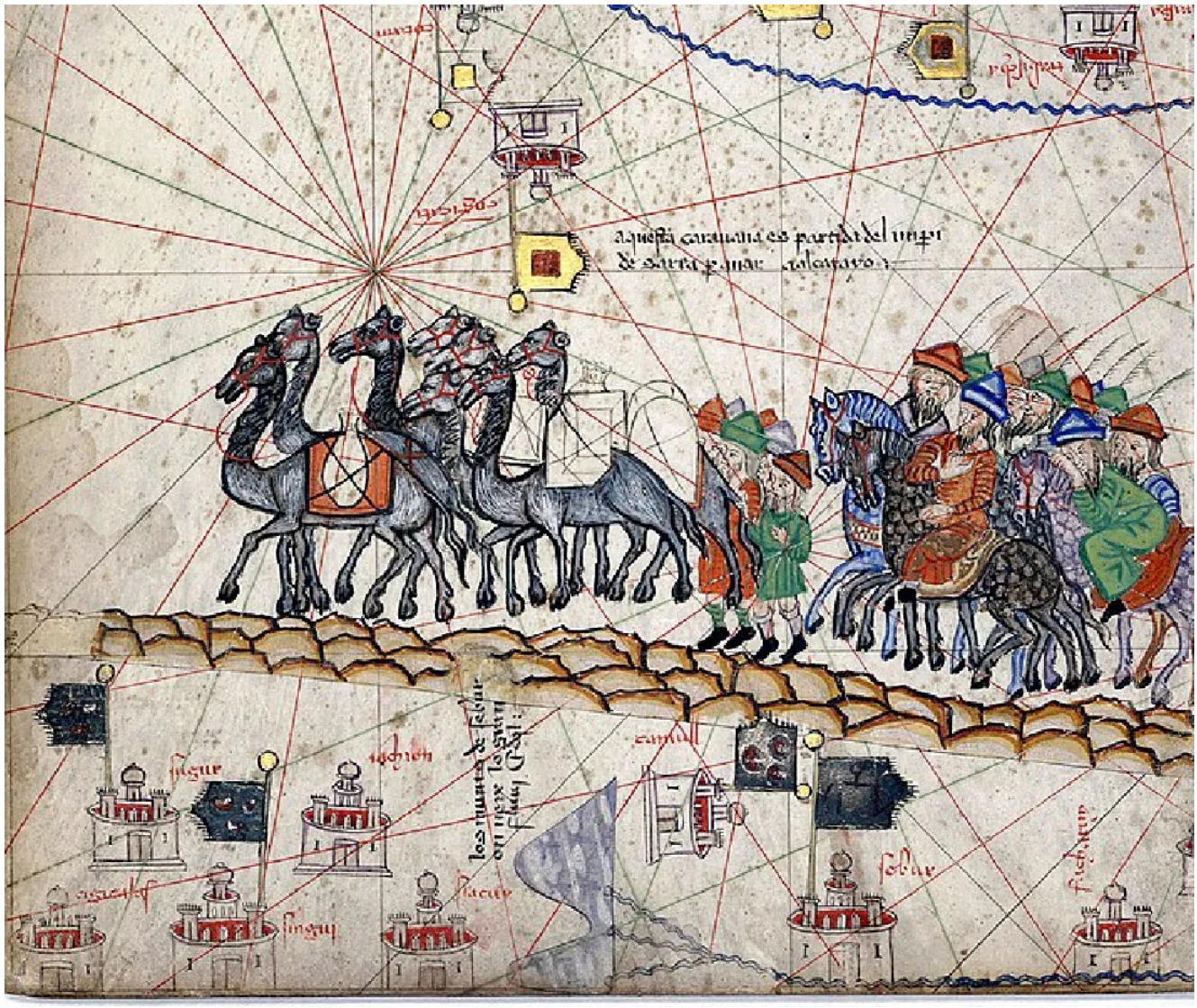


Figure 16.12 Traveling the Silk Roads. This detail from a page of the Mallorquin (meaning “from the island of Majorca off the coast of Spain”) Atlas of 1375 shows the type of trade caravan that traveled through various legs of the Silk Roads journey. Given the length of the route, few merchants covered it in its entirety. (credit: “Caravan on the Silk Road” by Gallica Digital Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Travel was also a common requirement of religious devotion in the tradition of pilgrimage. Muslims desired and were even obligated, by one of the “pillars” of Islam, to complete the hajj, a visit to Mecca and Medina, the holy sites of their faith in modern Saudi Arabia. Many Christian faithful wanted to travel to sacred sites containing relics of the saints, believed to be imbued with special power, and also to the Holy City of Jerusalem, believed to be the site of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection. The surrounding area was the birthplace of the Christian Church. Jerusalem was also the site of the holiest of holies of Judaism, the most sacred of spaces where the Temple of Solomon had stood until its destruction by the Romans.

Beyond the demands of trade and religion, however, travel was far less possible for all but a small elite who could afford the time and expense required. Travel narratives and journals written by the select few who could embark on voyages provide much of our knowledge of premodern travel. In particular, the chronicles of Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan scholar who traveled across much of the Muslim world of Asia and Africa in the fourteenth century, offer much insight into the conditions and challenges travelers faced.

Link to Learning

This interactive web resource from the University of California, Berkeley provides a virtual tour of Ibn Battuta’s travels in the fourteenth century. It also describes their historical context and offers suggested readings and links to related videos and

primary sources.

At the same time, worsening environmental conditions necessitated travel by many who would rarely have ventured beyond their immediate surroundings but now migrated in search of the resources they needed to survive. Leaving behind all that was familiar in the hope of finding a more stable and hospitable environment, they faced a variety of perils, including regional disputes, adverse weather conditions, illness, and banditry. It was difficult to arrange travel between the many different political entities that existed in the fourteenth century, and crossing borders could be exceptionally risky without the security provided by the presence of established networks or patrons, especially when it came to bandits and lack of access to safe waystations to rest. Moreover, at a time when people were struggling to secure basic necessities, travel was very expensive. Horses, carts, camels, and seafaring vessels were beyond the means of most people, so walking became the most common means of transportation for those in search of new opportunities and resources. Walking eight to ten hours a day, on poor roads and at times in poor weather conditions, likely made the experience all the more grueling for migrants who were already malnourished, weak, and vulnerable to opportunistic infections.

Although some people traveled back and forth across borders, the difficulties and expense of fourteenth-century travel made round trips uncommon. Many were forced to abandon their homes knowing they would likely never return. In times of drought and food shortages, these climate refugees faced precarious situations and uncertain prospects. They could become “strangers in strange lands,” foreigners whose unique customs and cultural practices—including religious traditions, dress, and language—marked them as “other” and worthy of scorn.

For those participating in commerce and bringing luxury goods over long distances for sale in faraway markets, however, the experience of travel could be very different. Though merchants and traders too were often seen as “other,” the goods they carried and their need for logistic support along the way, like food and caravansaries (inns along the common trade routes), directly enriched local societies and gave these travelers a different status.

Whether they were pilgrims, refugees, merchants, or soldiers traveling great distances in the premodern world, people on the move brought with them both the goods and traditions of their homelands. In the fourteenth century, an increase in this long-distance travel by a greater swath of people across Afro-Eurasia helped bring new technologies and traditions over geographic and cultural divides, but the desperation of some travelers meant the process was not without tensions. Beyond this, however, a growing threat in the form of infectious disease traveled with them, too, and it soon had a disastrous impact on society even beyond the droughts and famine that had caused many to abandon their homes.

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14.4: The Black Death from East to West

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the origins and characteristics of the bubonic plague
- Describe the response to the Black Death in Asia and North Africa
- Describe the response to the Black Death in Europe

Imagine a world in which medicine was utterly defenseless against a disease that could kill within hours. Vaccines and antibiotics had not yet been discovered, nor was the existence of germs and their role in contagion understood. While treatments existed, their efficacy was limited, and medical knowledge was unequally understood across regions and within class structures. At times, the defenses against illness were prayers, divination, the protective aromas of flowers and spices, and for the select few who could afford to flee heavily populated areas, retreat to the countryside. Such was the world of the Mediterranean basin and Afro-Eurasia in the middle of the fourteenth century when the bubonic plague ravaged central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.

After the plague had run its course by the 1350s, it recurred in cyclical fashion several times during the second half of the fourteenth century. It was never fully eradicated, though subsequent waves were not as deadly as the initial outbreak, with the exception of the Great Plague of London in the 1660s and an especially virulent outbreak that began in China in 1894. Outbreaks have occurred more recently in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but surveillance, preventive measures, early diagnosis, and treatment with antibiotics remain the most effective approaches to preventing its spread.

The Origins and Spread of the Bubonic Plague

The bubonic plague, the most common variant of the disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, raises egg-shaped swellings known as buboes near an afflicted person's lymph nodes in the groin, underarm, and upper neck areas. Other symptoms include fever, nausea, vomiting, aching joints, and general malaise. For the vast majority in the Middle Ages, death generally occurred within three days. The bubonic plague pandemic, which had far-reaching economic, political, social, and cultural effects throughout Afro-Eurasia, came to be known as the Black Death. This name, inspired by the blackened tissue the disease caused on the body, also came to express the fear and awe brought by a disease with a mortality rate ranging from 30 to 80 percent. That is significantly higher than the deadliest smallpox, influenza, and polio pandemics of the modern era. Although in its bubonic form the plague could not be spread from human to human, the rat flea became a major plague vector, an organism that spreads plague from one organism to another.

The black rat was one of the most capable animal hosts for the plague-carrying fleas. It was highly susceptible to the disease itself and an especially inconspicuous stowaway on trade caravans and merchant ships. Cases of bubonic plague proliferated as rats spread through the international shipping and trades routes of the Silk Roads and the Mediterranean Sea, where they colonized crowded dwellings in towns and cities. The spread of the plague only increased owing to the increased movement of people. First it was the Mongol armies, traveling over enormous distances and unintentionally bringing small mammalian stowaways among their foodstuffs. Then, owing to the Mongols' protection of merchants and others traveling great distances during the Pax Mongolica, the disease spread further and in new directions. Finally, those forced to leave their homes for survival amid famine and environmental change created yet another pathway for the disease to spread.

Plague-bearing fleas generally preferred to feed on small rodents such as rats and marmots, but when their rodent hosts succumbed to the plague, they secured their next meal from the nearest human. Two even deadlier variants of the disease eventually emerged during the fourteenth century: pneumonic and septicemic. The pneumonic form directly infected the lungs and was spread from person to person by coughing, with a mortality rate of 95 to 100 percent. The septicemic variant, which resulted from plague bacteria circulating directly into the bloodstream, was invariably fatal and, according to contemporary observers, seemed to kill within hours of the first onset of symptoms. While historians had surmised for many decades that the plague had spread in primarily one form (bubonic) and in one direction (east to west), new evidence increasingly suggests there was a far greater diversity of spread.

Although in many regions where it struck the plague was eventually understood to be contagious, at first the means of transmission were not recognized. Some saw the epidemic as a divine punishment from God, and others speculated that it was caused by a rare conjunction of planets creating noxious atmospheric conditions on Earth. Others blamed foreign travelers, minority religious communities, or vagrants. The desperation incited by the plague's relentless assault often led to scapegoating of marginalized populations, particularly in Europe.

Dueling Voices

The Origins of the Black Death

In the following excerpts are two different historical interpretations of the origins of the Black Death. In the first, medievalist Philip Ziegler discusses the central Asian origins of the fourteenth-century bubonic plague pandemic, arguing that abnormally high death rates near Lake Issyk-Kul point to the pandemic's beginnings. In the second selection, new research by medical historian Monica H. Green strongly suggests the disease first developed in the thirteenth century and was largely misunderstood amid the chaos of the Mongol conquests. Green argues that the plague outbreak of the mid-fourteenth century was actually one of four "explosive proliferations of *Yersinia pestis* into new environments" and that its origins go beyond a simplistic narrative of rats moving westward. As you read, consider what factors might have led each historian to take a particular point of view.

> *Though it is impossible to be categorical about the origins of the medieval pandemic, investigations near Issyk-Kul, a lake in Central Asia, show that there was an abnormally high death rate in 1338 and 1339. Memorial stones attribute the deaths to plague. Since this area is in the heart of one of the zones in which bubonic plague lies endemic, it is likely that this was the cradle of the Black Death. From there it spread eastward into China, south to India, and west to the Crimea some eight years later.*
>
> *—Philip Ziegler, The Black Death*

> *The combined approaches of evolutionary genetics—working from modern isolates of Yersinia pestis and the retrieved genetic fragments of the bacterium reclaimed from its premodern victims—have given new parameters to the history of plague. Currently, the biological archive, which has now yielded over three dozen complete Yersinia pestis genomes in evidence of Europe's late medieval and early modern experience of plague . . . supports the idea that one specific strain of Yersinia pestis . . . entered the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and from there into Europe, in 1347–1348. . . . The climate crises and grain shortages of the early fourteenth century may well explain the intensity of that outbreak. . . . But the (west Eurasian) Black Death, as traditionally defined, was preceded by the terrors experienced at the sieges in Song China and western Asia [by the Mongols] in the thirteenth century. . . . The historian, working with documentary sources, will need to track the humans who are now implicated in plague's spread. In so doing, historians would do well to adopt epidemiologists' neutral stance toward the task of tracking infectious disease: this is not about assigning 'blame.' It is about documenting humans doing what humans do.*
>
> *—Monica H. Green, "The Four Black Deaths"*

- How do Ziegler and Green's arguments about the origins of the plague differ?
- Upon what sources is Green relying for her innovative conclusions?

Many historians have focused almost exclusively on the Black Death's impact on Europe, assuming that other regions were only minimally affected. The Americas and Australia were, indeed, entirely spared due to their geographic isolation. Other areas such as the Indian subcontinent experienced relatively mild outbreaks. However, we now know that the disease's spread affected much of Asia, the Middle East, Europe, North Africa, and possibly some regions of sub-Saharan Africa in what are now Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. And new scientific techniques such as genetic testing are strongly suggesting that the plague developed far earlier than modern historians had believed. In its most well-documented form, it ultimately spread along international sea and land trade routes in the 1340s and by 1409 had reached port cities of the Indian Ocean trade network in East Africa (Figure 16.13). Wherever it went, the Black Death left a trail of demographic destruction and long-term damage to social and economic networks, compounded by the combined effects of drastic climate changes, rebellions, and crop failures that preceded it in many parts of Afro-Eurasia in the early 1300s.

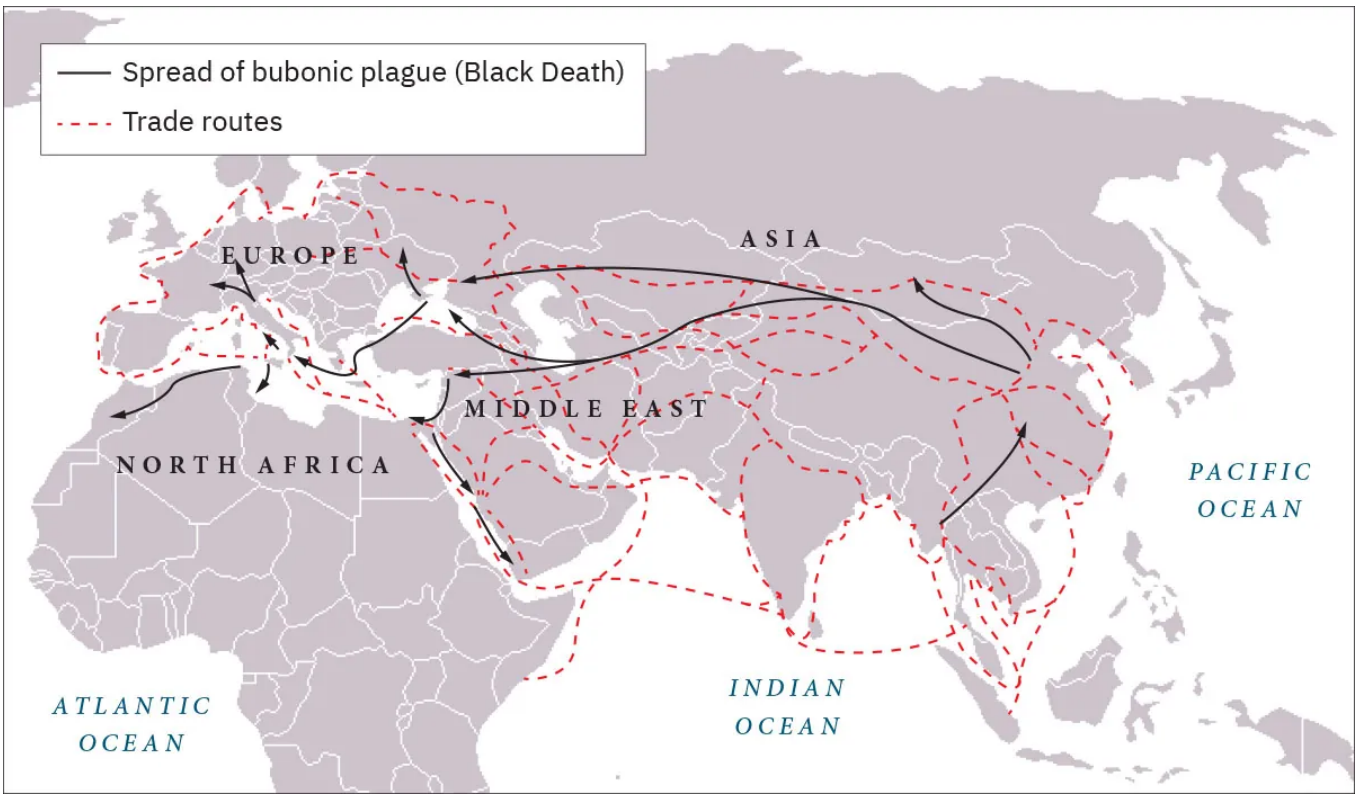


Figure 16.13 Route of the Black Death. This map compares trade routes with the spread of the Black Death across Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. (credit: modification of work "TNM Download (v2.0)" by National Land Cover Database (NLCD)/United States Geological Survey (USGS)/U.S. Department of the Interior, Public Domain)

The Black Death in Asia and North Africa

Although the exact date of the Black Death's arrival in China remains unknown, Chinese historical records first refer to the appearance of a deadly epidemic in the years from 1331 to 1334. The accounts of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, compiled in the late nineteenth century, suggest that roughly thirteen million people perished during this lethal outbreak. For those living in China, the devastation likely seemed to portend the withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven from the rulers of the Yuan dynasty. Epidemics, droughts, and other catastrophes could be perceived as omens of divine displeasure and an indication that a ruler had lost divine support.

After ravaging China, the plague continued to spread west along trade routes by land and sea that eventually enabled it to engulf much of the Middle East. The Il-Khanate was heavily reliant on the trade networks of the Silk Roads and especially vulnerable to the plague's disruption of the trade communities therein. In the midst of a protracted conflict with the Golden Horde, a rival khanate to the north, the Il-Khanate was reeling from the shock of invasion, factional disputes, and the death of the ruler Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan (possibly from plague) in 1335. The plague's devastating impact on trade and the population decline further compounded the deterioration of Il-Khanate Mongol rule after Abu Sa'id's death. Cities such as Tabriz in Iran that had long served

as thriving centers of trade were largely abandoned by the 1340s, when foreign merchants abruptly fled the city and commerce plummeted. To put this into perspective, imagine what would occur if today's most renowned cosmopolitan centers of trade like New York, Tokyo, London, and Hong Kong fell suddenly into ruin as deserted ghost towns.

The decline of Tabriz was truly shocking to contemporary observers, but few cities were spared when infected fleas accompanying trade caravans were readily transported across central Asia and into the Middle East. Although the mortality rate across the Middle East was high, much of our knowledge of the plague's impact in the Muslim world comes from historical documentation of its impact on the Mamluk Empire (1250–1517), which suffered a population loss of roughly one-third.

Under the control of the Mamluk rulers, who were based in Cairo, the trade routes of the Nile delta were hit especially hard. As in Yuan China, the onset of plague in Egypt was intensified by localized famines that disrupted agriculture and sent many rural peasants to large cities like Cairo and Alexandria in search of employment as unskilled wage laborers. Being in these densely populated zones significantly increased their chances of contracting the plague. The nomads of the region had long known to avoid settled areas when strange diseases appeared, and they largely managed to outrun the disease by retreating into the desert. Although some of Cairo's Mamluk elite fled to rural areas north of the city in 1347, most decided to remain and protect their citadel from potential attacks from their rivals. In the process, however, they made themselves vulnerable to the plague and experienced high mortality rates.

Treatises written by Islamic scholars in the 1340s shed some light on the ways in which the Muslim world responded to the suffering. These texts, meant to serve as chronicles of the plague, also provided medical guidance and advice about proper conduct during epidemics. Doctors could neither define nor remedy the disease, so plague texts tended to frame the epidemic with religious explanations and recommendations derived from the Quran and religious law. Typically describing the plague as noncontagious, they instructed readers not to flee from it, declaring it a potential opportunity for martyrdom for faithful Muslims and a warning to infidels sent directly by God.

Other contemporary Arab writers described the plague as an apocalyptic catastrophe that resulted from a breach in the gate that separated humanity from Gog and Magog, the evil forces that, according to tradition, threatened to destroy the faithful. Even given the apocalyptic tone of this account, however, the Muslim response to the plague generally lacked the doomsday predictions and persecution of minorities that occurred in other regions such as Christian Europe. Although many undoubtedly fled the plague in spite of the treatises, Muslim writers tended to emphasize the importance of a collective and controlled response that promoted resignation and acceptance of God's will.

Many formerly thriving industries in Mamluk cities went into deep decline during the plague, but there was a sudden increase in the construction of madrasas, mosques, and tombs, which for those who survived were a means of expressing gratitude. As a result, urban artisans who worked on these tended to be compensated very well for their skill. The only other occupational group in the Mamluk Sultanate that prospered in the wake of the plague was the spice merchants, since Egypt continued to serve as an important depot in the international spice trade. As agriculture and trade in other industries plummeted, however, the golden age of the Mamluk rulers came to an abrupt end in 1341. Although the Mamluks continued to rule until 1517, fierce clashes and ethnic rivalries within their empire created significant political instability that ultimately led to its collapse.

The Black Death in Europe

As the plague began wreaking havoc in the Mamluk Sultanate, it was also making its way to the ports of Europe via Silk Roads trade caravans and merchant ships sailing the Black Sea in 1346–1347. After striking the Mongol-controlled cities of Astrakhan and Sarai (in present-day Russia), when bales of flea-infested marmot fur were unloaded, the plague then traveled down the River Don, where it reached the city of Caffa (present-day Feodosiya, Ukraine), a center of trade on the Crimean Peninsula.

The plague's entry point into Europe, Caffa was also the site of a Mongol siege targeting Genoese traders who had taken refuge in the city. Gabriele de Mussis, an Italian notary clerk who witnessed the siege, wrote a gruesome account of the Mongols' efforts to launch plague-ridden corpses into the city. Although its reliability is difficult to establish, the story nevertheless demonstrates that even though the role of microbes was not yet known, dead bodies were believed to be sources of contagion. But the plague was most likely spread to Caffa by flea-infested rats independent of the Mongol siege. Caffa had long served as an important administrative center of Genoese trade, and its port was a major hub of merchant activity.

From Caffa, the plague made its way to Italy in the summer of 1347, when plague-bearing rats boarded ships headed across the Black Sea, through the Dardanelles, and onward to the ports of Messina and Genoa. From there, the disease was carried to the port of Marseilles and spread into the European interior along rivers, paths, and roads, leaving perhaps as many as twenty-four million dead, roughly 30 percent of the continent's population at the time.

The plague's arrival in Europe occurred after a period of economic contraction following a series of famines and crop failures earlier in the fourteenth century. In the early 1300s, a rising population and a relative decline in agricultural productivity had created an economic crisis and falling standards of living for all but the most privileged elites. For the vast majority of people living at the lower end of the economic spectrum, falling wages led to limited resources, poorer diets, and widespread malnourishment. Well before the plague's arrival in the 1340s, the European population was reeling from years of economic decline and poor nutrition, which may have weakened immune systems and made some people more vulnerable to attacks of infectious disease.

In addition to the demographic and economic impacts of the Black Death era, modes of artistic and literary expression were significantly transformed in response to the plague's devastation. In the visual arts, the fears engendered by the omnipresence of death and decay initiated a new emphasis on realism that grappled with themes of salvation and mortality. Macabre representations of deathbed scenes and dancing skeletons became especially prominent reminders of the inevitability of death and fears of hell and damnation (Figure 16.14). Although the visual iconography of death reflected the collective cultural trauma associated with the plague, it also served as a potent reminder to celebrate life in the face of it.



Figure 16.14 Dance of Death. This fifteenth-century woodcut image from the *Nuremburg Chronicle* of Hartmann Schedel depicts Death dancing and celebrating. The personification of death as a dancing skeleton became a common theme in late medieval Europe that reflects the psychological toll of the Black Death. (credit: "The Dance of Death" by Michael Wolgemut, from the Nuremberg Chronicle of Hartmann Schedel/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Medieval writers also sought to make sense of the Black Death by documenting the experience of living through the pandemic and exploring themes of transience and mortality. For example, in Giovanni Boccaccio's famous collection of novellas, *The Decameron*, a fictional group of young men and women taking refuge from the plague in a villa outside Florence pass the time by

trading stories that reflect upon love, loss, and the vagaries of fortune. *The Decameron* also calls attention to larger social responses engendered by the plague's demographic devastation, such as the growing prominence of merchants due to the continued growth of global trade and people's loss of confidence in the European Christian Church.

Link to Learning

Some of the stories that make up Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* can be read at the Project Gutenberg website.

Although the Christian Church remained a bastion of spiritual solace for many during the Black Death, social responses to the plague in medieval Europe ranged from increased piety to hedonism to resigned acceptance of inevitable death. Those who could afford to do so fled the crowded urban centers, but most did not have this luxury. Medieval European cities remained hotbeds of infection despite the efforts of some Italian cities to impose quarantine and travel restrictions. Some cities even closed markets and prohibited gatherings for funerals; others required the removal of the infected to plague hospitals. Lacking a germ theory of contagion, however, medical practitioners were unable to fully explain or remedy the plague, although centuries of early scientific observations led many to attempt the techniques and approaches that had served in outbreaks of other diseases. Failing to fully grasp how and why the disease was spreading, however, many of the devout turned to the clergy, who were also dying in record numbers, mostly because of their efforts to care for the sick. But they too were unable to prevent the plague's relentless toll.

Although some blamed the plague on earthquakes, astrological forces, or poisonous fog, most people in Christian Europe agreed it was a sign of God's displeasure. In some towns, the belief that communities had to be purged of "morally contaminating people" such as prostitutes and beggars also led to the scapegoating of Jewish people, who were falsely accused of causing the plague by poisoning wells. Regardless of the fact that their communities also suffered from the plague, Jewish people faced widespread persecution, escalating in several cities to full-blown massacres (Figure 16.15). Driven by the fire-and-brimstone dogmatism of late medieval Christianity, those who led the persecution of marginalized populations sought to placate God by building churches, developing cults to plague saints like Saint Roche, and hunting heretics and outsiders they believed had provoked divine displeasure.

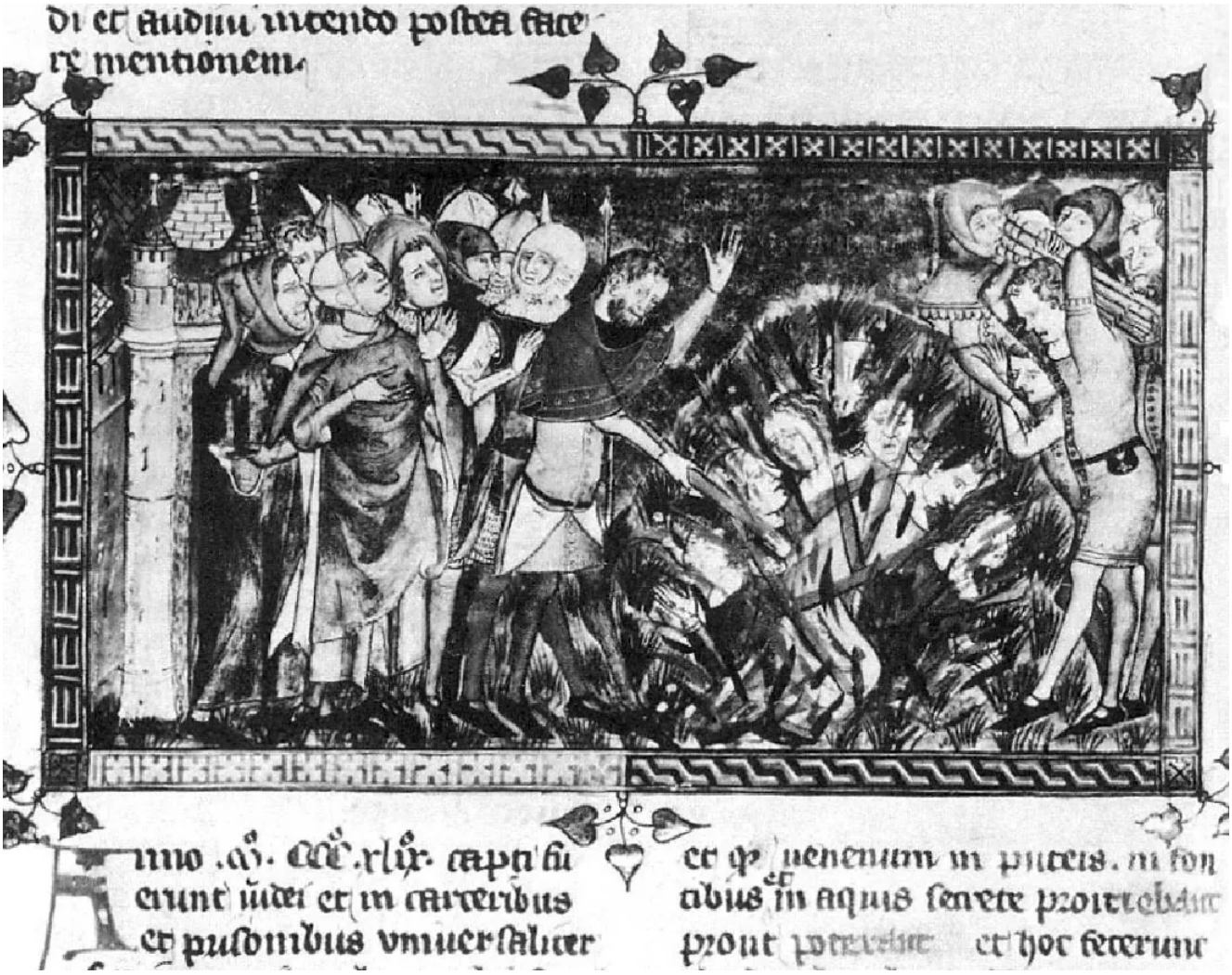


Figure 16.15 Scapegoating in a Pandemic. This image from a fourteenth-century Belgian manuscript shows Jewish people being burned alive on false accusations of spreading the plague. The anti-Semitism inflamed by the Black Death in many parts of medieval Europe sometimes had deadly consequences, and the scapegoating of Jewish and other marginalized communities led to full-blown massacres at times. (credit: modification of work "Burning of Jews during the Black Death epidemic, 1349" by Bibliothèque royale de Belgique from *A History of the Jewish People* by H.H. Ben-Sasson/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

In Their Own Words

Strasbourg during the Black Death

This excerpt from *The Cremation of Strasbourg Jewry St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1349* describe the destruction of the Jewish community in Strasbourg in the time of the Black Death and how city authorities who attempted to defend the city's Jewish population were overwhelmed by an angry mob.

> *In the year 1349 there occurred the greatest epidemic that ever happened. Death went from one end of the earth to the other, on that side and this side of the sea, And from what this epidemic came, all wise teachers and physicians could only say that it was God's will.*
>
> *In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells—that is what they were accused of—and for this reason the*

> *Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there.*
>
> *Nevertheless they tortured a number of Jews in Berne and Zofingen [Switzerland] who then admitted that they had put poison into many wells, and they also found the poison in the wells. Thereupon they burnt the Jews in many towns and wrote of this affair to Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Basel in order that they too should burn their Jews. But the leaders in these three cities in whose hands the government lay did not believe that anything ought to be done to the Jews. However in Basel the citizens marched to the city-hall and compelled the council to take an oath that they would burn the Jews, and that they would allow no Jew to enter the city for the next two hundred years. Thereupon the Jews were arrested in all these places and a conference was arranged to meet at Benfeld Alsace, February 8, 1349. The Bishop of Strasbourg [Berthold II], all the feudal lords of Alsace, and representatives of the three above mentioned cities came there. The deputies of the city of Strasbourg were asked what they were going to do with their Jews. They answered and said that they knew no evil of them. Then they asked the Strasbourgers why they had closed the wells and put away the buckets, and there was a great indignation and clamor against the deputies from Strasbourg. So finally the Bishop and the lords and the Imperial Cities agreed to do away with the Jews. The result was that they were burnt in many cities, and wherever they were expelled they were caught by the peasants and stabbed to death or drowned.*
>
> *—The Cremation of Strasbourg Jewry St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1349*

- According to this source, why did the people of Strasbourg seek to destroy the city's Jewish population in response to the plague?
- Why might a minority community like Strasbourg's Jews become a scapegoat? What does this excerpt suggest about Jewish-Christian relations in this period?

The desperation and zealotry that inspired some responses to the plague in medieval Europe are perhaps best seen in the appearance of flagellants, people who believed that by publicly flogging themselves, they could atone for the sins of humanity and mitigate divine retribution. After this idea originated in Eastern Europe and took root in Germany, the flagellants traveled from town to town, reciting penitential verses and lashing themselves with leather whips until they drew blood. They were usually welcomed by townspeople who hoped they could bring an end to the plague epidemic. Occasionally, their rhetoric took an anti-Semitic turn, accusing the Jewish people of causing the plague to annihilate Christendom. The flagellants were active through much of Europe in the early years of the plague pandemic and may have even spread the disease through their contaminated blood. As a result of their increasingly radical orientation, however, by 1349 flagellants had been officially condemned by Pope Clement VI, and they ultimately faded into oblivion in the fifteenth century.

The plague left each region it affected with long-term economic and demographic consequences, including widespread depopulation and cyclic outbreaks of the disease in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Old systems of belief came into question, and ancient social hierarchies shifted to accommodate the significant population losses that followed the plague. Peasants, laborers, and those at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy tended to experience the greatest mortality, but for those who survived, pronounced labor shortages led to the demise of some industries and more favorable working conditions in others. The disadvantaged began to question whether social elites really did enjoy God's privilege, as the social hierarchy generally preached, since they too succumbed to the plague and failed to care for those to whom they bore responsibility.

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14.5: The Long-Term Effects of Global Transformation

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe how the challenges of the fourteenth century affected the structure of European society
- Explain the reaction of religious communities throughout Afro-Eurasia to the challenges of the fourteenth century

As they recovered from plague, famine, and political conflict, people across many regions during the fourteenth century took the opportunity to rebuild and rebound. Although some empires fell and once-thriving trade routes were abandoned, other entities emerged to take their place and establish the foundations of a truly modern global society. As the crises of the fourteenth century came to an end, geopolitical boundaries shifted, religions expanded into many new areas, and social traditions transformed to meet the needs of an ever-expanding world. Many social and political structures of the fourteenth century, such as the Mongols' dominance and the economic and land-ownership conventions that made up the feudal system, ultimately ceased to exist. Although it may be tempting to assume the modern world has little in common with the fourteenth century, the growth of globalization—the interconnectedness of societies and economies throughout the world as a result of trade, technology, and the adoption and sharing of various aspects of culture—defined the later medieval period and the fourteenth century in particular as transregional exchange continued to expand.

Economic and Social Changes in Europe

Just as political entities and empires broke down or evolved over the course of the fourteenth century, so too did the social structures and hierarchies that defined much of the medieval period, especially in western Europe. In many medieval cities, the merchant class began to acquire increasing wealth and power, while in the countryside the political and social pyramid known as feudalism began to weaken. Feudalism had been defined by a small elite group of hereditary landowners governing the lives of the peasants known as serfs who worked their lands. In exchange for the privilege, serfs paid rent in the form of labor, which generally kept them tied to the land in servitude with little income to spare. This dependent relationship began to disintegrate, however, in the wake of the Great Famine, Black Death, and Hundred Years' War.

Given massive depopulation and the loss of resources they needed to survive, people increasingly chose to leave locations to which they had formerly been anchored. Peasants left the feudal estates on which their families had lived for generations, as landlords elsewhere offered more generous terms of labor to attract workers who could replace the dead. Many peasants also left the countryside to seek wage labor and employment in cities, which began experiencing significant labor shortages as a result of the plague's staggering death toll. Because the demand for labor was so high, peasants who remained in the countryside, especially males, were now able to press their employers for more money and rights.

However, power did not suddenly shift away from the noble landowners in favor of the peasantry and common people. European rulers sought to restore the status quo and ensure the nobility had sufficient access to peasant labor by passing laws that fixed wages at pre–Black Death levels. In 1349, an English law required laborers to accept wages at the level that would have been paid in 1346. Two years later, England's 1351 Statute of Labourers required all unemployed and able-bodied people under sixty years of age to accept whatever work was offered to them. Similar laws were enacted elsewhere in Europe.

In towns, where labor shortages were also a problem, rules requiring guild membership for artisans seeking to practice their crafts were often relaxed, making it easier for newcomers to engage in craft production. Guild masters often responded to the need for labor by shortening the time that apprentices had to serve, which may have helped to attract willing young men to their shops. The same masters, however, often changed the rules of their guild so that only the sons and sons-in-law of current masters could become masters themselves. The enterprising peasant might thus be able to find an apprenticeship in a trade, but he would not be able to advance to the highest level and become an independent master or the employer of others.

The Past Meets the Present

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Although the devastation of the Black Death may seem difficult to fathom in an era with access to modern scientific knowledge and medical technologies, COVID-19 clearly overwhelmed contemporary public health systems across the globe in 2020–2021. Far more than a health crisis, the pandemic has also had disastrous social and economic effects. In addition to causing significant loss of life worldwide, it has disrupted global supply chains, food systems, and the world of work. The global recession of 2020 was the deepest since the culmination of World War II. Millions of people remain at risk of falling into extreme poverty, particularly in low-income countries. According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed more than eighty-eight million people in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa into poverty in 2020 alone.

In addition to its impact on health and economic systems more generally, the pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities of the global food system. Border closures, quarantine measures, and trade restrictions made it more difficult for workers to harvest crops and for farmers to reach their markets, leaving many people with reduced access to healthful and affordable food. And as millions of wage earners lost jobs or fell ill, rates of food insecurity and malnourishment continued to increase, while the logistic system through which goods traveled became strained, and many essentials became much harder to find.

The COVID-19 pandemic also radically altered the patterns of human interaction as social distancing requirements transformed everyday routines and forced many to avoid family members, friends, schools, workplaces, stores, and support networks and even to suspend their routine health care. The psychological effects of quarantine, financial loss, and infection fears led to a worsening of chronic health problems, increased substance use, and elevated risk of adverse mental health outcomes including depression.

- How would you compare the experience of living through the modern global pandemic of COVID-19 to the fourteenth century's experience of the plague?
- Considering the effects of both the plague and the COVID-19 pandemic, what can we say about the positives and negatives of an increasingly globalized world?

Link to Learning

The experience of infectious disease can be different depending on a variety of factors, especially access to wealth. While diseases do not discriminate between the poor and the rich, our ability to avoid exposure does. This article from TheConversation.com provides some fascinating contrasts between the Black Death pandemic in the fourteenth century and the COVID-19 global pandemic in the modern world.

Emboldened by the shift in power and angered when the nobility attempted to limit their economic opportunities, peasants launched rebellions that further damaged the foundations of feudalism by calling into question the lords' traditional privileges. These popular revolts, such as the Jacquerie (a French word for a particular type of garment that came to be associated with peasants and peasant uprisings) of northern France in 1358 and the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, included not only peasants but also merchants, craftspeople, and other common people. Although the landowning elites ultimately prevailed in most of these clashes, their role was changing rapidly. With fewer people to work their land and generate income for them, their collective wealth contracted significantly. The power of local nobles and landowners was also being eclipsed by more powerful monarchs and emerging urban economies that bolstered the growth of towns and cities.

In addition, the death of many members of the clergy during the Black Death made monarchs more dependent on the merchant class to perform services for which education was required. The rising prominence of the merchant class that resulted, coupled with the growing centralization of monarchical power, gradually eroded some of the traditional privileges and prerogatives of landed elites. Although some regions of the continent, particularly the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire, remained a largely decentralized and fragmented collection of principalities, by the end of the fourteenth century, England and France had begun to lay the foundations of the centralized modern nation-state to replace the power of the nobles.

Another impetus for the rise of centralized monarchies and the reduction of the nobility's authority was the Hundred Years' War. This conflict not only reinforced budding notions of national identity, but it also changed the nature of warfare and minimized the nobles' traditional military role as expensively trained and outfitted cavalry officers. The use of new weapons and tactics rendered the cavalry-focused armies of the feudal era all but obsolete, because large professional standing armies paid for by monarchs could defeat mounted knights with the use of the longbow. Thus, the new type of warfare chipped away at the traditional feudal

prerogatives and prestige of social elites. The growth of professional armies also offered peasants the potential for social mobility, because they were able to earn a regular wage for military service while also sharing in the spoils of war.

Ultimately, the combination of depopulation, shifting military practices, and centralization of monarchical power led to the demise of feudalism. Although profound social disparities persisted in the wake of its decline, increased opportunities for social mobility and the emergence of centralized monarchical bureaucracies began to erode the feudal divide between commoners, serfs, nobles, and the wealthiest landowners.

Religious Changes

Anxieties about spiritual redemption and conflicting doctrinal interpretations generated many transformations in religious life across Afro-Eurasia in the fourteenth century. While some religions splintered into subdivisions focused on reinforcing their own doctrinal purity and conformity of belief, others expanded in the face of adversity. In the wake of the plague and the demoralizing collapse of the Mongol Empire, for example, Islamic traditions in much of North Africa and central Asia did not deteriorate but increasingly solidified into institutional forms that helped develop a sense of common identity across a broad territory (Figure 16.16). To maintain this sense of community, Muslim scholars routinely corresponded with each other and traveled to Mecca to keep up with the latest theological teachings.

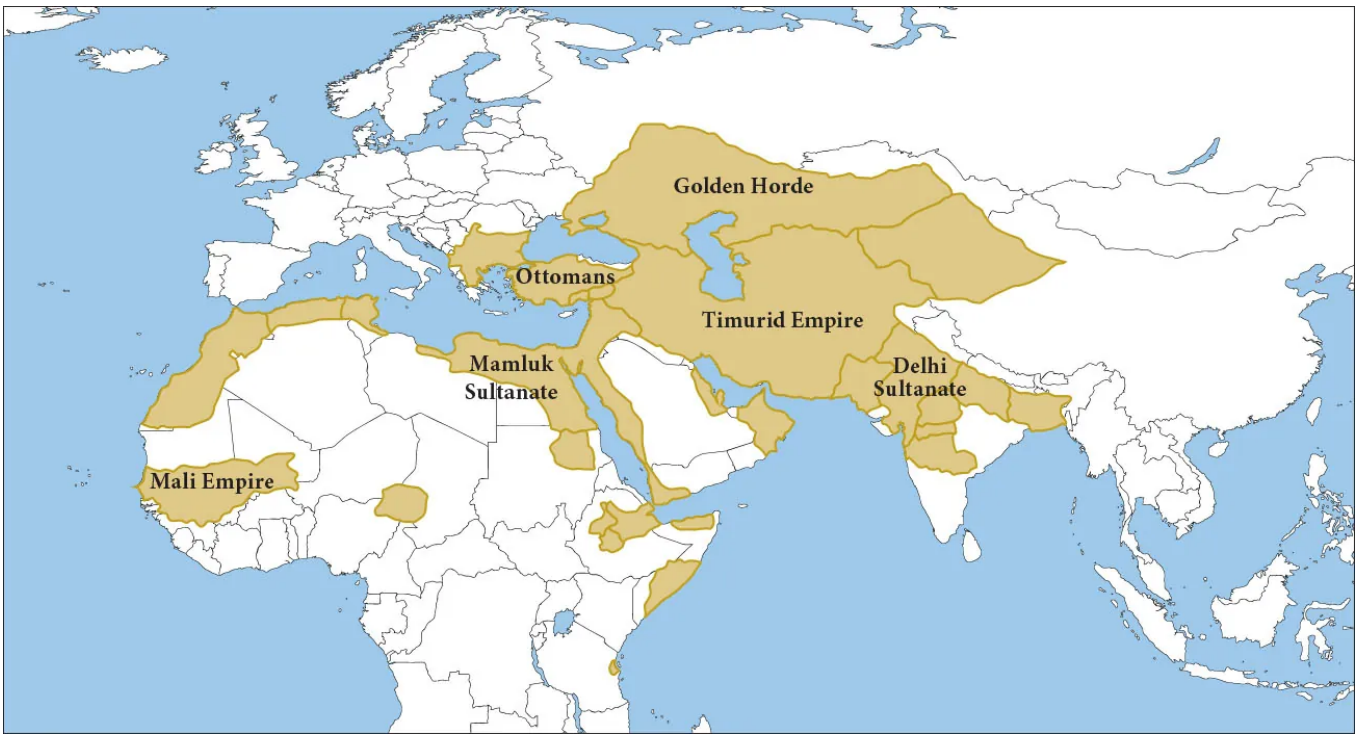


Figure 16.16 The Late Fourteenth-Century Islamic World. The shaded areas in this map depict the extent of the largest Islamic states at end of the fourteenth century. Despite the challenges of the Black Death and the Mongols' conquest and decline, Islam's scope and influence continued to expand into Africa and Asia in the fifteenth century. (credit: modification of work "TNM Download (v2.0)" by National Land Cover Database (NLCD)/United States Geological Survey (USGS)/U.S. Department of the Interior, Public Domain)

The Quran and the Hadith (the recorded actions and sayings of Muhammed) remained central components of all varieties of Islam, but different interpretations of ritual and the role of the mystical experience increasingly defined the contours of its myriad branches. In particular, Sufism, a mystical form of Islam that had first emerged in the eighth century, became increasingly integrated into everyday religious life. Although it could be expressed in a variety of ways, Sufism's emphasis on inner personal contemplation and the believer's connection with the divine became especially compelling during the period of instability and uncertainty following the collapse of the Il-Khanate.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the majority of the population from North Africa to eastern Persia was Muslim. This community of the faithful was increasingly defined by its diversity of languages and cultures. But allegiance to a shared historical

tradition and set of core beliefs provided unity and coherence, as did believers' social networks, schools, and mosques. This cohesion and continued growth enabled Islam to expand into sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, setting the stage for Muslim ascendancy in the fifteenth century.

While Islam spread across central and southern Asia, China focused on recovering its religious and philosophical traditions after years of Mongol rule. Thus, the Ming era represented a period of introspection and isolation. Zhu Di took the imperial title of Yongle emperor and ruled from 1402 to 1424 as the third emperor of the Ming dynasty. He reinstated Confucian-based rituals and learning by sponsoring the compilation of a massive encyclopedia that incorporated writing from thousands of Confucian scholars. Although Confucianism coexisted with Buddhism and Daoism in Ming China, it effectively complemented these traditions rather than competing with them.

Meanwhile, western Europe was grappling with emerging cracks in the foundations of Christianity, its principal religious tradition. By the end of the fourteenth century, leadership crises associated with the Avignon papacy and the Great Western Schism had badly damaged the papacy's reputation and led many to question the church's piety and integrity. After the conclusion of the Great Schism, some attempts were made to resolve such doubts and misgivings by granting more authority to councils of clergy rather than popes through the conciliar movement. Although this movement offered some hope that the church could be reformed from within, it met with severe resistance from popes who insisted on absolute papal supremacy.

Beyond their larger misgivings about the integrity of church leadership, however, many Christians who survived the trauma of the Black Death were primarily concerned with their own salvation and the church's inability to appease God's anger or mitigate the plague's devastation. As a result, new forms of mystical and individualistic spiritual practices emerged that emphasized *asceticism*, a tradition of strict self-discipline and the denial of worldly goods, and that encouraged the rise of anticlerical groups such as the Spiritual Franciscans in Italy and the Lollards in England. Through their critiques of clerical wealth and corruption, these groups posed significant challenges to the authority of the church. Although the leaders of many anticlerical organizations were deemed heretics and suppressed by church leaders, they nevertheless laid the groundwork for the sixteenth-century religious revolution known as the Protestant Reformation. Born in central Europe, the Reformation came to emphatically divide the Christian Church.

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14.6: Key Terms

Black Death
a pandemic of the plague caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* with far-reaching economic, political, social, and cultural effects that transformed Asia, Europe, and North Africa in the fourteenth century

flagellants
penitents who ritually flogged themselves in response to the Black Death as a means of appeasing God and mitigating the spread of the disease

globalization
the interconnectedness of societies and economies throughout the world as a result of trade, technology, and the adoption and sharing of various aspects of culture

Golden Bull
a document issued by the Holy Roman emperor Charles IV in 1356 that recognized the role of seven princes in electing Holy Roman emperors

Great Western Schism
the period from 1378 to 1417 during which three men simultaneously served as pope of the Roman Catholic Church in western Europe

historical climatology
the study of historical temperature and climate changes and their effects on human society

Little Ice Age
a period in the early fourteenth century during which global mean temperatures dropped an average of 0.6°C, resulting in droughts and decreased agricultural productivity

Medieval Warm Period
a time of more temperate climate across the globe from the tenth through the thirteenth century

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14.7: Section Summary

16.1 Asia, North Africa, and Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century

The fourteenth century was a time of profound political change across Afro-Eurasia. From the rise of the Yuan dynasty to the emergence of the Il-Khanate, the Mongol Empire began the fourteenth century in a period of growth and expansion. By the end of the century, however, plague, revolts, rebellion, and crises of authority had led to the decline of the once-massive empire. Elsewhere in Europe, conflict between England and France and the fragmented political structure of the Holy Roman Empire led to a deeply divided continent ready for change.

16.2 Famine, Climate Change, and Migration

The field of historical climatology has enabled historians to combine analyses of written sources with data about the ecological environment of the past. Thus, we know that at the beginning of the fourteenth century, a prolonged period of temperate climate was followed by a devastating period of lower temperatures and substantial changes in precipitation in the Northern Hemisphere that wiped out crops and led to widespread droughts and famines. Many were forced to migrate in search of the basic necessities of life.

16.3 The Black Death from East to West

From the 1340s to the 1350s, the Black Death unleashed a wave of death and devastation across Afro-Eurasia. This global pandemic of bubonic plague not only resulted in significant population loss, but it also led to profound social and economic transformation. The formerly thriving cities of the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt quickly deteriorated, and in Europe, the psychological toll of the plague's trauma led many to question the traditional privileges of the clergy and nobility. Although afflicted regions of Afro-Eurasia eventually recovered from the plague's devastating impact, the Black Death radically altered the course of human history.

16.4 The Long-Term Effects of Global Transformation

The challenges and crises of the fourteenth century generated many social and cultural changes as the societies of Afro-Eurasia sought to recover and rebuild. The Ming dynasty represented an era of introspection during which traditional practices and beliefs such as Confucianism were reestablished to shed China of Mongol influence. Islam continued to expand across central Asia and North Africa, incorporating many new cultural traditions and regions into the community of believers. In Europe, growing anxiety about the church's leadership led to further stirrings of reformation that crystallized in the sixteenth century. While England and France squared off in the battles of the Hundred Years' War, peasants acquired some status and power as feudalism declined across western Europe. In each of the regions of Afro-Eurasia, the challenges of the fourteenth century created a climate of change that laid the foundations of the modern world.

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14.8: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What was unique about the Yuan dynasty in Chinese history?

a. The entire Chinese state was ruled by someone not of Chinese ancestry.
b. Confucianism was fully embraced throughout the Mongol Empire.
c. There were no rebellions or revolts.
d. China closed its borders to foreign trade for the next several hundred years.

2.
Following the conversion of the Il-Khanate ruler Ghazan to Islam in 1295, what occurred in the Il-Khanate?

a. Intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims became illegal.
b. Muslim subjects were required to adopt the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols.
c. Il-Khanate rulers embraced Islamic culture and civilization.
d. Buddhism became the most widely practiced and embraced religion in the Il-Khanate.

3.
How did Mongol leaders of the Il-Khanate become less distinct from their Muslim subjects in the fourteenth century?

a. They intermarried with their subjects.
b. They required their subjects to adopt traditional Mongol shamanistic beliefs.
c. They chose to live in the same neighborhoods as the peasants.
d. They replaced all languages and traditions in their realm with newly developed ones.

4.
How did the Golden Bull clarify the process of selecting a new Holy Roman emperor?

a. It declared that Holy Roman emperors would be selected by hereditary succession.
b. It declared that only popes would be eligible to serve as Holy Roman emperors.
c. It declared that the Holy Roman emperors would be required to reside in Rome.
d. It declared that seven princes known as electors would select the Holy Roman emperor.

5.
How did the period of the Avignon papacy affect the church in western Europe?

a. It represented the growing power of secular monarchs and a weakening of papal authority.
b. It enabled the pope to become the king of France.
c. It marked a period during which the pope refused to travel to the city of Avignon.
d. It encouraged many Europeans to abandon Christianity.

6.
What did the Golden Bull attempt to clarify?

a. The order of hereditary succession to the position of Holy Roman emperor.
b. The nature of the Holy Roman emperor’s duty to the pope.
c. The method of electing the Holy Roman emperor.
d. The assessment of taxes in the Holy Roman Empire.

7.
The simultaneous appointment of three popes in 1378 began the period in the history of the Catholic Church known as what?

a. the Conciliar Period
b. the Avignon papacy
c. the East–West Division
d. the Great Western Schism

8.
What may have caused the Little Ice Age, a period of global cooling during the fourteenth century?

a. overpopulation and the growth of cities

b. a lack of adequate livestock on farmlands
c. volcanic eruptions and changes in the earth's orbit
d. the encroachment of humans on land in the Arctic

9.
What subject for analysis has the field of historical climatology incorporated into the investigation of historical climate change?

a. fossilized firewood
b. tree ring data
c. weapons used by premodern armies
d. remnants of medieval clothing

10.
The Great Famine of 1315–1317 primarily affected what regions?

a. northern Europe
b. Central Africa
c. Southeast Asia
d. the Mediterranean

11.
What caused many fourteenth-century people to migrate from their homes in search of more hospitable conditions?

a. the low cost of travel in the medieval period
b. the widespread availability of horses and carts
c. an enormous growth in available wealth across the social hierarchy
d. worsening environmental conditions

12.
What was the primary factor that made travel in the fourteenth century far more difficult than today?

a. a lack of interest in leaving the homeland
b. the high cost and limited modes of transportation
c. the difficulty of traveling with children
d. the need to first obtain permission from the king or emperor

13.
What did most medieval people believe was the cause of the Black Death?

a. insect vectors
b. religious, astrological, and supernatural factors
c. lack of cleanliness
d. a comprehensive germ theory

14.
What was true of the plague's impact on the world of the fourteenth century?

a. It began to have a significant impact only when it reached Europe.
b. China was the only region in the world the plague did not reach.
c. The plague had a devastating impact on Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.
d. The disease originated in Australia, where it decimated the population before reaching China.

15.
What was the principal means of the plague's spread?

a. the use of shared medicine
b. contaminated water supplies
c. small rodents traveling with foodstuffs and other transported goods
d. rabid dog bites

16.
What trade route played a pivotal role in enabling the plague to spread from central Asia to western Europe and North Africa?

a. the Silk Roads

b. the trade caravans of Sub-Saharan Africa
c. commercial networks of the Rhine River
d. merchant ships of the North Sea

17.
The 1330s marked the beginning of the plague's appearance in which regions?

a. the Mongol Empire and China
b. Egypt and Libya
c. Italy and France
d. Ethiopia and Tanzania

18.
Following the Black Death, the decline of feudalism in western Europe was hastened by what factor?

a. Nobles became so wealthy that they no longer relied on peasant labor.
b. The Christian Church abolished the practice of servitude.
c. Monarchs began to appropriate feudal lands for the construction of plague hospitals.
d. Many peasants left rural areas in search of employment in towns and cities.

19.
How did Ming emperors such as Zhu Di seek to restore Chinese cultural traditions after the overthrow of the Mongol Yuan dynasty?

a. by reinforcing the role of Confucianism
b. by requiring their subjects to practice Daoism exclusively
c. by creating a new religion known as Mingism
d. by levying steep fines on all non-Chinese residents

20.
What mystical Islamic tradition emphasized inner personal contemplation?

a. Shamanism
b. Buddhism
c. Sufism
d. Shiʿism

21.
To address labor shortages caused by the Black Death, countries like England passed laws regulating workers'_____.

a. hours
b. wages
c. working conditions
d. religious preferences

22.
How did the lack of laborers in towns and cities affect the European social structure?

a. It made it easier for people to set up craft shops, undermining the guild system.
b. It led to an increase in female artisans and business owners.
c. It reduced the size of the merchant class.
d. It led towns to pass laws forbidding apprentices to move elsewhere.

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14.9: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
Why did the Yuan leaders select China as the center of their empire?
2.
Why did England and France engage in the series of conflicts known as the Hundred Years' War?
3.
What events weakened the power of the papacy in western Europe in the fourteenth century?
4.
What types of methods have historical climatologists used to learn about the history of climate change?
5.
What are some key differences between fourteenth-century and modern travel patterns?
6.
How were different regions affected by the climate changes of the Little Ice Age?
7.
What role did trade and commercial networks play in the spread of the bubonic plague?
8.
How did responses to the plague differ in Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East?
9.
What conditions made populations more vulnerable to infectious disease?
10.
How did the social structures and hierarchies that defined much of western medieval Europe shift in the aftermath of the Black Death?
11.
How did the calamities of the fourteenth century affect religious life in Afro-Eurasia?

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14.10: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
How did the events of the fourteenth century contribute to the destabilization of the Europe?
2.
What comparisons can you draw among the various political transformations and crises of authority that occurred across Afro-Eurasia in the fourteenth century? How were they similar, and how were they different?
3.
Compare the Mongol establishment of rule in China to their establishment of the Il-Khanate in the Middle East. What actions did the Mongol conquerors of these regions take that likely angered or alienated the inhabitants of these regions? In which area were the Mongols more likely to have peaceful relationships with the inhabitants? Why?
4.
How did climate change affect European culture and society in the fourteenth century? In what ways are these effects similar to (or different from) the ways in which climate change affects societies in the twenty-first century?
5.
For what reasons did people travel or migrate from one region to another in the fourteenth century? Do people travel or migrate for the same reasons today? Why or why not?
6.
Although germs do not select hosts based on their social status or relative wealth, how might such factors in the premodern world have influenced an individual's exposure and vulnerability to infectious diseases such as the plague? How do they affect the likelihood that people will contract infectious diseases today?
7.
Many people have compared the COVID-19 pandemic to the bubonic plague pandemic of the fourteenth century. What similarities do you see between the two? What are some of the differences? In what ways is the modern world better able to cope with pandemics?
8.
Were the political, social, and religious changes of the fourteenth century inevitable? Why or why not?
9.
If you were a peasant in Afro-Eurasia during the fourteenth century, how do you think you would seek to explain the upheaval that had occurred in your lifetime?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

15: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming

15.1: Introduction
15.2: The Ottomans and the Mongols
15.3: From the Mamluks to Ming China
15.4: Gunpowder and Nomads in a Transitional Age
15.5: Key Terms
15.6: Section Summary
15.7: Review Questions
15.8: Check Your Understanding Questions
15.9: Application and Reflection Questions

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15.1: Introduction

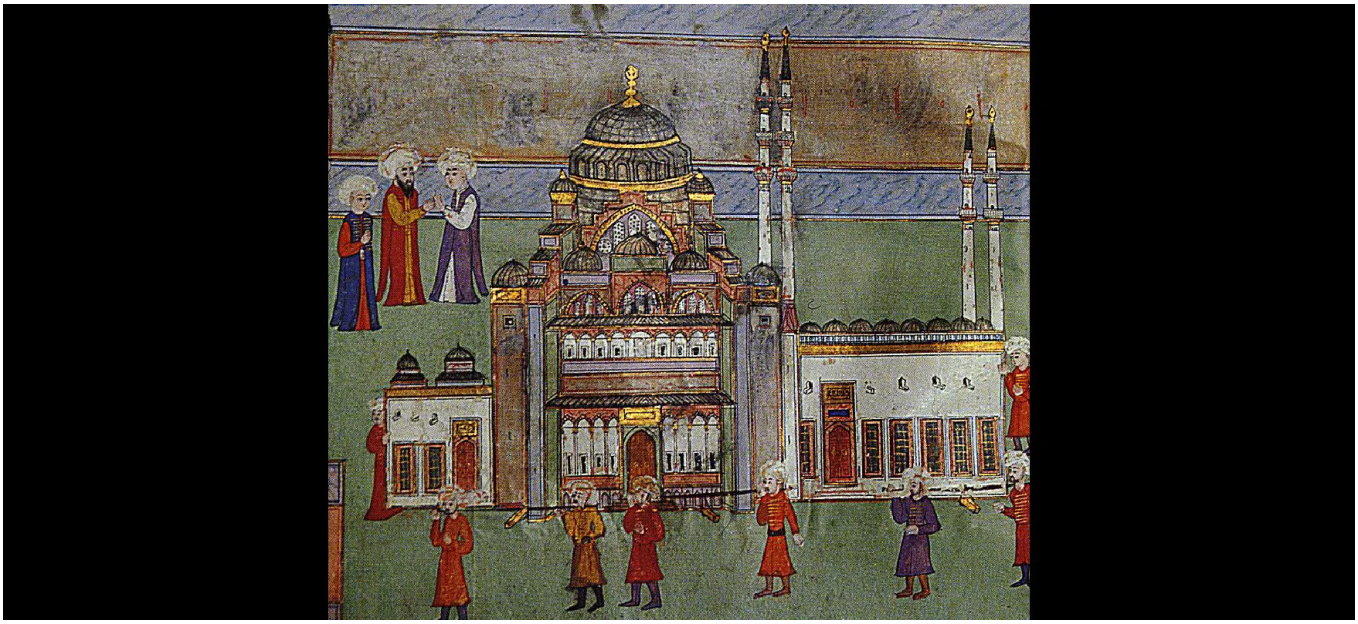
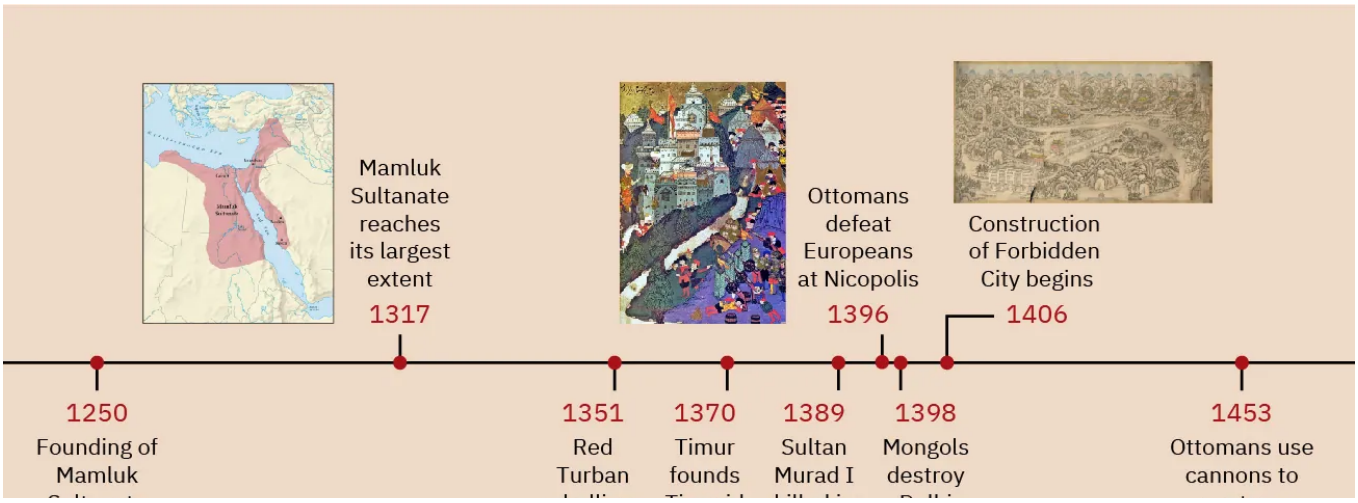


Figure 17.1 Suleymaniye Mosque. The Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul, depicted here in an Ottoman miniature, structurally resembles the Greek Orthodox church Hagia Sophia in the same city. Its dome is intentionally higher however, in an effort to surpass the achievement of the Byzantine emperor Justinian who had it constructed and proclaimed that by erecting Hagia Sophia, he had outdone the Israelite king Solomon's construction of the temple to the one God in Jerusalem. (credit: modification of work "The carrying-in of a model of Süleymaniye Mosque (Detail from Surname-i Hümayun)" by Nakkaş Osman/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Chapter Outline

17.1 The Ottomans and the Mongols
17.2 From the Mamluks to Ming China
17.3 Gunpowder and Nomads in a Transitional Age

The Ottomans rose to prominence at the end of what historians call the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period, arriving on the scene in the thirteenth century. In defeating the Byzantine Empire, the last remnant of ancient Rome, the Ottoman Empire became a gatekeeper between East and West, occupying a central position politically, economically, and culturally in Eurasia. The meeting of the two worlds is represented in the architecture of Istanbul's Suleymaniye Mosque, which combines Islamic architectural elements such as minarets with a large central dome popularized in ancient Mediterranean temples and churches such as the Hagia Sophia in the same city (Figure 17.1). Hagia Sophia itself was transformed into a mosque by Mehmed the Conqueror when the city fell to Ottoman forces in 1453.



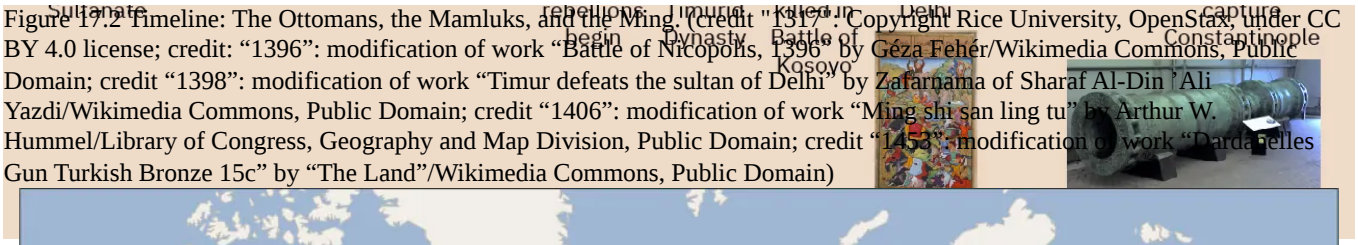


Figure 17.2 Timeline: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming. (credit "1317": Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license; credit: "1396": modification of work "Battle of Nicopolis, 1396" by Géza Fehér/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1398": modification of work "Timur defeats the sultan of Delhi" by Zafarnama of Sharaf Al-Din 'Ali Yazdi/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit "1406": modification of work "Ming shi san ling tu" by Arthur W. Hummel/Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Public Domain; credit "1453": modification of work "Dardanelles Gun Turkish Bronze 15c" by "The Land"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

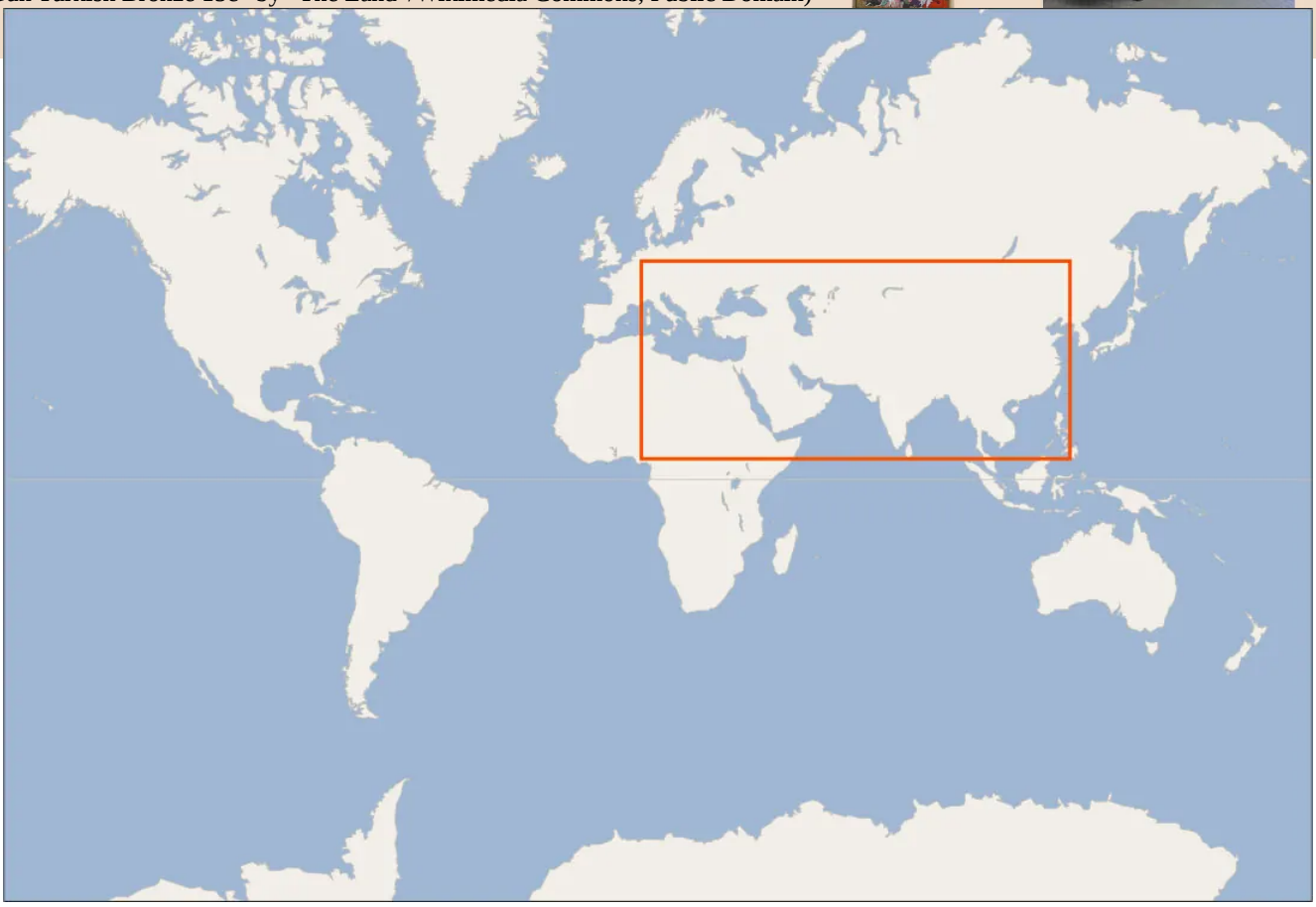


Figure 17.3 Locator Map: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming. (credit: modification of work "World map blank shorelines" by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

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15.2: The Ottomans and the Mongols

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the origins of the Ottoman Empire
- Describe how the conflict between the Ottomans and Timur influenced the development of the Ottoman state
- Describe the effect of the conquest of the Byzantine Empire on Europe and the Ottoman Empire
- Describe the intellectual, cultural, and artistic developments of the Renaissance

As the people of western Europe remade their societies following the collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire, the Byzantines in the east preserved Roman cultural practices for centuries, seeing themselves always as the continuation of a proud and strong Mediterranean empire. By the eleventh century, however, the Byzantines found their power challenged by the arrival of Turkic tribes such as the Seljuks, who settled in the eastern half of their domains and gradually wrested control of the area from them. As different Turkic tribes arrived and settled in the region, one group, the Ottomans, soon rose to prominence over others. Withstanding the last major Mongol onslaught, the Ottomans went on to dominate Asia Minor, invade Europe, and eventually deprive the Byzantines of their last remnants of power. The fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 sent many Greek scholars and theologians fleeing to the city-states of Italy, where they contributed to the intellectual and artistic transformation of western Europe in the period known as the Renaissance. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Ottomans had transformed the eastern Mediterranean.

Ottoman Growth

With an empire that bordered both the western and eastern worlds, the Ottoman Turks began to play an important role in Asian and European affairs in the thirteenth century. They were not the first Turkic-speaking people to do so, however. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, a group of Turkic speakers from central Asia arrived first through the Iranian plateau before continuing westward into the area that is now modern Turkey. This group, called the Seljuks after their ruler, converted to Islam in the tenth century. Accomplished archers and riders, they were originally employed by the armies of the Islamic Karakhanid and Ghaznavid dynasties of central Asia before carving out an empire of their own in Persia, Mesopotamia, and eastern Asia Minor. Seizing control of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire and home to the Sunni caliph, in 1055, the Seljuks came to regard themselves as defenders of the Islamic faith and established the Seljuk Empire. Defeating the forces of the Byzantine Empire in 1071 at the Battle of Manzikert in eastern Anatolia (another name for Asia Minor), the Seljuks soon dominated that region as well (Figure 17.4).



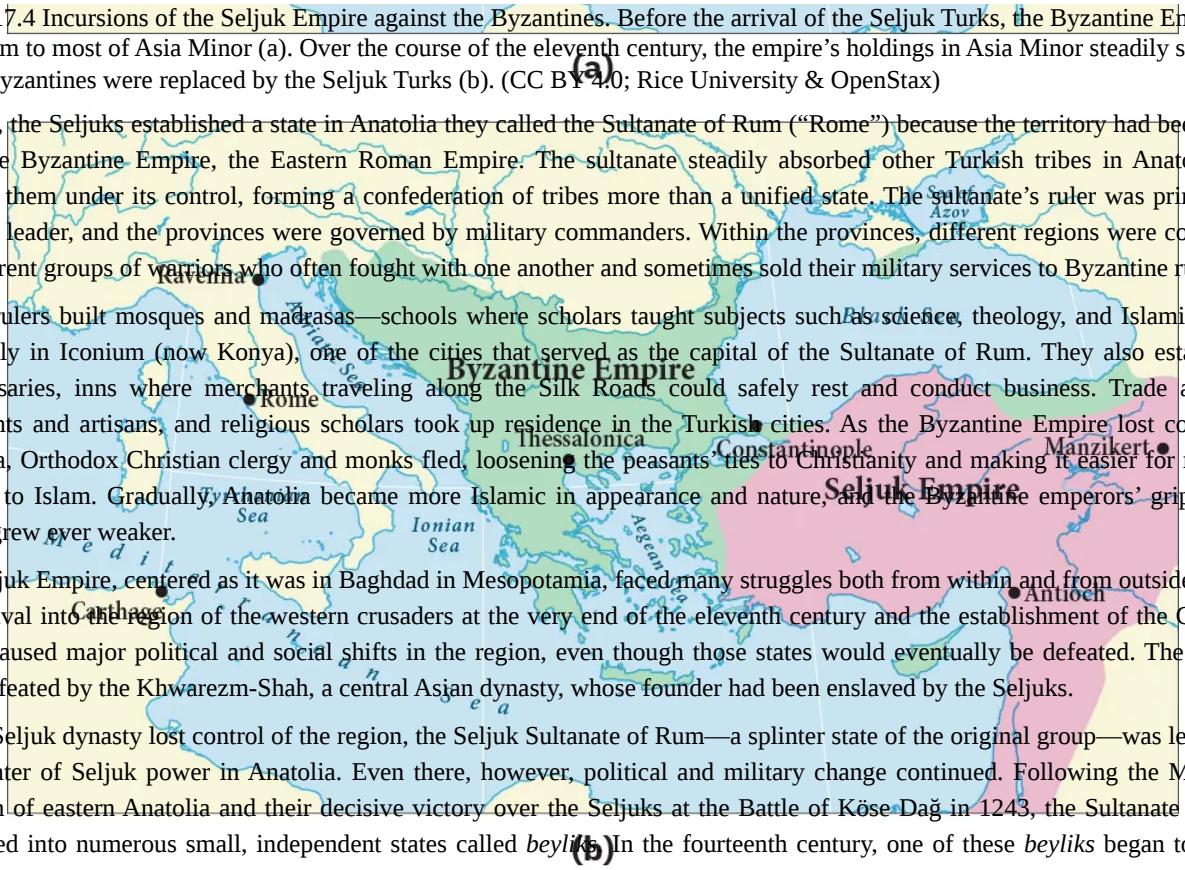


Figure 17.4 Incursions of the Seljuk Empire against the Byzantines. Before the arrival of the Seljuk Turks, the Byzantine Empire laid claim to most of Asia Minor (a). Over the course of the eleventh century, the empire's holdings in Asia Minor steadily shrank as the Byzantines were replaced by the Seljuk Turks (b). (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

In 1077, the Seljuks established a state in Anatolia they called the Sultanate of Rum ("Rome") because the territory had been taken from the Byzantine Empire, the Eastern Roman Empire. The sultanate steadily absorbed other Turkish tribes in Anatolia and brought them under its control, forming a confederation of tribes more than a unified state. The sultanate's ruler was primarily a military leader, and the provinces were governed by military commanders. Within the provinces, different regions were controlled by different groups of warriors who often fought with one another and sometimes sold their military services to Byzantine rulers.

Seljuk rulers built mosques and madrasas—schools where scholars taught subjects such as science, theology, and Islamic law—especially in Iconium (now Konya), one of the cities that served as the capital of the Sultanate of Rum. They also established caravansaries, inns where merchants traveling along the Silk Roads could safely rest and conduct business. Trade attracted merchants and artisans, and religious scholars took up residence in the Turkish cities. As the Byzantine Empire lost control of Anatolia, Orthodox Christian clergy and monks fled, loosening the peasants' ties to Christianity and making it easier for many to convert to Islam. Gradually, Anatolia became more Islamic in appearance and nature, and the Byzantine emperors' grip on the region grew ever weaker.

The Seljuk Empire, centered as it was in Baghdad in Mesopotamia, faced many struggles both from within and from outside forces. The arrival into the region of the western crusaders at the very end of the eleventh century and the establishment of the Crusader States caused major political and social shifts in the region, even though those states would eventually be defeated. The Seljuks were defeated by the Khwarezm-Shah, a central Asian dynasty, whose founder had been enslaved by the Seljuks.

As the Seljuk dynasty lost control of the region, the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum—a splinter state of the original group—was left as the sole center of Seljuk power in Anatolia. Even there, however, political and military change continued. Following the Mongols' invasion of eastern Anatolia and their decisive victory over the Seljuks at the Battle of Köse Dağ in 1243, the Sultanate of Rum splintered into numerous small, independent states called *beyliks*. In the fourteenth century, one of these *beyliks* began to rise to prominence as Seljuk fortunes declined in the wake of the Mongol invasions. This *beylik* was led by a man named Osman, and his followers came to be known as the "Osmanli" or "Ottomans."

The Ottomans were Turkic-speaking pastoralists who occupied lands in northwestern Anatolia. Like the Seljuks, they regarded themselves as *ghazis*, warriors who fought to expand and protect the borders and influence of Islam, and this recognition came to form an important part of Ottoman Turkish identity. The Ottomans had originally stepped into the power vacuum left in northwestern Anatolia by the attack on Constantinople in 1204, when European crusaders raided, ransacked, and demolished parts of the city. Civilians were brutally assaulted and killed. Priceless religious relics were looted and destroyed, erasing ties to the history of the Byzantine Empire. After this "sack" of Constantinople, Venice and its allies divided the empire, and political upheaval took place in the years that followed. Although the Byzantines attempted to rebuild their capital and state, they were no match for the Ottomans. The empire lasted another two hundred years, but it controlled relatively little territory in Anatolia. The Ottomans laid siege to the Byzantine cities of Anatolia, conquered them, and made one, Bursa, the capital of a growing Ottoman state with imperial ambitions. They built mosques and madrasas in the city, turning it into an important religious center.

Following Osman's death, his son Orhan I, who took the title of sultan, expanded Ottoman territory into Europe. In 1354, his troops established a base on the European peninsula of Gallipoli, on the northern side of the Dardanelles, one of the straits that separate Asia Minor from Europe. Control of Gallipoli gave the Ottomans control over oceanic traffic between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. It also gave them the ability to interfere with ships bound for Constantinople, which sat on the European side of the straits of the Bosporus, should they so desire. The Ottomans steadily took control of the European portion of the Byzantine Empire, the area that is now northern Greece, southern Bulgaria, and Thrace, the western part of modern Turkey.

Orhan's son Murad I established a new capital at Edirne, on the European side of the Dardanelles, in 1362. Turks from Anatolia were invited to settle in Ottoman-controlled territory in Europe and take over the lands of fleeing European landowners. The European peasants who came under Ottoman control did not necessarily resent their new masters; the majority were Orthodox Christians, and they were allowed to practice their faith without interference so long as they paid the special tax, the *jizya*, and recognized their status as Ottoman subjects. The Ottomans also realized that non-Muslim clergy could help in the governing of their empire, because people were accustomed to turning to their religious leaders for direction on a variety of issues. To win the assistance of Christian clergy, therefore, the Ottomans refrained from efforts to stamp out their religion. Many peasants likely

regarded the religiously tolerant Ottomans as better overlords than the European Roman Catholic soldiers, who had attacked the Greek Orthodox Byzantine Empire on more than one occasion. They also welcomed the lighter tax burden imposed by the Ottomans.

Murad sought to take advantage of the death of the Serbian king in 1355 and incorporate his land into the Ottoman domains as well. At the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the Ottomans defeated the Serbian army and made Serbia, the last major Orthodox Christian state, a vassal of the empire. Both Murad and the Serbian ruler Prince Lazar died in the battle, although Serbian myth claims that a Serbian soldier used trickery to secretly kill the Ottoman sultan in his tent (Figure 17.5).



Figure 17.5 Sultan Murad I. In this image created by an Ottoman artist two centuries after Murad's death, the sultan (left, followed by his guards) is described in the caption at the top as "the Kosovo martyr." (credit: modification of work "Sultan Murad I šahīd" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

The Battle of Kosovo in 1389 serves as a focus for Serbian national identity, and its anniversary is a national holiday. In this blog, you can learn more about how the Battle of Kosovo has affected Serbian views about political independence.

Murad's son and successor Bayezid I (called "the Thunderbolt") attempted unsuccessfully to eliminate all remaining Byzantine governance in the region by capturing Constantinople. In 1396, the Ottomans blockaded the city, but the pleas of the Byzantine emperor led Pope Boniface IX to call for a crusade to rescue the Greek Orthodox Christians from the Muslim Turks. Roman Catholic knights from throughout Europe responded. Ottoman troops, fighting alongside Bayezid's Serbian vassals, crushed the crusader army at the Battle of Nicopolis on the Danube River (Figure 17.6). The blockade of Constantinople ultimately failed, however, for the Ottomans had no way to break through the city's walls, and Bayezid soon found himself facing a more formidable foe, the Mongol conqueror Timur.

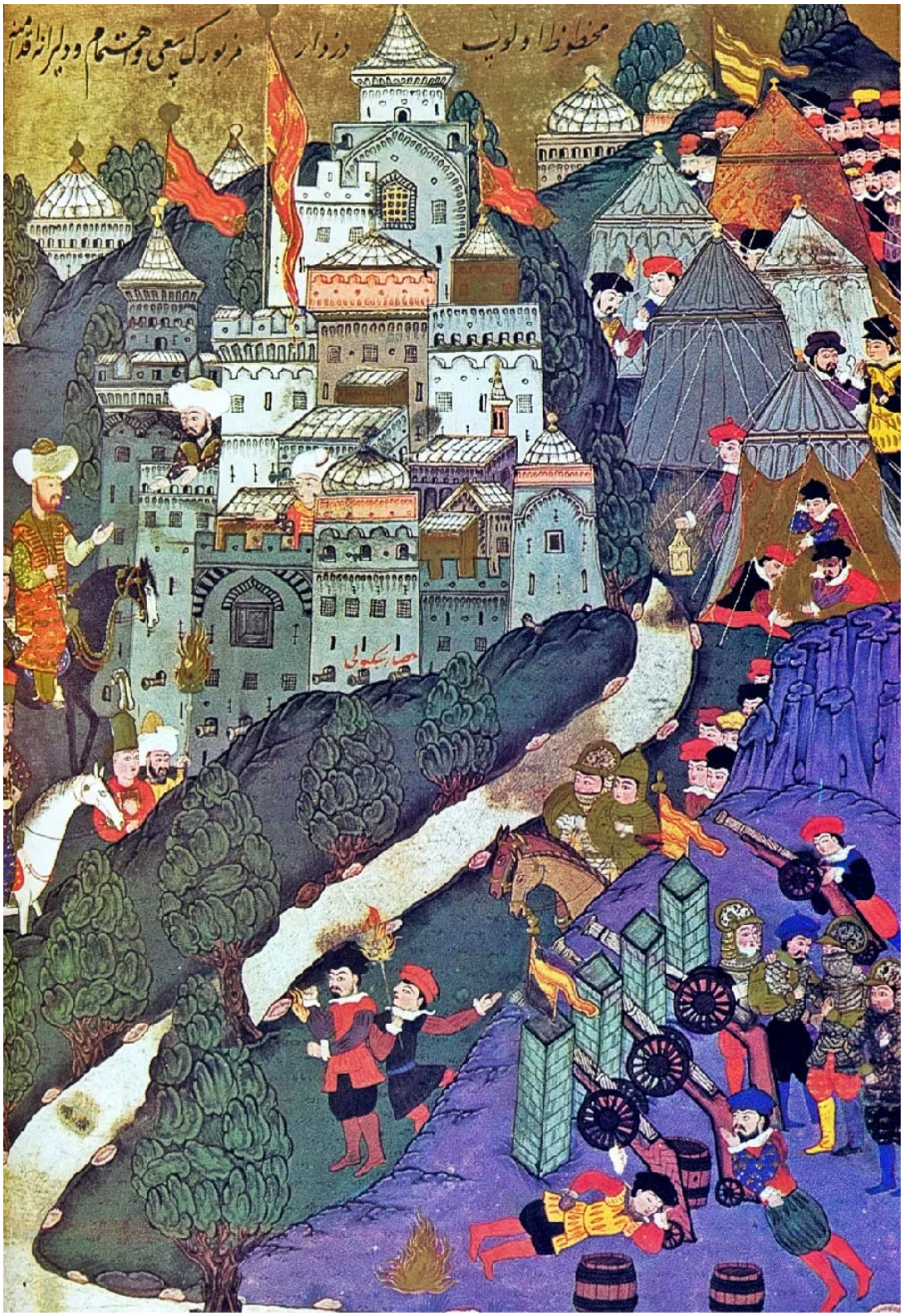


Figure 17.6 The Battle of Nicopolis. This 1523 painted miniature by an Ottoman artist depicts the triumphant Ottoman army on the left, defeating the European knights who opposed them at the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396. A miniature painting such as this, which appeared in bound books and manuscripts, was a popular medium of artistic expression throughout Ottoman history. (credit: "Battle of Nicopolis, 1396" by Géza Fehér/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Timurids and the Aftermath of the Battle of Ankara

Timur was a Mongol from the Barlas tribe, which had been exposed to and assimilated Turkic culture. He was born in central Asia, in a part of the Chagatai Khanate (now modern Uzbekistan), in the 1320s or 1330s. At some point early in his life, he suffered an injury that left him lame in one leg and without two fingers. According to some stories, he had been wounded while attempting to steal sheep, but he may well have sustained his injuries in battle.

Timur sought to rebuild the empire that Chinggis Khan had controlled at the time of his death. Because he could not establish descent from Chinggis, he could not claim the title of khan himself. In the 1360s, he gained control of part of the Chagatai Khanate and placed one of Chinggis's descendants, Soyurgatmish, on the throne, claiming to act in his name. He also married a female descendant of Chinggis and adopted the title "Royal Son-in-Law."

Timur soon looked beyond central Asia for lands to control. In the 1380s and 1390s, he conquered Persia, portions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Syria. He taxed the inhabitants of vanquished cities heavily and sent skilled artisans to work in his capital in Samarkand, but he spared people's lives. Cities that did not submit were treated brutally, however. For example, when the city of Isfahan, in Persia, surrendered peacefully, he treated the residents leniently. However, when the people later rose in revolt, Timur responded unequivocally: he killed an enormous portion of the city's population, with some reports claiming that 100,000 to 200,000 people were killed. Eyewitness accounts report his soldiers amassing piles of severed heads. Timur's troops then turned north to the Russian territory controlled by a former follower named Tokhtamish, the khan of the Golden Horde, who sought the same lands in central Asia that Timur claimed. After destroying the Russian cities of Astrakhan and Ryazan, Timur defeated Tokhtamish's army in 1391.

In the late 1390s, Timur turned eastward toward India. In 1398, he attacked the city of Delhi, the capital of the Muslim-ruled Delhi Sultanate. The sultan's army rode into battle on war elephants clad in chain mail, frightening Timur's troops, who had not seen elephants before (Figure 17.7). Timur piled hay on the backs of his camels, set the hay on fire, and sent the burning, panicked animals into the enemy's lines, scattering the elephants. Victorious, Timur then destroyed Delhi.



Figure 17.7 Timur Defeats the Sultan of Delhi. In this image produced in India around 1600, Timur's Mongol forces, wearing golden helmets, defeat the troops of the sultan of Delhi, who are shown sprawled across the backs of their war elephants. (credit: "Timur defeats the sultan of Delhi" by Zafarnama of Sharaf Al-Din 'Ali Yazdi/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Timur also coveted lands in Syria that were controlled by the Mamluk Sultanate and territory in Anatolia that was claimed by the Ottomans. Bayezid I had been steadily conquering weaker rulers in Anatolia and forcing them to become his vassals. In 1397, he defeated the ruler of the *beylik* of Karaman and went on to subdue smaller Anatolian states. Unwilling to submit to his domination, however, Turkish tribes and Ottoman vassals who Bayezid I believed owed allegiance to him turned to Timur, considering him their means of achieving independence from Ottoman rule. In turn, enemies of Timur such as Kara Yusuf, the leader of the Black

Sheep Turks, and Sultan Ahmed, the ruler of the Persian Mongol Jalayir dynasty whose lands Timur had conquered, turned to Bayezid for assistance. Timur wrote to Bayezid, demanding that the Ottoman ruler cease aiding his enemies. Bayezid responded with insults and sent his forces to attack an ally of Timur's in Armenia.

In 1400, Timur struck back, destroying the city of Sivas in Anatolia, part of Bayezid's domain. He then went on to wage war against the Mamluk sultans in Egypt in Syria, preventing Bayezid from turning to them for help. He also entered into an allegiance with the Byzantines against the Ottomans, amassed forces from throughout his empire, and headed for Anatolia. Bayezid broke off his siege of Constantinople, which had begun in 1396, and rushed to meet him. In July 1402, Timur's troops clashed with the Ottoman army at the Battle of Ankara in Anatolia.

On the field at Ankara, one of the great weaknesses of Bayezid's Ottoman state was revealed. The Ottomans had built their empire in Anatolia by conquering other Turkish states and absorbing their rulers and the rulers' descendants into their administration. These men, Bayezid's unwilling vassals, had no wish to risk their lives for their Ottoman overlords. In addition, Bayezid had chosen to live primarily at Edirne, in Thrace. He had adopted elements of Greek culture and, as part of a strategy to build alliances with other rulers, had taken as wives or concubines a number of non-Turkish women, including the daughter of Prince Lazar. This decision further alienated him from the Turkish nobility of Anatolia. When Timur's forces attacked at Ankara, therefore, many of Bayezid's Turkish vassals abandoned the field and left Bayezid to his fate, happy to be free of Ottoman control. The Ottomans were defeated, and Bayezid and his sons Musa and Mustafa were captured by Timur. Bayezid remained Timur's prisoner until he died a few months later.

Following his rout of the Ottomans and having conquered most of the domains of Chinggis Khan and his sons and grandsons, Timur turned eastward to claim his last prize—China. In 1368, the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China had come to an end. Its successor, the Chinese Ming dynasty, sought to make a tributary vassal of Timur, but the Ming emissaries and the soldiers who accompanied them had instead been imprisoned in Samarkand, the capital of Timur's empire, in the Mongol heartland near the place of his birth. In December 1404, Timur set out to cross central Asia on his way to China. Within a few months, however, he fell ill, and in February 1405 he died. The invasion of China ended before it had begun, and the Chinese emissaries were released.

At the time of his death, Timur had conquered much of the land claimed in the original Mongol conquests of Chinggis Khan and his descendants. Unlike them, however, Timur made no real effort to rule the places he seized outside Persia. His armies conquered, plundered the riches of the defeated cities, seized artisans and whoever else might be of use to Timur, and sent the wealth and captives on to Samarkand. Thus, it was relatively easy for most places that Timur had conquered to regain their independence. Anatolia is a good example. Following his defeat of Bayezid I, Timur departed, leaving Bayezid's sons to battle among themselves for control of their father's lands. Although Bayezid's son Mehmed declared himself a vassal of Timur, Timur did not assist him in his civil war against his brothers. Following Timur's death, his own sons and grandsons fought over the lands he had conquered (Figure 17.8). In 1409, his son Shah Rukh emerged as his successor and the next head of the Timurids, the name given to the dynasty founded by Timur.

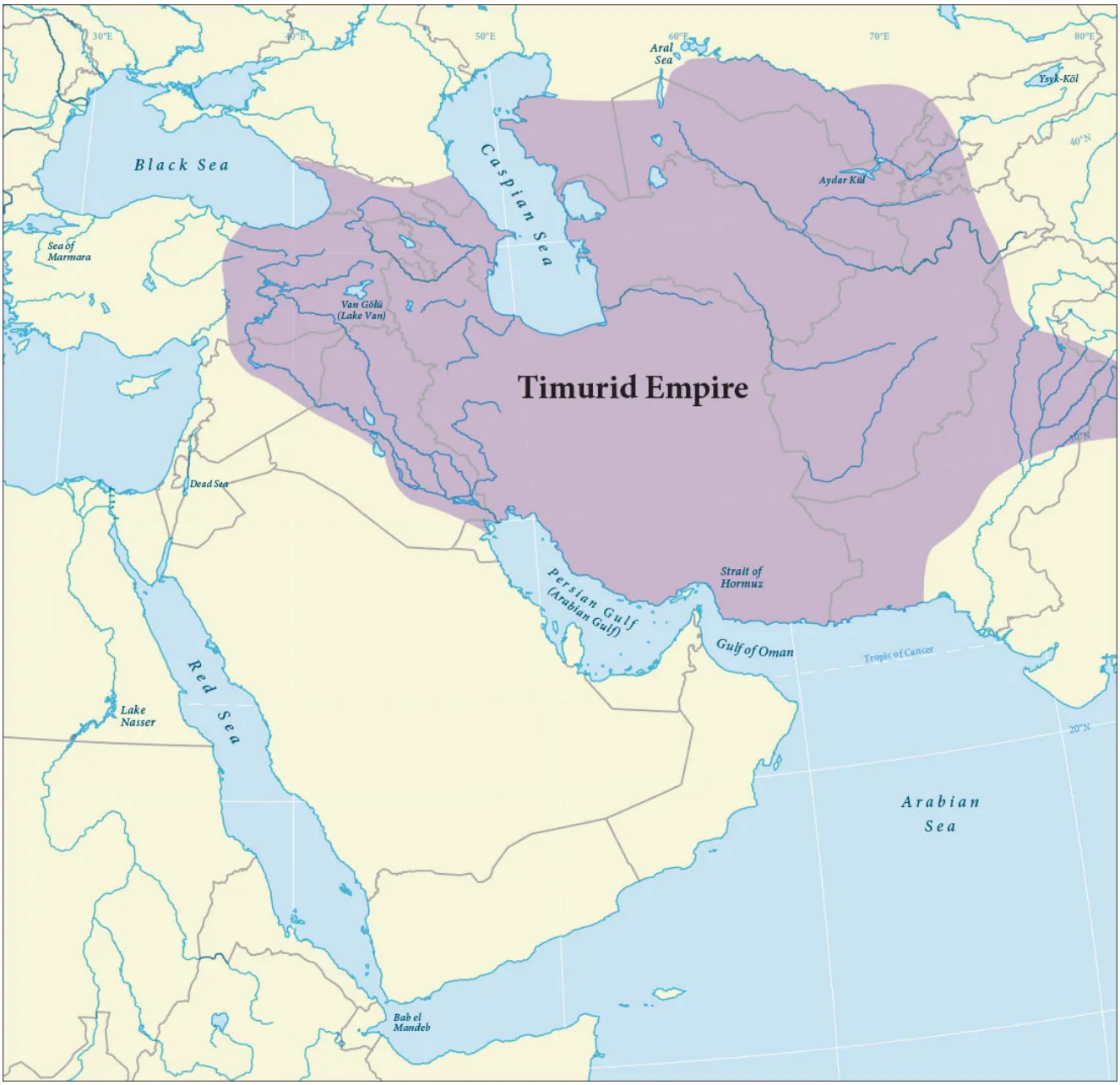
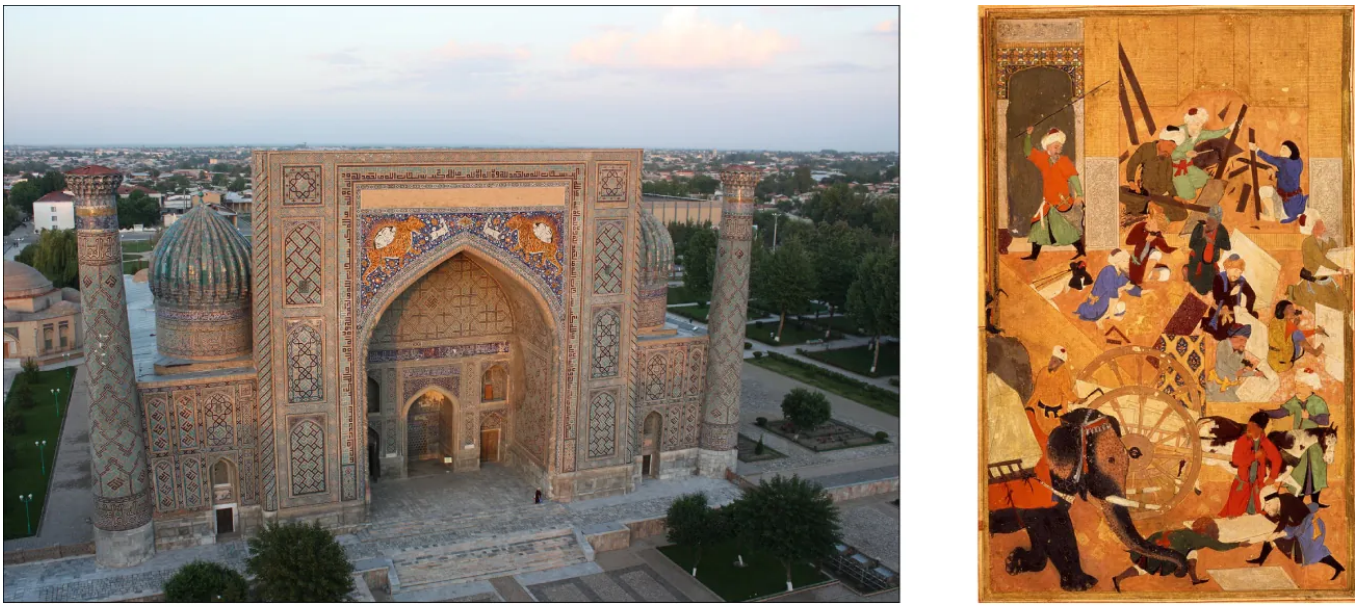


Figure 17.8 The Timurid Empire. By the time of Timur's death in 1405, his empire stretched from the border of Anatolia in the west to northern India in the east, and from modern Uzbekistan in the north to the Gulf of Hormuz in the south. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

While many in Asia regarded Timur as a villain, he was a hero of the Turks and Mongols of central Asia. Ibn Khaldun, the North African Muslim historian, credited him with unifying the world's Muslims into a single empire. Timur's greatest legacy may be an artistic one. Although conquered people might have been met with brutality, artists, architects, and artisans were spared and sent to Samarkand. During Timur's lifetime, the city was in a constant state of construction, and buildings like the Bibi Khanum Mosque were erected or remodeled to please him. The Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta praised the city's beauty, and its gardens made visitors forget the arid lands that surrounded it (Figure 17.9). Timur's grandson Ulugbek built a madrasa (an Islamic school) and an observatory in Samarkand and invited Muslim mathematicians and astronomers to the city, making it an important site of learning in the fifteenth century. Many Europeans of the time also regarded Timur, whom they called Tamerlane ("Timur, the Lame"), as a hero.



(a) (b)

Figure 17.9 The Registan. (a) A word meaning “country of sand” in Persian, the Registan of Samarkand was the public square of Timur’s splendid capital city of Samarkand in what is today Uzbekistan. A center for public gatherings, it was also a center of learning in the city and region, as evidenced by the three madrasas flanking the central square. (b) This image from the *Zafarnama* (“Book of Victories”), an account of Timur’s campaigns, depicts the construction of the Great Mosque for Timur's new capital in Samarkand. (credit a: modification of work “Samarkand, Registan, Sher-Dor Madrasah” by Arian Zwegers/Flickr, CC BY 2.0 ; credit b: modification of work “Building of the Great Mosque in Samarkand” by Bihzad/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Ottoman Conquest of the Byzantine Empire

Following the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the sons of Bayezid who had remained free—Mehmed, Suleyman, and Isa—fought among themselves for control of the Ottoman domains. Suleyman held the Ottoman lands in Europe, Isa controlled Anatolia, and Mehmed I ruled Amasya, a region on the Black Sea coast. When Musa was released from Mongol custody, he also joined the fight, and Mustafa later contended for the throne as well.

In 1413, Mehmed emerged victorious in the civil war with his brothers. He and his son and heir Murad II reorganized and expanded the domains of the Ottomans. Members of the cavalry and other highly placed members of the Ottoman administrative and military elite were each granted a timar, the right to collect taxes from merchants, farmers, and artisans in a particular geographical area (Figure 17.10). Timars were awarded regardless of religion or ethnicity, and occasionally elite women were given them as well. At times, conquered local elites were allowed to retain control of their former lands as *timariots* (holders of a timar). The taxes they collected supported them, so the state did not need to pay them a salary or hire tax collectors.



Figure 17.10 A Member of the Ottoman Cavalry. Administrators and other elites, like this member of the light Ottoman cavalry, were granted timars to reward them for their service and enable them to support themselves. The image is from a mid-seventeenth-century book of miniature drawings of costumes, possibly made in Constantinople. (credit: "Ralamb Sipahi" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The practice of awarding timars to members of the military ensured their loyalty. The land ultimately belonged to the sultan, who would revoke a timar if the holder did not continue in his service. A timar might also be lost if the population of the land declined; this encouraged timariots to treat the people on their holdings well. Timariots also tried to make the lands they controlled more agriculturally productive. The more crops produced, the more taxes they could collect. They were responsible for maintaining order on their lands, but they could not impose punishments without the permission of a judge appointed by the sultan. The timar was nonhereditary; upon the timariot's death, the sultan awarded the vacant timar to someone else. This prevented the development of an independent hereditary class of timariots.

The main goal of Mehmed I and Murad II was to conquer Constantinople. Muslim rulers since the seventh century had attempted to capture the Byzantine capital and had always failed. Both Mehmed and Murad realized that in order to rebuild the Ottoman state, they had to drive out the Byzantine rulers. The Byzantine emperor Manuel II had assisted Mehmed's rivals for the Ottoman throne, attempting to keep the Ottomans weak by prolonging the civil war. The Byzantines were also close allies of the Venetians and

Genoese, who controlled trade in the Aegean and the Black Seas and whose ships could interfere with Ottoman efforts to control both sides of the Dardanelles.

Murad II laid siege to Constantinople in 1422, but the effort failed because the Ottomans lacked artillery to destroy the city walls. Murad was also distracted from the siege by his need to combat yet another claimant to the Ottoman throne. As they had done before, the Byzantines called upon European Christians for assistance against the Ottomans. The pope called for a new crusade, and the Roman Catholic knights of Europe responded. Murad defeated them in 1444 at the Battle of Varna, in eastern Bulgaria (Figure 17.11). Nevertheless, Constantinople stood firm. The city was only a shadow of what it had once been. At its height, somewhere between 500,000 and one million people had lived within its walls, but the bubonic plague and Ottoman sieges had reduced the number to perhaps fifty thousand. Nevertheless, so long as Constantinople stood on the western shore of the Bosporus controlling access to the Black Sea, the Ottomans could not rest easy in their domains.

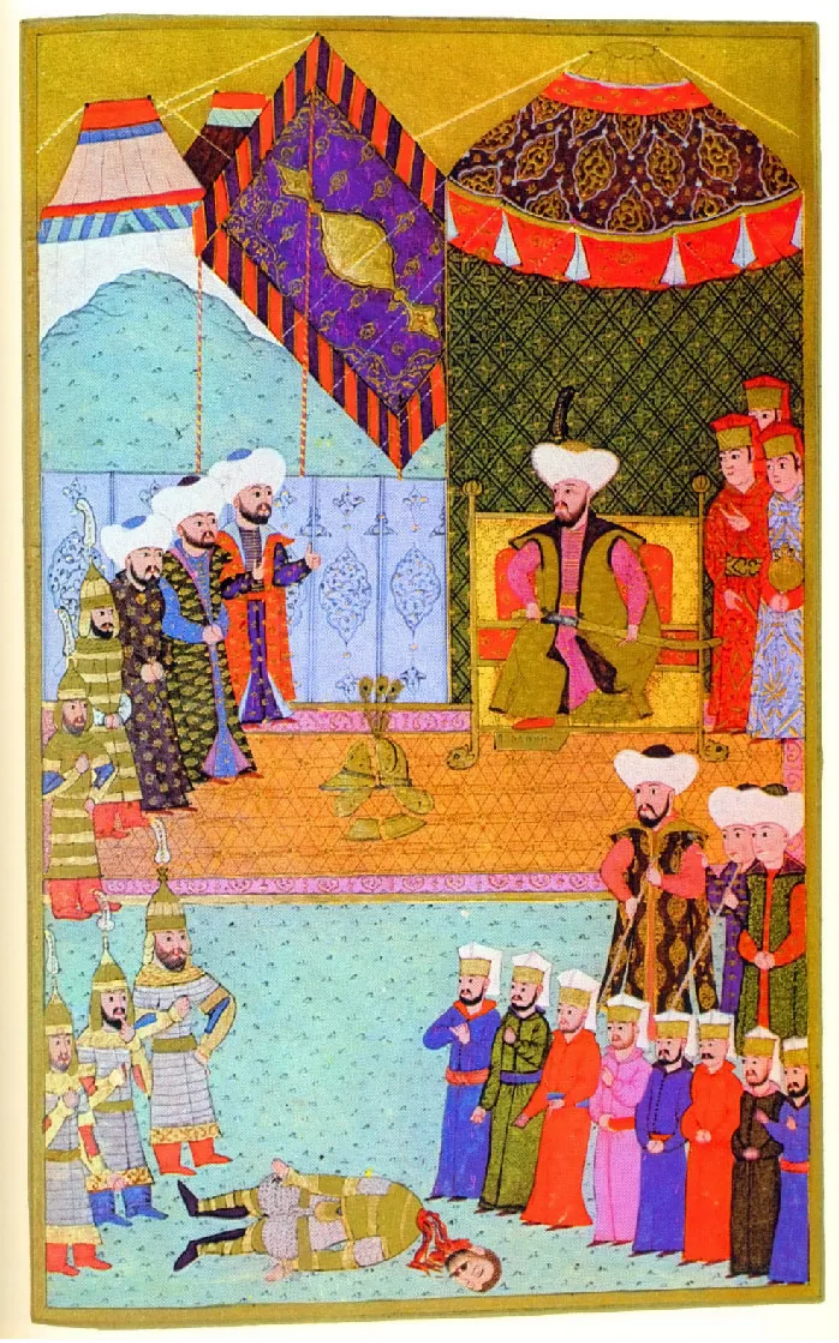


Figure 17.11 The Death of Władysław III. According to legend, at the Battle of Varna in which he led Ottoman forces against European Christians, Murad II prayed for victory. When the Polish king Władysław III charged Murad's troops, the sultan's guards beheaded him, an event depicted in this Ottoman miniature. (credit: "Murad II and the imaginary beheading of Władysław III of Poland" by Géza Fehér/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

It fell to Murad II's son Mehmed II (also called Mehmed the Conqueror and Mehmed the Great) to destroy the Byzantine threat. He was better prepared than his father had been. In 1453, he summoned his Muslim and Christian vassals from Anatolia, Thrace, and the Balkans. With the vassals and a core of six thousand elite professional soldiers, he marched to the Bosporus. Ottoman forces included more than one hundred newly constructed ships to prevent Constantinople from receiving reinforcements and supplies via the sea. He also summoned European gunsmiths, the most important of whom was the Hungarian named Urban, to craft bombards, an early form of cannon. One gun was so large that it could fire a twelve-hundred-pound granite ball more than a mile. Constantinople's defensive walls, which had guarded the city since the fifth century, could not withstand the Ottoman artillery (Figure 17.12).



Figure 17.12 The Walls of Constantinople. The walls that protected Constantinople were massive. On the right is the inner wall, the city's last defense. In places it was up to six meters thick. On the left is the outer wall. Below this was yet a third wall, and beyond that a moat. (credit: modification of work "Theodosian Walls in Constantinople" by "CrniBombarder!!!"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

On the morning of May 29, 1453, after a siege of fifty-seven days, the Ottoman guns breached the walls, and Mehmed's soldiers rushed into the city. Perhaps twenty thousand people were left to defend it, including the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI Palaeologus, who died fighting for his city. After their Genoese commander was wounded, many defenders abandoned their posts along the walls, leaving them deserted during battle. Constantinople's residents carried religious icons to the walls and prayed for deliverance. However, they put up little resistance, and the city fell to the Ottomans.

Dueling Voices

The Fall of Constantinople

Following are two accounts by European Christians of the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the behavior of Mehmed II, the conquering sultan. The first excerpt is from a letter from the Convent of the Order of Saint John on Rhodes to the military commander of Brandenburg (present-day Germany), a principality of the Holy Roman Empire. The second is an eyewitness account of the event.

> *After the great Turk had besieged Constantinople by land and sea, on the twenty-ninth of the May just passed he seized the city by force of arms, killed the emperor of Constantinople, cut off the heads of many nobles, gave the entire city over to plunder, and cruelly tortured many. He then obtained the city of Pera, which the Genoese held, without force of arms, made it a tributary, and tore down its walls. This also happened to the walls of Constantinople. . . .*
>
> *It is believed that he is preparing a new fleet from scratch, since he intends to make all the islands of the Aegean archipelago subject to him or to destroy them if he can. For his heart swells with pride and he boasts that he has equaled or surpassed the deeds of Alexander of Macedon. He also threatens that he will attempt to do what Alexander never did—push into Italy and the regions of the West with his arms and might and see whether fortune shall favor him there as it has throughout the East.*
>
> *—a letter from the Convent of the Order of Saint John on Rhodes to the Margrave of Brandenburg, June 30, 1453, translated by W.L. North*

> *The enraged Turkish soldiers . . . gave no quarter. When they had massacred and there was no longer any resistance, they were intent on pillage and roamed through the town stealing, disrobing, pillaging, killing, raping, taking captive men, women, children, old men, young men, monks, priests, people of all sorts and conditions. . . . This medley of all nations, these frantic brutes stormed into their houses. . . .*
>
> *Temples were desecrated, ransacked and pillaged . . . sacred objects were scornfully flung aside, the holy icons and the holy vessels were desecrated. Ornaments were burned, broken in pieces or simply thrown into the streets. . . .*
>
> *When Mehmed (II) saw the ravages, the destruction and the deserted houses and all that had perished and become ruins, then a great sadness took possession of him and he repented the pillage and all the destruction. Tears came to his eyes and sobbing he expressed his sadness. "What a town this was! And we have allowed it to be destroyed!" His soul was full of sorrow. And in truth it was natural, so much did the horror of the situation exceed all limits.*
>
> *—"The Sack of Constantinople, 1453," EyeWitness to History, 2011*

- In what ways are these accounts similar? How do their depictions of Mehmed II differ?
- How did the Ottomans create a multiethnic military force? Why would that be useful?

Many Muslim scholars believed the conquest of Constantinople had been predicted in a hadith, an account of the sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad. After his capture of the city, Mehmed turned eastward, incorporating the Turkish state of Karaman, the home of the important Islamic religious center of Konya, and other lands ruled by Turkish tribes in eastern Anatolia. In 1461, he sent the Ottoman fleet to conquer Trebizond, an offshoot of the Byzantine Empire and an important trading center on

the Black Sea. In Europe, he gained control of most of the southern part of Greece, defeating the Byzantine princes who ruled the area, as well as Bosnia and Albania. He also wrested the Black Sea port of Kaffa from the control of Genoese merchants. At his death, the Ottoman Empire controlled all of Anatolia and nearly all of the Balkans.

Mehmed II, despite being referred to regularly as “the Conqueror” by historians, was a builder more than a destroyer, however. Upon conquering Constantinople, he declared it the new capital of the Ottoman Empire, replacing the city of Edirne. He dispatched soldiers to clear away the ruins left from the siege and the Ottoman assault, and he immediately set about appointing a mayor and other important city officials to establish and maintain order. Rather than drive out the city’s European merchants, he allowed them to stay, to retain their property, and to continue to worship in their churches. He demanded only that the Genoese merchants remove the walls that surrounded Galata, the Genoese trading quarter of Constantinople, and surrender their armaments. To protect his new Christian subjects, he forbade his Turkish troops to enslave the Europeans.

Mehmed regarded himself not as a usurper but as the rightful successor to the Byzantines. He declared himself Caesar, the heir to the old Roman imperial throne. He appointed a new leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Gennadius II, who in turn recognized Mehmed’s claim as the legitimate heir of the last Byzantine emperor. The last emperor’s actual heirs, his nephews, were taken into Mehmed’s service and occupied important administrative positions in the empire. One served as Grand Vizier, or chief minister, under Mehmed’s successor Bayezid II.

Mehmed embarked on an ambitious campaign to rebuild Constantinople, now called Istanbul. He built the new Topkapi Palace, where he ruled the empire. The palace also contained his private household, or harem. He ordered that the Byzantine cathedral of Hagia Sophia be left intact and converted into a mosque. He rebuilt the city walls, constructed a weapons foundry, and established a hospital. He also ordered a new mosque, the Fatih Mosque (“Conqueror’s Mosque”), to be built in the city (Figure 17.13). Near the mosque, he erected numerous madrasas in which Muslim scholars taught science, Islamic law, and theology.

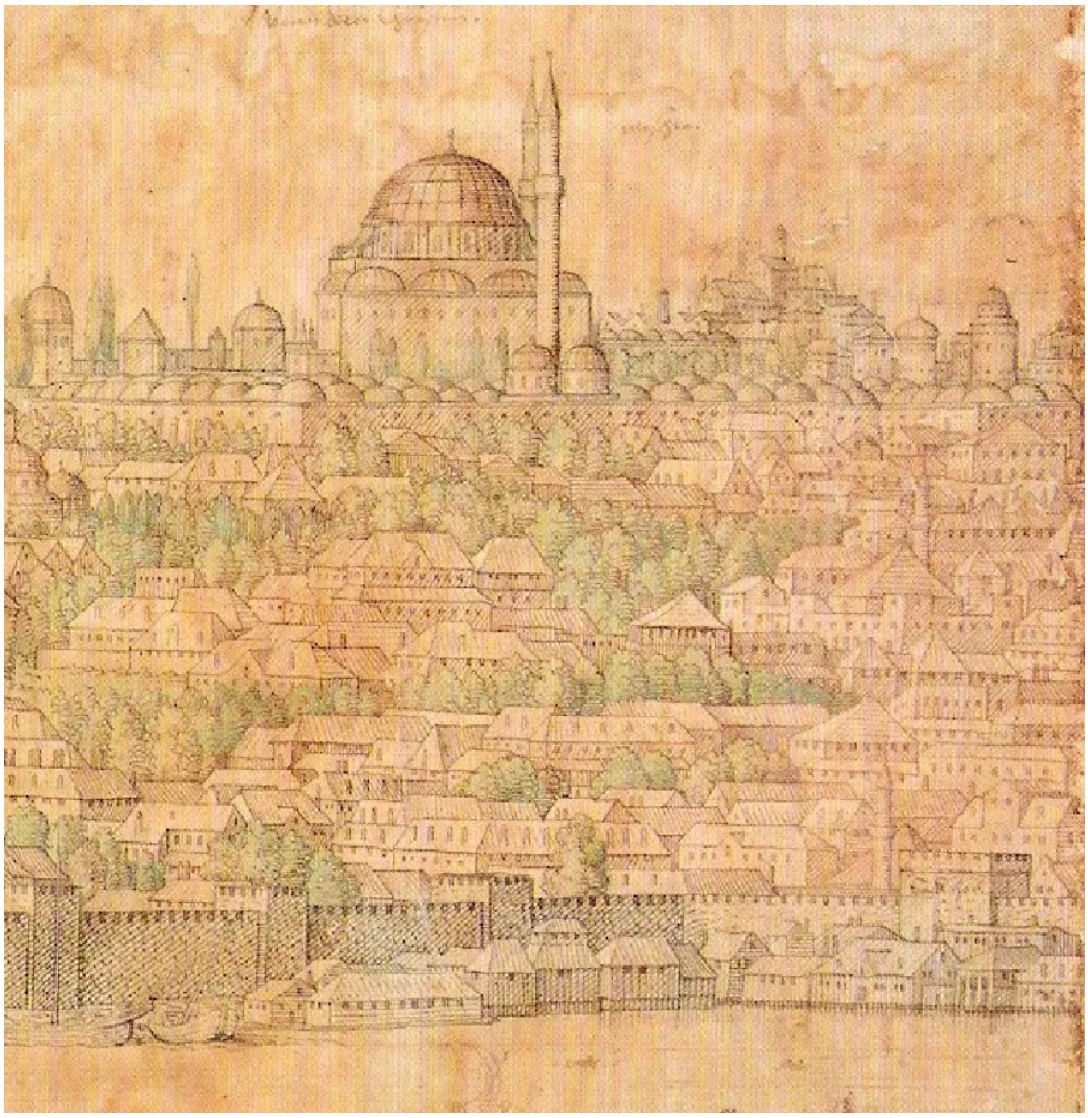


Figure 17.13 Fatih Mosque. In Melchior Lorck's painting of Istanbul from 1559, the Fatih Mosque rises above the rooftops of the city. The building was destroyed by an earthquake in 1766, and a mosque built according to a different plan was subsequently constructed on the site. (credit: "Fatih Complex" by Melchior Lorichs/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Visit this UNESCO site to learn more about Istanbul and to view pictures of its famous historic sites.

Mehmed had a great thirst for knowledge. He spoke many languages and amassed a library filled with works in Turkish, Greek, Latin, Persian, and Arabic. He invited Muslim scientists to Istanbul and attended debates of religious scholars. He collected Greek antiquities and brought Greek scholars and Italian artists to Istanbul. Some of these artists, such as the Italians Gentile Bellini and Paolo Veronese, painted portraits of him (Figure 17.14).



Figure 17.14 Mehmed II. The meeting of East and West is evident in this portrait of Sultan Mehmed II. Painted in 1480 by the Italian artist Gentile Bellini, it depicts an Eastern ruler in a Western artistic style. (credit: "The Sultan Mehmet II" by Gentile Bellini/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

As Mehmed conquered other parts of the Balkans and of Anatolia, including *beyliks* that had broken free of Ottoman control following Bayezid I's defeat at the Battle of Ankara, he brought artisans and prisoners of war to Istanbul to rebuild the city. As earlier Ottoman rulers had done, Mehmed allowed Christians and Jews in his lands to worship as they pleased. This arrangement was an early appearance of the Ottoman *millet* system, in which religious communities were allowed a substantial degree of autonomy and were governed by their own leaders and their own law codes. In addition to naming a head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Mehmed established the position of *hakham bashi* ("chief rabbi") to lead the Ottoman Empire's Jewish community. He also invited the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church to establish a house of worship in Istanbul; because the Eastern Orthodox Church, the religion of the Byzantine rulers, regarded the Armenian church as heretical, it had been banned from the Byzantine capital. And although the Roman Catholic Church refused to recognize his right to rule Istanbul, Mehmed allowed Catholic clergy to travel throughout Ottoman lands and worship freely.

Mehmed also moved to exert authority over Islamic clergy in his domains. He made teachers at madrasas employees of the Ottoman state. He issued *kanun*, laws made by the sultan, as opposed to sharia (religious law) interpreted by Islamic judges, and compiled them in the *Kanun-name* ("Book of the Law"). *Kanun* dealt with issues that sharia often did not address, such as taxation

or punishment for certain crimes. Mehmed also made use of *kanun* to centralize his authority and gain unchallenged control over the Ottoman state.

With the fall of the Byzantine Empire and the collapse of Timurid authority, the Ottoman state could now assert its authority in both the East and the West, effectively making itself a gatekeeper between the two worlds. Following their defeat of the Byzantine Empire and their capture of Constantinople, the Ottomans gained control of part of the Silk Roads that brought silk, spices, and other luxury goods from East Asia. Besides controlling the overland route, the Ottomans commanded Red Sea ports in Egypt after defeating the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, which gave them additional control over the spice trade. By the late fifteenth century, Ottoman ships were trading with India, and goods such as Chinese silks and porcelains furnished the homes of the wealthy in Istanbul. The Ottomans also dominated trade on the Black Sea, which until then had been the province of the Venetians and Genoese. The exclusion of Italian merchants from their traditional trade routes, the heavy taxes imposed on goods that traveled overland, many Europeans' dislike for transacting business with Muslims, and the expense of overland trade led western Europeans to seek all-water oceanic routes to South and East Asia.

The Renaissance

The fall of Constantinople was lamented in Europe as signaling that no significant force remained to counter the Muslim advance westward. For many historians, it also marks the end of the European Middle Ages. As the Byzantine Empire collapsed, many Greeks sought refuge in other lands, often wealthy merchants and state officials who brought their riches with them. Many settled in Italy, especially in Venice and Rome. Those who came to Venice were assisted by Anna Notaras, a wealthy Byzantine noblewoman who had taken up residence in the city before Constantinople fell.

Byzantine scholars, theologians, artists, writers, and astronomers also fled westward to Europe, bringing with them the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome that had been preserved in the eastern half of the Roman Empire after the western half fell. Among the texts they brought were the complete works of Plato and copies of Aristotle's works in the original Greek. Access to these and other writings, many of which had been either unknown in western Europe or known only in the form of Arabic translations that arrived at the time of the Crusades, greatly influenced the course of the Italian Renaissance.

The Renaissance, which means "rebirth" in French, was a period of intellectual and artistic renewal inspired by the cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome and marking the dawn of the early modern world. It began in the city-states of northern Italy that had grown wealthy through trade, especially trade with the Ottomans. Beginning in the 1300s, scholars there turned to the works of Western antiquity—the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans—for wisdom and a model of how to live (Figure 17.15). Among these scholars was Petrarch, who encouraged writers to adopt the "pure" Classical Latin in which the poets and lawmakers of the Roman Empire had written instead of the form of Latin used by medieval clergy. He advocated imitating the style of the Roman orator Cicero and the foremost of the Roman poets, Virgil.

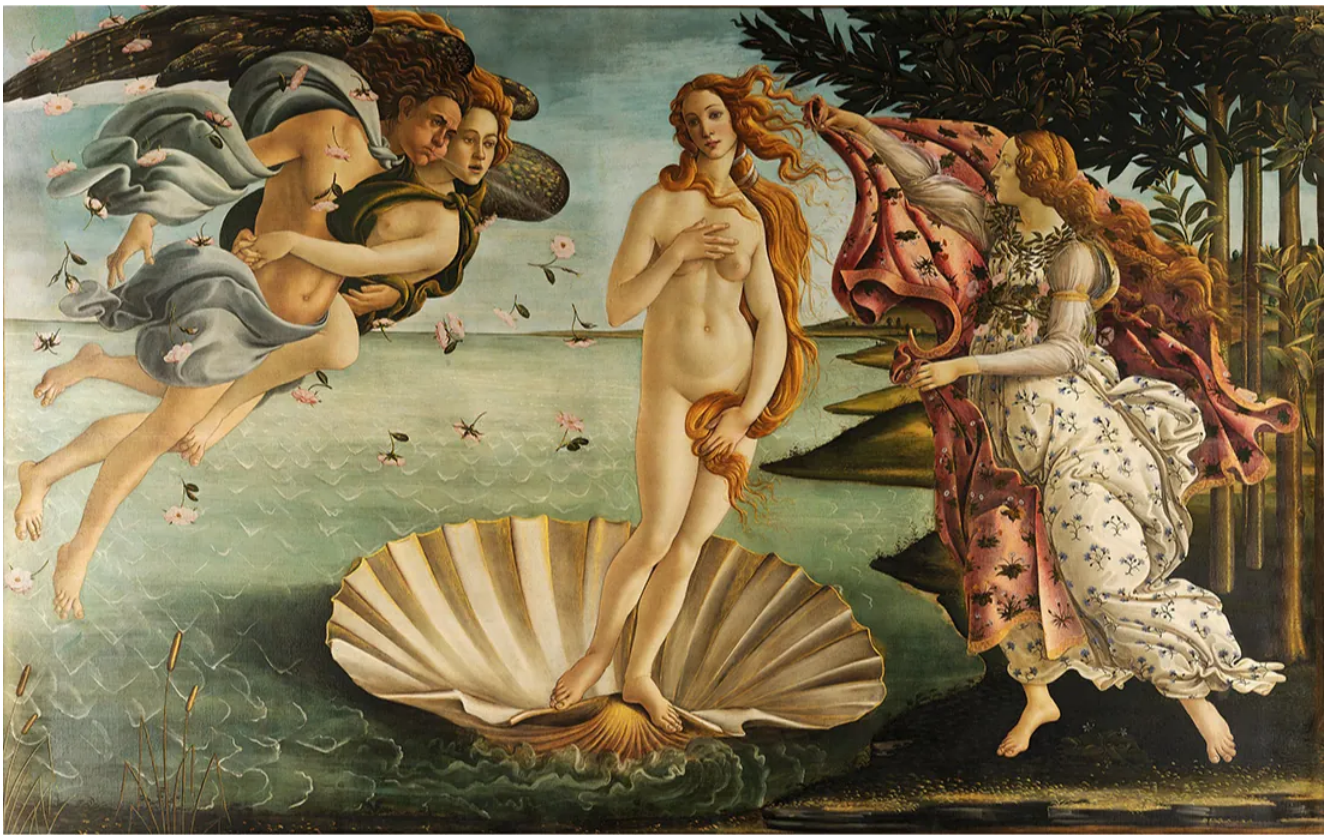


Figure 17.15 The Birth of Venus. Sandro Botticelli's 1485 painting *The Birth of Venus* shows the Roman goddess of love and beauty perched on a seashell after having emerged from the water. During the Renaissance, the depiction of scenes from Greek and Roman mythology became common in European art. (credit: modification of work "The Birth of Venus" by Sandro Botticelli/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Petrarch has been called the father of humanism. Humanism was a movement born in Italy in the fourteenth century that focused on the study of human beings, human nature, and human achievements, as opposed to the study of God. Humanists stressed the beauty and dignity of humanity instead of focusing on its sinful, "fallen" nature. They believed the classical worlds of ancient Greece and Rome could provide contemporary people with untold wisdom and a model for life.

Beyond the Book

The *Arnolfini Portrait*

Humanism influenced the manner in which people were depicted in works of art as well as the types of people who were portrayed. Many of the subjects of Renaissance paintings were wealthy members of the merchant class. Merchants might appear as worshippers in paintings with religious subject matter, but many paintings of the period also depicted such people in secular settings as well, often in a manner meant to display their wealth. This 1434 painting, by Jan van Eyck, an artist from the Netherlands, is believed to depict the Italian merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife (Figure 17.16). The image may have been painted to commemorate the Arnolfinis' marriage. Mrs. Arnolfini (her exact name is unknown) is not pregnant. The fashions of the time featured gowns with cloth gathered at the front to give the illusion of a large belly, very different from what is considered stylish today.



Figure 17.16 The *Arnolfini Portrait*. This oil painting, believed to represent the merchant Giovanni di Nicolao di Arnolfini and his wife at their home in Bruges, was painted in 1434 by Jan van Eyck. (credit: modification of work "The Arnolfini Portrait" by Jan van Eyck/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

- What details in the painting may indicate that the Arnolfinis are wealthy people?
- In what ways do the values of humanism seem to have influenced this painting?
- Why may artists of the time have included members of the merchant class in their paintings?

Before the arrival of Byzantine scholars and their copies of Plato and Aristotle, Italian humanists had focused primarily on the study of rhetoric and ethics. They displayed little interest in metaphysics, the philosophical study of the nature of existence. Access to Plato's complete works changed that, and many scholars were influenced by Byzantine Neoplatonism, an intellectual movement that sought to synthesize the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoic philosophers, and Arabic philosophy. One of the most important of the Italian Neoplatonists was Marsilio Ficino, who translated all of Plato's works from ancient Greek to Latin and synthesized Platonic thought with the teachings of Christianity.

In the Neoplatonic conception, the universe was an ordered hierarchy with God, "the One," at the top, and everything else existing as "emanations" of God at descending levels with the earth at the bottom. If God was perfect, the physical world in which humans lived was least perfect. However, Ficino argued, the human soul existed at the center of the universe, because it combined aspects of both the godly world and the physical world in which humans lived. Because humans possessed a soul, they were thus the center of creation. Ficino's ideas fit well with the humanist perception of human beings as special creatures and worthy of study.

Another Neoplatonist, Nicholas of Cusa (Nicholas Cusanus), also had a profound effect on the Italian Renaissance and one of its most important legacies, the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Greek philosopher Aristotle had stressed the study of the world through direct observation, a method known as *empiricism*. For Plato, however, the world of ideas, of abstract concepts, was superior to the components of the physical world. Thus, mathematical thought was superior to sensory observation as a way of arriving at ultimate knowledge of the "truth" of the world. Nicholas also stressed that mathematical knowledge of the world was superior to knowledge derived from mere observation. He went so far as to state that through mathematics, humans could know the very mind of God.

The idea that the physical world could best be understood through mathematical formulas was espoused by Johannes Kepler, the German astronomer who believed the model of the universe that made the most sense mathematically was the true model. It was through mathematics that Kepler discovered three of the laws of planetary motion and was able to explain how the planets moved in the heliocentric, or sun-centered, model of the universe earlier proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus (Figure 17.17). This was the same view of the universe held by the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei: the true nature of the universe could be discovered only through mathematics.

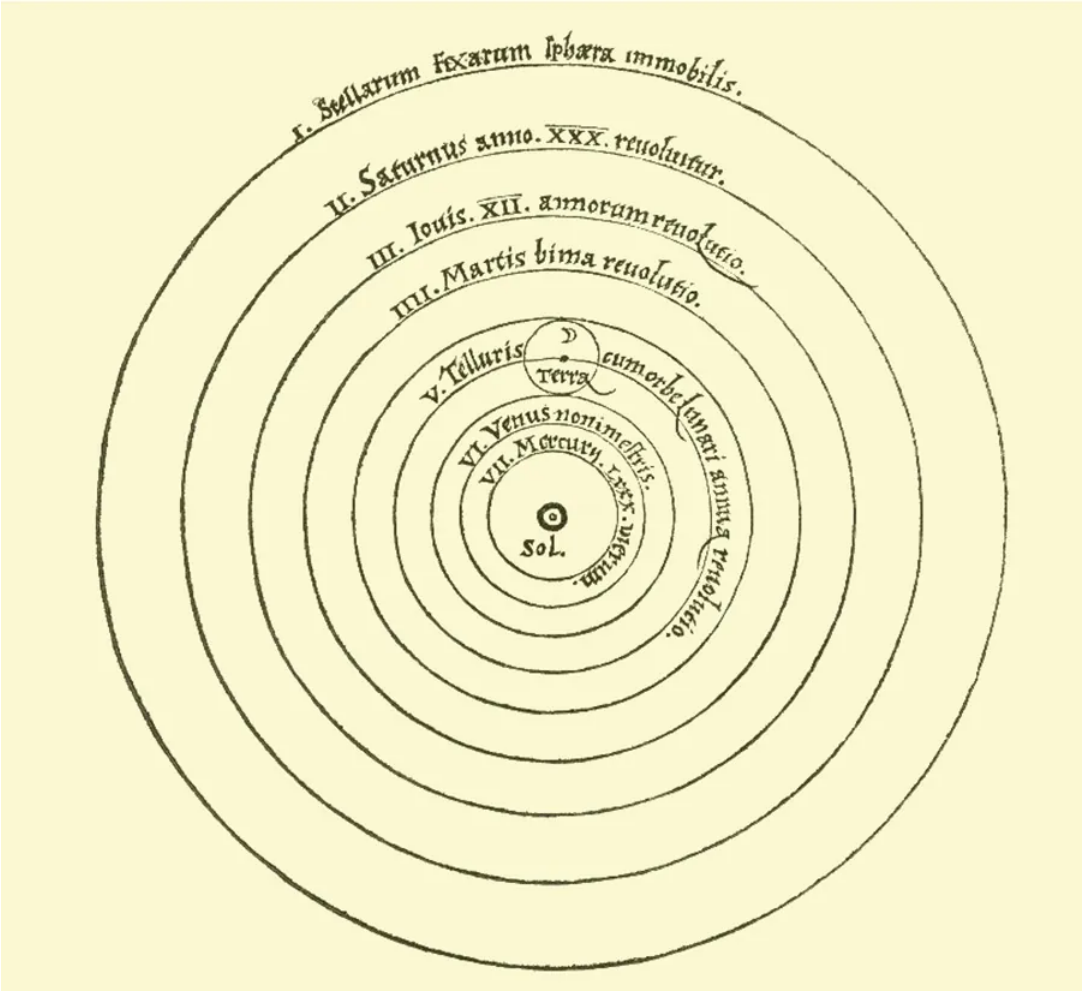


Figure 17.17 The Heliocentric Universe. In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus proposed a model of the universe with the sun at the center, which differed from the medieval Ptolemaic model with the earth in the center. Copernicus's model does not show any planets beyond Saturn. In his model, beyond Saturn there are only fixed stars. (credit: modification of work "Image of heliocentric model from "De revolutionibus orbium coelestium"" by Nicolaus Copernicus/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Although the Neoplatonists did not value Aristotle's empiricism, they did not completely cast his ideas aside. First, his concept of "virtue" influenced the humanists' idea of human excellence. And his emphasis on acquiring knowledge through observation influenced scientists in fields other than astronomy. Observation of nature became of importance not only to scientists but also to the visual artists of the Renaissance. The fifteenth-century Florentine painter Masaccio was the first to incorporate the principles of linear perspective into painting (Figure 17.18). The use of linear perspective had been a "secret" known to the ancient Greeks and Romans but lost and then "rediscovered" by the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi, whose drawings inspired Masaccio. This technique created a sense of realism in visual imagery that had been lacking in medieval art. Later artists such as Leonardo da Vinci conducted studies of animal and human anatomy to make their works more realistic. Michelangelo went beyond attempting to make human beings look realistic and instead idealized the body, in keeping with the new position into which the thinkers of the Renaissance had elevated humans.

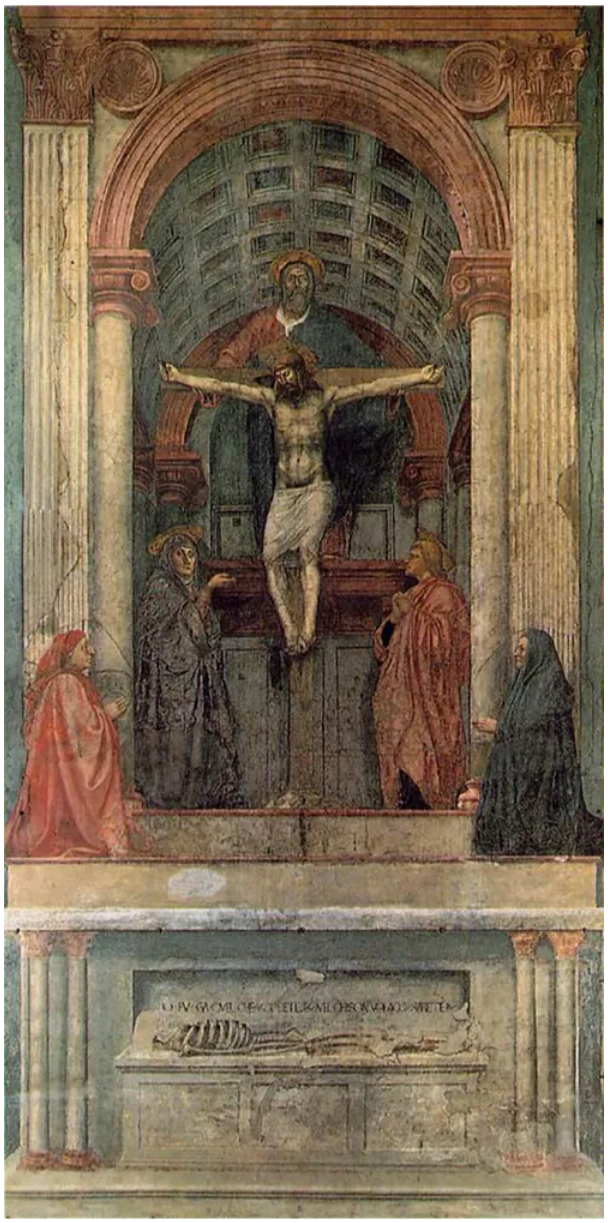


Figure 17.18 Linear Perspective. The fresco *Trinity with the Virgin, Saint John the Evangelist, and Donors*, painted around 1427 in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, shows Masaccio's use of linear perspective to create a realistic image of the interior of a building. (credit: modification of work "Holy Trinity" by Masaccio/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

These short videos from Khan Academy discuss Filippo Brunelleschi's experiment with linear perspective and demonstrate how linear perspective works. There is also an interactive feature that enables you to experiment with linear perspective.

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15.3: From the Mamluks to Ming China

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the system of slavery that existed within the Islamic world
- Explain the unique political and social organization of the Mamluk Sultanate
- Describe Ming dynasty China in the fifteenth century and its responses to foreign influences

In the thirteenth century, a new state came into existence in Egypt and the Levant. Although it grew out of the existing Ayyubid Sultanate, the Mamluk Sultanate was unique among world societies in that it was administered and defended by educated, elite, formerly enslaved men. The Mamluk state grew so powerful that it was able to fend off the advances of the Mongols. At the opposite end of Asia, the Mongols also found themselves displaced by the Han Chinese of the Ming dynasty.

The Slave Soldier System

Many of the Islamic states formed in western Asia over the centuries relied upon a unique means of staffing their armies and administrations—the creation of a highly trained, foreign-born enslaved (or formerly enslaved) elite. Beginning in the ninth century in the Abbasid Caliphate, rulers purchased Turks from beyond the Oxus River in central Asia to serve as soldiers for the state. Enslaved adult men raised outside the state were loyal to their purchaser and not to the state itself, however, and thus they were more willing to revolt if they were not well treated. Briefly losing control of the state in the ninth century because of such uprisings was a lesson for Muslim rulers. Thereafter, they sought to enslave young boys who could be educated and trained within and by the state, ensuring they were more invested in the society they served as adults. Non-Muslim children were chosen because Islam forbade the enslaving of fellow Muslims.

Known as mamluks (from an Arabic word meaning “someone owned”), the boys were taken primarily from Turkic tribes in central Asia, as well as from the Caucasus and eastern Europe, and then converted to Islam and educated. Because they were freed upon completing their training, the rule against enslaving other Muslims was not violated. The largest part of their instruction consisted of training in riding, archery, and military tactics (Figure 17.19). Some were given a formal education in the bureaucracy, in a bid to develop smart and capable administrators for the state.



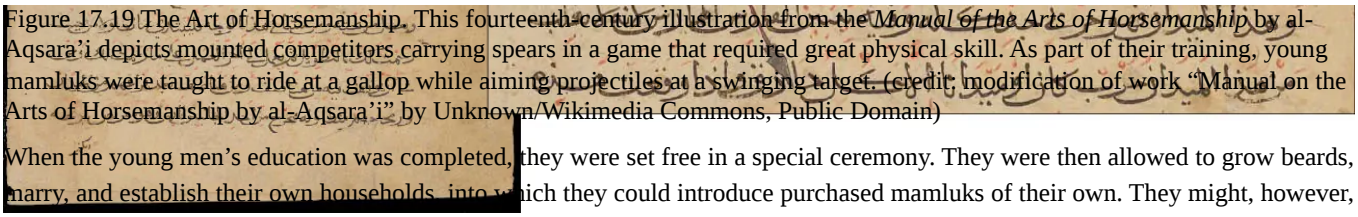


Figure 17.19 The Art of Horsemanship. This fourteenth-century illustration from the *Manual of the Arts of Horsemanship* by al-Aqsara'i depicts mounted competitors carrying spears in a game that required great physical skill. As part of their training, young mamluks were taught to ride at a gallop while aiming projectiles at a swinging target. (credit: modification of work "Manual on the Arts of Horsemanship by al-Aqsara'i" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

When the young men's education was completed, they were set free in a special ceremony. They were then allowed to grow beards, marry, and establish their own households, into which they could introduce purchased mamluks of their own. They might, however, remain in the household of their former owner, the ruler to whom they were expected to remain loyal. In this way, the mamluks somewhat resembled the freed people of ancient Rome, who often retained ties to their former masters.

The relationship between mamluks and their masters was often conceived of as familial in nature, and mamluks often referred to one another as "brother" and to their master as "father." When their training had ended, their "father" would find a place for them in the ruler's service. Most mamluks found positions in the army, and from there they often went on to hold administrative positions. In the Ayyubid Sultanate, the mamluks eventually gained control over the government after deposing the sultan and proceeded to rule the state as the Mamluk Sultanate.

In Mamluk Egypt, having been an enslaved soldier was often the path to the greatest success and standing in society. Important positions were given to mamluks, such as provincial governor and commander of the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca. The sultan himself was a mamluk. Appointed mamluks were regarded as more entitled to positions of power and authority than were a man's biological sons, and while Egyptian mamluks married and produced children, it was considered inappropriate if these offspring were awarded important roles in government when true mamluks were available. The mamluks were displeased when this happened, and it was they who usually determined who became the sultan.

While it might seem like a risk to entrust important governmental and military positions to men who had once been enslaved, the Ayyubids, who had broken away from the Abbasid state to found their own dynasty in the eleventh century, adopted the system because of its advantages. The mamluks were highly trained and well educated, and thus well prepared to occupy the offices given to them. A ruler could pick and choose the most able of them, whereas biology might leave a sultan with children entirely unsuited to occupy positions of authority. The fact that the mamluks were of non-Arab origin and had been taken from their homes in foreign lands as children also meant they were likely to remain loyal to the "father" who had been responsible for their training, and to whom they owed their position in society. While the offspring of the Arab nobility might act to advance the fortunes of their families in ways that did not suit the interests of the sultan, the sultan usually did not need to fear that his mamluks would favor the interests of far-distant, long-absent biological relatives over his own.

Enslaved men occupied a similar position in the Ottoman Empire. Beginning in the fourteenth century, the Ottomans purchased enslaved people or used prisoners of war to fill the ranks of their armies. With their invasion of the Balkans, however, the Ottoman sultans soon turned to gathering Christian children from the European lands they occupied, in order to counter the power of the Turkish nobles who controlled the army and the state's administration.

In a system known as the *devshirme* ("gathering"), Ottoman agents recruited Christian boys as part of the tax imposed on their European subjects (Figure 17.20). Approximately every three to five years, agents of the sultan took boys, ideally aged between eight and ten, to serve the Ottoman state. They were taught to speak Turkish and brought to Istanbul where they were educated and made to convert to Islam. When they became adolescents, they were trained to become scribes, palace administrators, or soldiers. Those selected to serve in the palace at the end of their training often rose to occupy important positions, including Grand Vizier. In addition, many were awarded timars in exchange for their service and had the opportunity to become wealthy.



Figure 17.20 The *Devshirme*. In this Ottoman miniature painting from 1558, Christian parents look on as their sons are led away to be enslaved by the sultan. The children carry a few personal possessions in sacks over their shoulders as the seated Ottoman official registers them. (credit: "Janissary Recruitment in the Balkans" by Ali Amir Beg/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The majority of boys were trained as soldiers, some of whom became members of the elite infantry corps called the Janissaries (from the Turkish words *yeni cheri*, or "new soldier"). They accompanied the sultan into battle and served as his household guard. Like the mamluks, the Janissaries were expected to be loyal to their master, the Ottoman sultan. In fact, the sultans believed the Janissaries would prove more dependable than the noble vassals, because they were entirely dependent upon the sultans for their status and privileges, and because they had been cut off from the biological families to whom they might otherwise have owed their first loyalty. The risk of trusting in the Turkish nobility had become clear at the Battle of Ankara when Bayezid I's Turkish vassals fled, abandoning him to the Mongols.

In Their Own Words

Memoirs of a Janissary

The account that follows is by a Serbian named Konstantin Mihailović. Born in 1430, he was taken as a child to be trained as a Janissary and recorded his experiences in a book, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, written between 1490 and 1501.

> *And from there the Emperor [the Ottoman Sultan] marched and surrounded a city which they call Novo Brdo, "Mountain of Silver and Gold," and having attacked it, conquered it, but by means of an agreement: he promised to let them keep their possessions and also not to enslave their young women and boys . . . . Having arrived in the city the Turks ordered all the householders with their families, both males and females, to go out of the city through the small gate to a ditch, leaving their possessions in the houses. And so it happened that they went one after another, and the Emperor himself standing before the small gate sorted out the boys on one side and the females on the other, and the men along the ditch on one side and the women on the other side. All those among the men who were the most important and distinguished he ordered decapitated. The remainder he ordered released to the city. As for their possessions, nothing of theirs was harmed. The boys were 320 in number and the females 74. The females he distributed among the heathens, but he took the boys for himself into the Janissaries, and sent them beyond the sea to Anatolia, where their preserve is.*
>
> *I was also taken in that city with my two brothers, and wherever the Turks to whom we were entrusted drove us in a band, and wherever we came to forests or mountains, there we always thought about killing the Turks and running away by ourselves among the mountains, but our youth did not permit us to do that; for I myself with nineteen others ran away from them in the night from a village called Samokovo. Then the whole region pursued us, and having caught and bound us, they beat us and tortured us and dragged us behind horses. It is a wonder that our soul remained in us. Then others vouched for us, and my two brothers, that we would not permit this anymore, and so they peacefully led us across the sea.*
>
> *—Konstantin Mihailović, Memoirs of a Janissary*

- How does Mihailović feel about the Ottomans? Why does he feel this way?
- How loyal a Janissary was he likely to have been? Why?
- While the Janissaries were elite members of Ottoman society, they remained enslaved people. What sense does this excerpt and the rest of the chapter give you of the Janissary experience?

The Janissaries held high status in Ottoman society. Although many parents protested the taking of their children and sometimes rebelled against the system, others who hoped to provide their sons with a means of advancing in society reportedly bribed Ottoman officials to select them. Some Muslim parents, whose sons were not subject to the *devshirme*, supposedly even lied about their religion to secure a spot for them in the sultan's service.

The sultans also kept other kinds of enslaved people. Christian women from foreign lands were purchased in slave markets, and others were given to the sultan as gifts or taken as prisoners of war. They were placed in the sultan's harem, where they lived among his children and female relatives and served the ladies of the court as attendants. Women in the harem were ranked according to a strict hierarchy in which they could advance based on talent and length of service. The minority chosen to become sexual partners of the sultan were also elevated, especially if they bore him children. Some became the mothers of future sultans and were given the title "lady." They might hold great power. While some of these women held great power, most remained

servants, and after a few years of service, they were usually released from their duties and married to palace officials. Guarding the Ottoman harem were enslaved eunuchs, castrated men who were usually purchased in slave markets in Africa and whose perceived differences in sexuality led them to be assigned made them well suited to important roles such as managing the household of the ruler and other nobles. Despite their enslaved status, the control these men exerted over the harem gave them great power.

Although the mamluks and enslaved men and women who served the Ottoman sultan were considered among the elite of their societies and occupied relatively privileged positions, people other than sultans owned enslaved people who performed hard physical labor on farms or as domestic servants. They might be poorly fed and clothed and were neither paid nor educated. They also could not expect to gain their freedom. As property, they could be pawned or sold at their owner's whim, and regardless of age, they might be sexually abused. The experiences of these people were far more typical and representative of the enslaved, including Africans enslaved in the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century, than were those of the mamluks, the Janissaries, or the women of the Ottoman harem.

The Mamluk Sultanate

The mamluks of Egypt reached the pinnacle of their unusually high status in 1250. In that year, they deposed the last Ayyubid sultan, then only a child, and took control of the state.

The Ayyubids, who ruled the Levant and Egypt beginning in the eleventh century, had established their dynasty by breaking away from the Abbasid Caliphate. In the early 1200s, as the members of the Ayyubid ruling family competed with one another for supremacy, they amassed large numbers of mamluk guards and soldiers, consisting mostly of Kipchak Turks from the steppes north of the Black Sea, to assist them. When rulers defeated brothers and uncles in their quest for power, they also took control of their mamluk forces. Soon the mamluk troops vastly outnumbered the members of the Ayyubid Arab ruling class.

In 1249, Sultan as-Salih Ayyub died. His son replaced him but was assassinated by mamluks in 1250. As-Salih's widow, Shajur al-Durr, also ruled briefly, but she was soon deposed. The Ayyubid commander of the city of Aleppo in Syria initially challenged mamluk rule and took an army to Egypt to reclaim control of the state, prompting the mamluk commander Aybak, whom Shajur al-Durr had married to bolster her own claim to power, to place an Ayyubid royal child on the throne as a puppet ruler and his nominal "master." Following his defeat of the Ayyubid forces, Aybak deposed the child sultan and took power in his own right, permanently ending Ayyubid rule in Egypt and formally establishing the Mamluk Sultanate. When Aybak was assassinated in 1257, his teenage son took the throne, but true power in Egypt was wielded by another mamluk commander, Saif ad-Din Qutuz.

The new Mamluk Sultanate soon found its power tested by the arrival of invading Mongol forces. In 1258, Hulagu Khan attacked and destroyed Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate. His troops then took the city of Damascus, which lay within the territory claimed by the Mamluk Sultanate. Hulagu demanded that Qutuz surrender Egypt, but the sultan refused. In 1260, the Mongol and Mamluk armies clashed at the Battle of Ain Jalut, in what is today modern-day Israel, and the Mamluks were triumphant. This halted the Mongol advance in western Asia and prevented them from invading North Africa.

Qutuz did not live to relish the Mamluk victory over the Mongols, however. Shortly after his triumph at Ain Jalut, he was assassinated, and a rival mamluk commander, Baybars, claimed the throne as sultan. Baybars established the Bahri dynasty, named for the location in Cairo of the mamluk barracks from which he had come. The rulers of the Bahri dynasty were mamluks of primarily Turkish origin. Unlike members of most dynasties, they were not generally descendants of the founder. Two of Baybars' sons succeeded to the throne following his death, but they were quickly deposed by rival mamluk army factions. This was the case for most Mamluk sultans, who each ruled for an average of only seven years, and often much less.

Stability was a constant problem for the Mamluk Sultanate. Although it remained in control of Egypt and the Levant until it was defeated by the Ottomans in 1517, the sultans' rule was never secure. Sultans were routinely deposed—and often murdered—by rival claimants to the throne. Provincial administrators often rebelled against the authority of Cairo as well. The problem lay in the origin of the mamluks themselves. Having undergone rigorous training and the experience of enslavement, and having risen through the ranks based solely on their abilities, the mamluks were scornful of those who had not had a similarly harsh upbringing and won their position based on merit. Thus, when sultans attempted to establish their biological sons as their heirs, the army often regarded them as unworthy and refused to follow them. Furthermore, while mamluk soldiers were loyal to their masters, they did not feel similar loyalty to other commanders. When a sultan died or was deposed, his mamluks were not inclined to obey the person who took his place. The succession to the throne of the Mamluk Sultanate thus always remained uncertain as the army continued to

assert its right to choose (and depose) the ruler. Mamluk history was marked by repeated attempts by individual commanders to seize power, and by the army's removal of "unworthy" rulers in favor of others.

Despite the fact that the line of succession always remained unclear, the Mamluk Sultanate was a force to be reckoned with, and its troops were successful at defeating their enemies. Beginning during the rule of Baybars, for example, the Mamluks gradually retook control of the Christian Crusader States in the Levant, either razing their fortresses or converting them to Mamluk garrisons. The final Christian stronghold, Acre, fell in 1291. The Mamluks also defeated the Christian Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia and stopped an attempted Mongol invasion of Syria in 1313 before establishing a peace treaty with the Ilkhanate Mongols in Persia in 1322 (Figure 17.21).

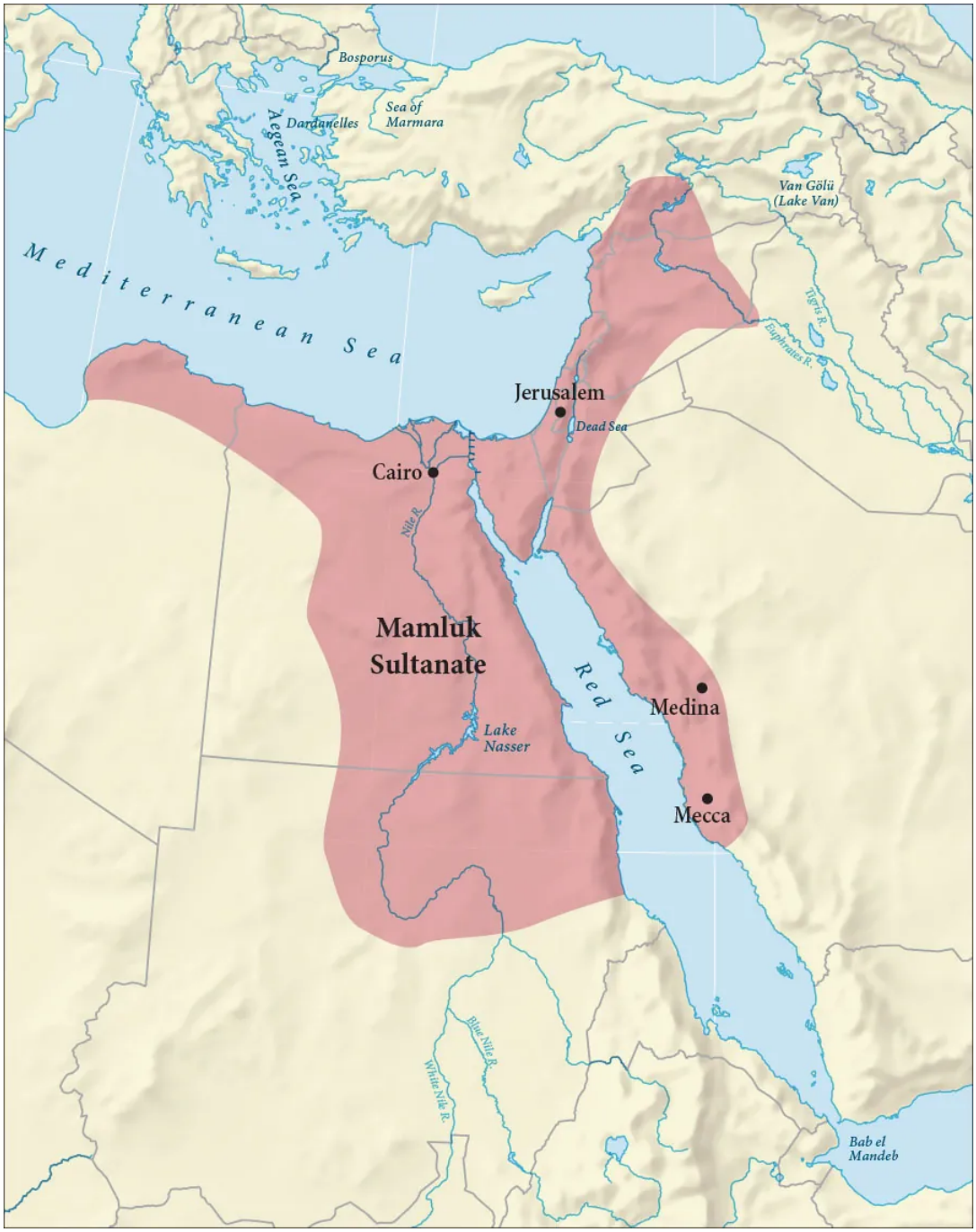


Figure 17.21 The Mamluk Sultanate. This map shows the territory claimed by the Mamluk Sultanate at its greatest extent in 1317. The empire controlled access to the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Nile as well as the holy cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

During the first century of Mamluk rule, the time of the Bahri dynasty, the empire flourished. Following the capture of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and the execution of Caliph al-Musta'sim, members of the Abbasid family sought refuge in Egypt. In 1261, Baybars proclaimed al-Mustansir, the nephew of al-Musta'sim, the new caliph. In return, al-Mustansir recognized Baybars's authority to rule over the lands once held by the Abbasids. Thus, while the Mamluk sultans never claimed the caliphate for themselves, they sought legitimacy for their rule through their role as protectors of the caliph.

Mamluk rulers were pious Muslims who protected pilgrims bound for the holy cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. They built mosques and madrasas, and Cairo grew into an important center of religious scholarship. Unwilling to risk the displeasure of Muslim judges, the mamluks supported all four major schools of Islamic law. They also built hospitals, primary schools, and public fountains to provide the poor with clean drinking water. Their championing of Islam and their building of charitable institutions provided them with an important connection to their non-Turkish subjects, who might otherwise have resented their rule.

Link to Learning

Although the Mamluk Sultanate is known primarily for the military prowess of its armies, Mamluk society also produced unique architecture and prized works of art. You can learn more about Mamluk art and architecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art website.

In the late fourteenth century, a new Mamluk dynasty came to power—the Burji, also named for the location of its mamluk barracks. The Burji sultans were mamluks of primarily Circassian and Georgian origin, unlike the Turks of the Bahri dynasty. The first Burji sultan, al-Zahir Barquq, assumed the throne in 1382. Almost immediately, plots emerged to remove him, one headed by the caliph who hoped to rule in his own right and another by Turkish tribes in Syria. Both attempts were defeated, but the peace did not last long. In 1399, 1434, and 1437, soldiers rioted in the streets of Cairo. Sometimes the riots began as conflicts between rival mamluk factions that spread to the streets and involved civilians. At other times, soldiers rioted when they had not been paid. In 1441, riots were sparked by food shortages and the perception that the grain trade, from which government officials profited, was inefficient and the prices unfair. Merchants' stores were plundered by angry mobs. In the second half of the fifteenth century, mamluk-initiated chaos erupted nearly every year as soldiers fought in the streets and attacked the homes of the wealthy and government officials. Even religious scholars were not safe.

Unable to maintain order in their own capital, Mamluk rulers also had to confront rebellions in more far-flung parts of their domain. The Mamluks had difficulty establishing control over Syrian Arabs and the nomadic and seminomadic Bedouin tribes of Upper Egypt. Bedouin rebels were punished severely; men were impaled or burned alive, while women and children were enslaved. The heads of rebels were placed on the gates of Cairo as a warning against future revolts. Syrian Arabs were punished less harshly because their assistance was needed to repel attacks by Mongols and the Ottomans.

Although they remained an elite class in Egypt until 1811, the Mamluks found their sovereignty over the region threatened when they lost control of Syria to the Ottomans in 1516. The Ottoman sultan Selim I then conquered Cairo in 1517. Rather than depose the Mamluks, however, the Ottomans allowed them to rule their old domains on their conquerors' behalf, though true power lay with the Ottomans in Istanbul.

Ming China and Its Neighbors

The ascendance of the Turks and the decline of Mongol rule in western Asia in the thirteenth century were soon followed by the decline of Mongol dominance in East Asia as well. By the second half of the thirteenth century, China found itself beset by problems. The Yuan dynasty emperor Kublai Khan waged a series of expensive campaigns against the kingdoms of Burma (now Myanmar), Annam, and Champa in Southeast Asia, and Java in the Indian Ocean. Two attempts to invade Japan failed, and revolts against Mongol rule erupted.

One of these revolts was the Ispah Rebellion, which began in Quanzhou. A major port city in southeastern China's Fujian Province, Quanzhou was on the Maritime Silk Road, an ocean trading route that connected China to other trading ports in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, India, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and Egypt. Along this route, highly sought-after Chinese goods like porcelain and silk flowed westward to Europe, Africa, India, and western Asia.

Quanzhou had a population of more than two million, making it the largest port in China and likely in the world in the thirteenth century. Most of the population were foreign-born merchants from Arabia, Persia, India, Armenia, and other lands. The Muslims

who lived in Quanzhou were among the many Arabs, Persians, and Turks from western and central Asia who had come to China to trade or to serve the Yuan government. Though they encouraged Muslims from elsewhere in Asia to settle in China, Yuan officials often discriminated against them, forbidding the butchering of animals according to Islamic law and interfering with Muslim marriage laws and efforts by the Muslim community to govern themselves. In 1357, Muslims in Quanzhou rose against the Mongols. The rebellion was not crushed until 1367.

Attempts to suppress such revolts, which continued after the death of Kublai, drained the treasury, as had Kublai's unsuccessful military campaigns. His successors often mismanaged the treasury and sometimes held the throne for only brief periods of time. By the first half of the fourteenth century, natural disasters were compounding the difficulties China already faced. Droughts and floods led to food shortages and famines. Inflation and scarcity combined to raise the price of food beyond the reach of many peasants. Unusually cold weather worsened people's suffering, and from the 1330s through the 1350s, epidemics swept through various parts of the country, killing millions. Bandits roamed the countryside, and the army made little effort to hunt down the numerous outlaws who preyed on the populace.

A number of religious sects arose foretelling the end of days. One of these was the White Lotus, a sect of Buddhism that announced the coming of a new Buddha and thus a new age (Figure 17.22). Seizing on the White Lotus prophecy, a secret peasant society named the Red Turbans called for the overthrow of Mongol rule and the return of the Song dynasty. Armed rebellion broke out in 1351. In 1352, a young wandering Buddhist monk named Zhu Yuanzhang joined the Red Turbans and married the daughter of one of its leaders. In 1356, his forces captured the southern Chinese city of Nanjing. After eliminating his rivals within the Red Turbans, in 1368 Zhu defeated the last Yuan emperor, who then abandoned China. Zhu destroyed the Yuan palace in the capital of Dadu (Beijing), proclaimed himself emperor with the name of Hongwu, meaning vast and martial, and dubbed his new dynasty the Ming ("bright").



Figure 17.22 The White Lotus Society. The White Lotus Society, a meeting of which is depicted in ink on this fifteenth-century paper handscroll, was originally established in China to spread the teachings of a novel sect of Buddhism that foresaw the coming of a new age. (credit: “White Lotus Society” by Unknown/John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1913/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Hongwu began by enforcing his power and bolstering China’s security as the Ming dynasty’s first emperor (Figure 17.23). Although he tried to resolve social disparities by abolishing slavery and increasing taxes on the wealthy, the cost of his army put a significant strain on the Chinese economy. He was never able to fully bridge the gap between rich and poor, and his attempts to protect China from invasion and rebellion led to repressive domestic policies. Nevertheless, with the restoration of agricultural productivity and political stability, the early Ming era was a time of significant wealth and power for China.



Figure 17.23 Zhu Yuanzhang. This hanging scroll silk painting of the fourteenth century is an official court portrait of the first emperor of the Ming dynasty. It is about 8 feet high by about 5 feet wide. (credit: “Official court painting of the Hongwu Emperor” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Hongwu’s reign was marked by efforts to consolidate his own power, to protect himself from attack, and to reassert and expand Chinese influence. He eliminated the office of chief minister so that he might govern without interference, established a force of secret police, and ordered the execution of thousands of people who he believed disagreed with his polices. He also acted swiftly to stamp out rebellions. A revolt by the Miao ethnic group in Hunan Province in the southwest was crushed. The Kingdom of Dali, where Mongol forces had taken refuge in what is now Yunnan Province in the southeast, was defeated and the region incorporated into China. In 1387, Ming forces invaded Manchuria in the northeast, where Mongols loyal to the Yuan dynasty had also established a foothold. To protect the borders in underpopulated areas, Hongwu made military service in these regions hereditary. He forced the mass relocation of peasants from the south to augment the population in parts of central and northern China that had been hard hit by crop failures and epidemics.

Hongwu's efforts to expand Chinese power continued under his successor, his son Zhu Di, known as the Yongle emperor. From 1406 to 1427, Chinese forces tried unsuccessfully to invade and subdue the kingdom of Vietnam, and to counter the continuing Mongol threat, the Great Wall of China was repaired and lengthened. In other ways, though, Zhu Di reversed his father's policies. Hongwu had wanted to isolate China from dangerous foreign influences and so had forbidden nearly all maritime trade. The Yongle emperor strove instead to establish relations with foreign lands in order to make their rulers aware of China's wealth and power. To this end, he dispatched Admiral Zheng He on seven naval expeditions between 1405 and 1433. Chinese fleets consisting of thousands of ships sailed to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, and East Africa. Zheng He presented foreign rulers with gifts of porcelain, silk, and gold to impress upon them the splendor of the Ming dynasty, and he returned with tribute for the emperor in the form of ivory and exotic animals such as zebras and ostriches.

Zhu Di also established diplomatic relations with Shah Rukh, the son and heir of Timur, as well as with rulers in the Philippines and the Indian Ocean. China had no direct contact with the Ottoman state, however. When he ascended the throne, Hongwu sent an announcement to the Byzantine emperor, who he believed was still in power in Constantinople. After this, however, there was no correspondence or direct contact between the two states for at least a century.

The Yongle emperor moved the capital of China from Nanjing to Beijing, in the center of which he began construction of the new Forbidden City, a walled compound consisting of palaces, temples, and gardens for use by the emperor and the members of his household. In 1420, he also ordered the building of an elaborate tomb north of Beijing, where other members of the dynasty also built final resting places for themselves (Figure 17.24). All these structures conveyed an image of China's power, wealth, and magnificence.



Figure 17.24 Ming Tombs. Ming dynasty emperors built thirteen tombs at the foot of the Jundu Mountains near Beijing, shown here in a nineteenth-century ink and watercolor image. The three red arches in the lower left mark the beginning of the Spirit Way, a four-mile road that runs through the valley. (credit: "Ming shi san ling tu" by Arthur W. Hummel/Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Public Domain)

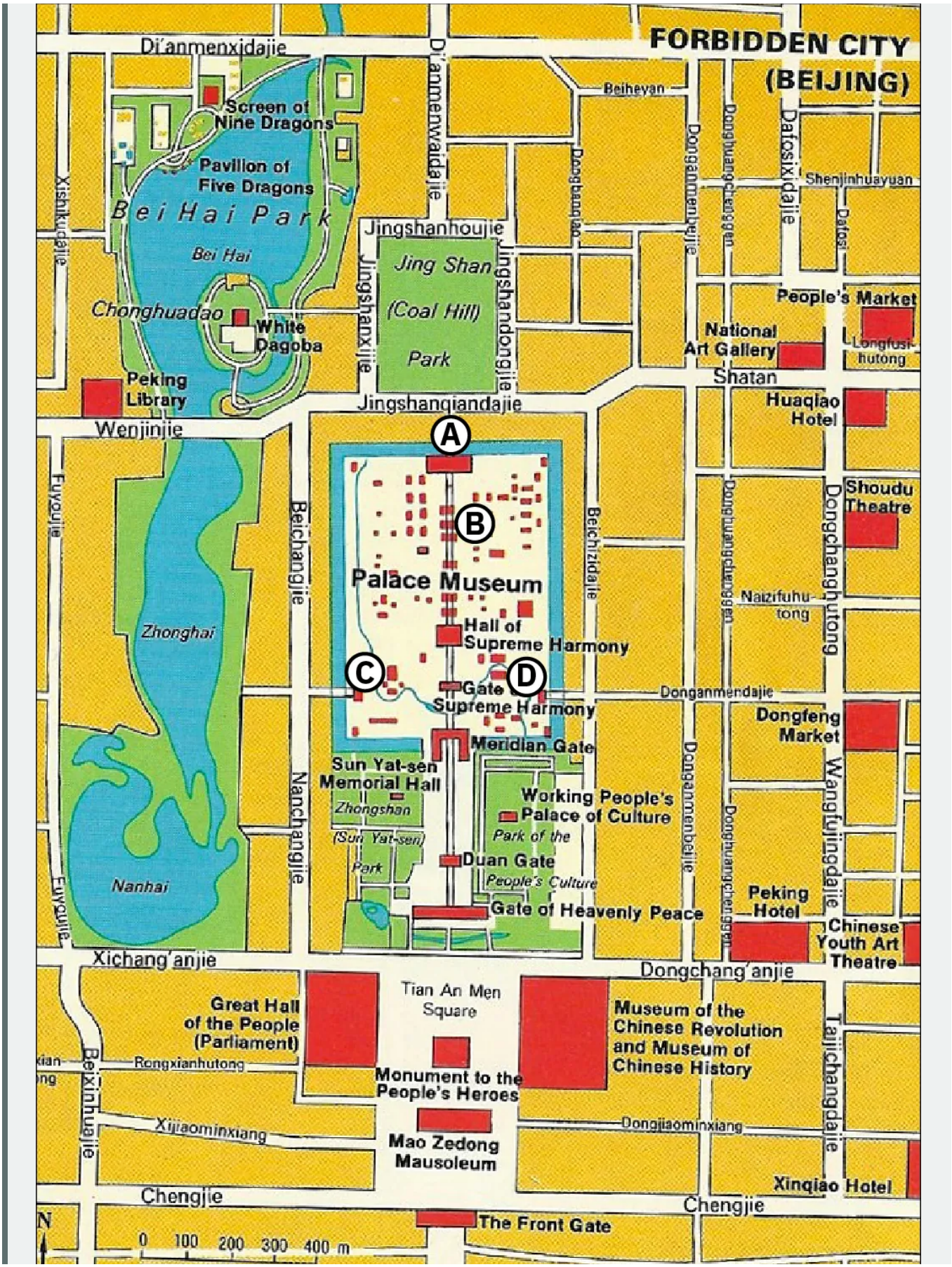
Beyond the Book

The Forbidden City

The construction of the Forbidden City (Figure 17.25) in the center of Beijing began in the reign of the Yongle emperor. Within its walls were gardens, palaces, and temples. Guards at its gates carefully limited access to only the important people who lived

and worked inside it. The main entrance was the Meridian Gate, which had five separate gateways. The central one was reserved for exclusive use by the emperor with only two exceptions: the empress could use the central gate on her wedding day, as could men who had successfully passed the imperial examinations for entering into state service as an administrator.

The Ming emperors held court in the Hall of Supreme Harmony. During the Ming dynasty, the emperor lived in the Palace of Heavenly Purity, while the empress lived nearby in the smaller Palace of Earthly Tranquility. To either side of these palaces were the six western palaces and the six eastern palaces where the emperor's consorts lived.


FORBIDDEN CITY
(BEIJING)
Di'anmenxidajie
Di'anmenwaidajie
Beiheyan
Donganmenbeijie
Dongchuanchangjie
Dongchuanchangjie
Datoasixidajie
Shenjinhuayuan
Datosi
Screen of Nine Dragons
Pavilion of Five Dragons
Bei Hai Park
Bei Hai
Xishikudajie
Jingshanhoujie
Jingshanxijie
Jing Shan (Coal Hill) Park
Jingshandongjie
Chonghuadao
White Dagoba
Peking Library
People's Market
National Art Gallery
Longfusi-hutong
Shatan
Huaqiao Hotel
Jingshanqiandajie
Wenjinjie
A
B
C
D
Palace Museum
Hall of Supreme Harmony
Gate of Supreme Harmony
Meridian Gate
Fuyoujie
Beichangjie
Zhonghai
Nanhai
Beichizidajie
Donganmendajie
Dongchanghutong
Shoudu Theatre
Naizifuhu-tong
Dongfeng Market
Wangfujingdajie
Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall
Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) Park
Nanchangjie
Working People's Palace of Culture
Park of the People's Culture
Duan Gate
Gate of Heavenly Peace
Peking Hotel
Chinese Youth Art Theatre
Xichang'anjie
Dongchang'anjie
Tian An Men Square
Great Hall of the People (Parliament)
Museum of the Chinese Revolution and Museum of Chinese History
Taijichangdajie
Rongxianhutong
Beixinhuajie
Monument to the People's Heroes
Xijiaominxiang
Dongjiaominxiang
Mao Zedong Mausoleum
Xinqiao Hotel
Chengjie
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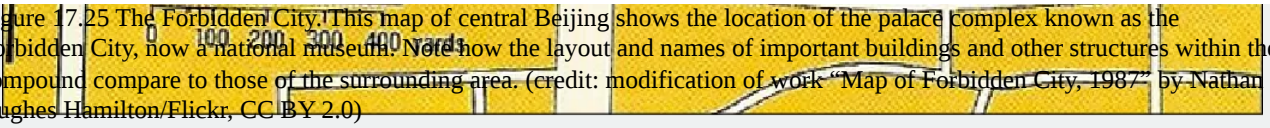


Figure 17.25 The Forbidden City. This map of central Beijing shows the location of the palace complex known as the Forbidden City, now a national museum. Note how the layout and names of important buildings and other structures within the compound compare to those of the surrounding area. (credit: modification of work "Map of Forbidden City, 1987" by Nathan Hughes Hamilton/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

- Examine the layout of the Forbidden City and the names of its palaces, gates, and other structures. What does this compound tell you about the values of the Ming dynasty?
- Can you think of any complexes that are similar to the Forbidden City? If so, what and where are they?

Despite their wealth and power, the Ming emperors could still find themselves helpless in the face of Mongol aggression. The Yongle emperor had unsuccessfully attempted to subdue the Oirats, the westernmost of the Mongol tribes, who lived in what is now western Mongolia and the Altai region of Siberia. In 1449, the Oirat leader Esen took the twenty-one-year-old Ming emperor Yingzong hostage after the Mongol army defeated a much larger Chinese military force at the Battle of Tumu Fortress. The Ming responded by demoting Yingzong to the rank of "retired emperor" and placed his younger half-brother on the throne instead.

Esen's efforts to return Yingzong to Beijing—after conveniently marrying the captive emperor to his daughter—failed, and Mongol efforts to take Beijing by force were repulsed. Yingzong remained a prisoner of the Oirat until a member of his court ransomed him and returned him to Beijing, where he was placed under house arrest in a palace in the Forbidden City by his half-brother, who had no intention of giving up the throne. It was another seven years before Yingzong managed to unseat (and kill) his half-brother and reclaim his throne.

Yingzong was forced to confront Mongol forces again in 1461 when the Chinese general Cao Qin attempted a coup with the assistance of Mongol soldiers. The emperor was saved only when a timely downpour foiled efforts to burn the gates that blocked the rebels' entry to the Forbidden City.

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15.4: Gunpowder and Nomads in a Transitional Age

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe gunpowder weaponry and its effect on early modern society
- Explain the reasons for the decline in nomadic societies in this period and beyond

The development of gunpowder and firearms technology in the late Middle Ages and early modern era had a tremendous impact on many societies. Firearms changed the nature of siege warfare and reduced the effectiveness of mounted warriors in battle, which in turn influenced the decisions of governments and the social organization of many states. Firearms also had an effect on nomadic societies that, before the early modern era, had often managed to dominate settled societies.

Social Change and the Adoption of Gunpowder

Societies like those of the Turks and the Mongols had originally gained power as a result of their prowess as mounted warriors. Turkish fighters, whether Janissaries or mamluks, were renowned for their archery and equestrian abilities. The Mongols also awed their opponents with their skills as archers and riders. In the tenth century, however, the invention of gunpowder transformed the manner in which these societies and others made war.

The first recorded use of gunpowder in battle occurred in China in 919. Scholars believe gunpowder was invented as a by-product of experiments conducted by Chinese alchemists, a group of people who pursued ways to turn ordinary metals into gold. A painting from Dunhuang in western China depicts a figure holding a tube from which flames are issuing forth (Figure 17.26). In 1126, a Chinese army was described as using similar tubes made of bamboo to fire projectiles at their opponents. Only six years later, another Chinese army made use of a bamboo cannon on wheels to destroy the walls of a city to which they had laid siege. By the thirteenth century, the Chinese were forging cannons from bronze.



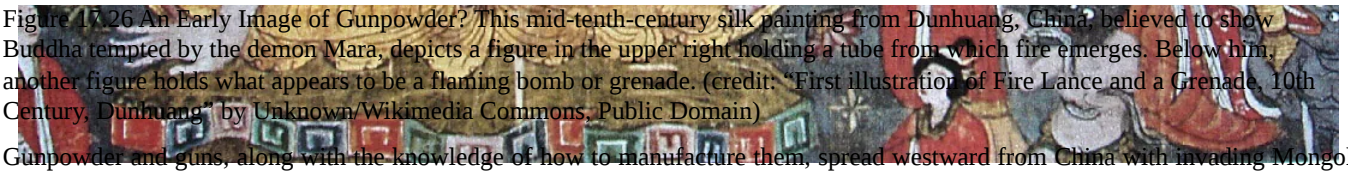


Figure 17.26 An Early Image of Gunpowder? This mid-tenth-century silk painting from Dunhuang, China, believed to show Buddha tempted by the demon Mara, depicts a figure in the upper right holding a tube from which fire emerges. Below him, another figure holds what appears to be a flaming bomb or grenade. (credit: "First illustration of Fire Lance and a Grenade, 10th Century, Dunhuang" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Gunpowder and guns, along with the knowledge of how to manufacture them, spread westward from China with invading Mongol armies. This was not entirely new technology, however. The Arabs of this region already knew how to create flammable substances using petroleum, and the Byzantines employed a substance made from naphtha, called "Greek fire," to set enemy ships alight (Figure 17.27). Arab texts of the thirteenth century contain numerous recipes for gunpowder and descriptions of rockets and other weapons that made use of it. The Mongols employed gunpowder and incendiary devices when laying siege to cities but did not adopt guns for fighting on horseback. The Arabs and Turks did, however. At the Battle of Ain Jalut in 1260, the mamluk forces that successfully fought off a Mongol army and prevented it from conquering Egypt were armed with an early type of cannon.



Figure 17.27 Greek Fire. A twelfth-century codex illustration shows the Byzantines using Greek fire to burn an enemy ship during a rebellion of the ninth century. The use of Greek fire in a variety of forms was a critical weapon for the Byzantines for centuries and made them a formidable force on the seas. (credit: "Greek Fire, from Codex Skylitzes Matritensis" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Europeans probably first encountered early versions of firearms in Russia, where the Mongols had introduced Chinese technology. Western Europeans discovered recipes for gunpowder in Arabic texts brought back from the Crusades or, in the case of Spain, introduced by the Muslims who established kingdoms there from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries. By the fifteenth century, numerous European countries had begun to use gunpowder and guns in battle. Some of the earliest weapons employed exploding gunpowder to fire arrows. By the thirteenth century, European and Ottoman armies were using early cannons called bombards to destroy the walls of cities and fortresses.

The use of early firearms, cannons, and gunpowder transformed the ways in which wars were fought and also changed the societies that adopted this technology. On the battlefield, explosions could not only kill soldiers but also panic horses ridden by mounted warriors and thwart cavalry charges. Before the adoption of bombards and cannon, sieges of cities could drag on interminably; some lasted for years. So long as the people within the city walls had food and water, they would not surrender. Bombards and cannon allowed armies to breach stone walls, however; even a modest opening gave enemy attackers the opportunity to enter the city and do battle with the forces within. It was the use of cannon that finally allowed the Ottomans to destroy the walls of Constantinople and bring an end to the Byzantine Empire in 1453 (Figure 17.28). Earlier attempts to defeat the city had failed because armies could not break through the walls and were unable to carry on a prolonged siege that could reduce the Byzantines to

starvation. The ability to destroy fortifications helped rulers assert power both in battle and at home. Nobles found it difficult to challenge the power of rulers whose cannon could destroy their castles.



Figure 17.28 The Dardanelles Gun. Cannons like this Dardanelles gun allowed the Ottoman Empire to conquer Constantinople in 1453. The Dardanelles gun was still in use nearly four hundred years later. (credit: “Dardanelles Gun Turkish Bronze 15c” by “The Land”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The use of cannon also changed the nature of military defenses. To give added strength to city or fortress walls, earthen banks were built up inside them. Fortresses and city defenses were designed in the shape of stars so guns could be aimed in all directions, preventing an enemy from bringing artillery within reach of the walls (Figure 17.29). Engineers who knew how to build or destroy the new styles of fortress were in high demand. Paying for their expertise and for cannon, gunpowder, and cannon balls was expensive; rulers in societies that adopted guns taxed peasants heavily to pay for this new style of warfare.

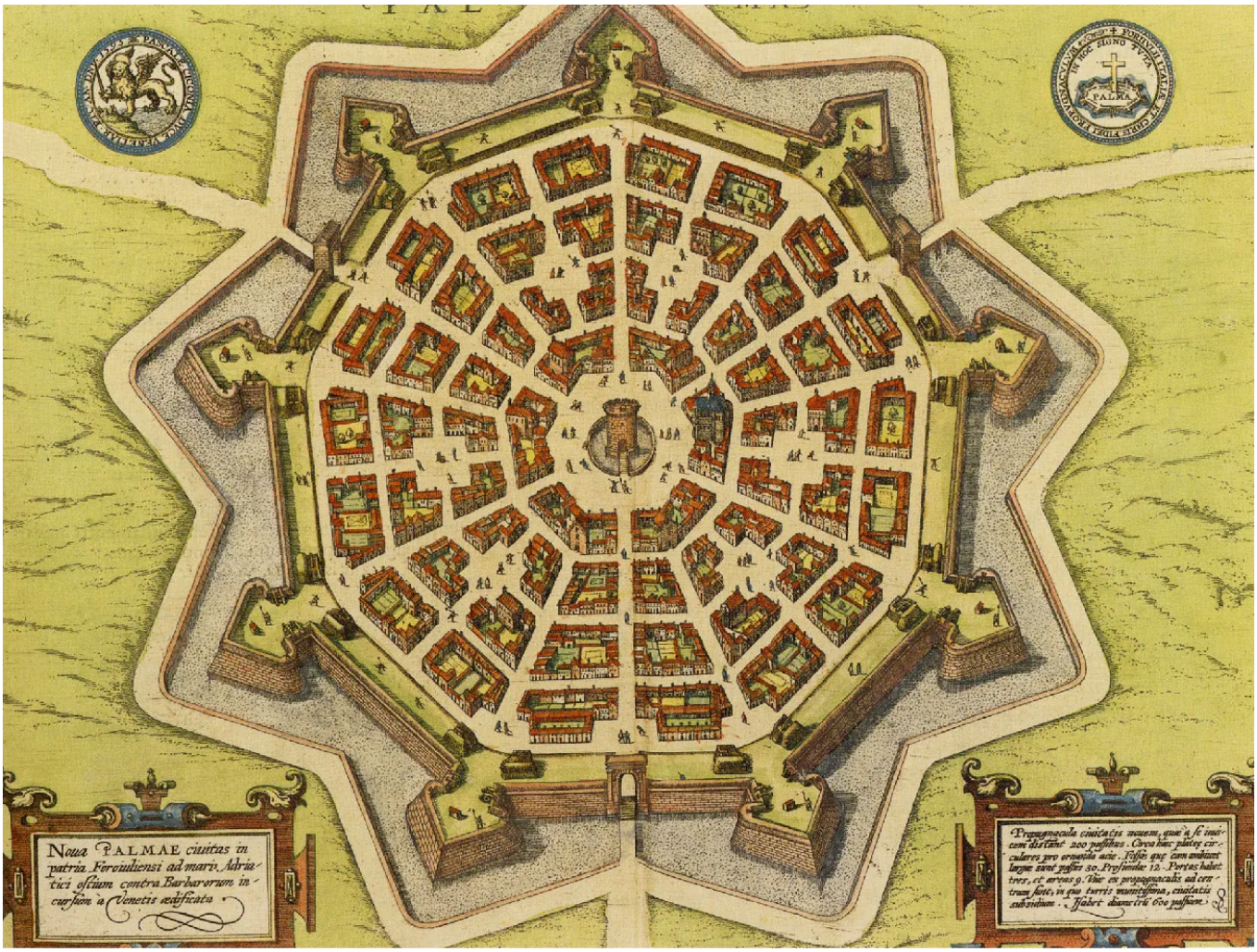


Figure 17.29 A Star Fort. This anonymous artist's seventeenth-century illustration of the Italian city of Palmanova shows its walls designed in the shape of a star for improved defense. (credit: "Palmanova1600" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The nature of armies changed as well. Before the invention of gunpowder, cavalry were the most effective troops a commander could place in the field. Mounted warriors could attack and escape much faster than soldiers on foot, and they could reach down from horseback to deliver fatal blows to infantry or trample them underfoot. Guns deprived the cavalry of these advantages because they could kill riders and their mounts before they came within striking distance of opponents on the ground.

The development of handheld guns for individual soldiers lagged behind improvements in large artillery pieces like cannon. Early firearms were heavy and difficult to carry and maneuver. An arquebus, one of the earliest guns, had to be propped up on pieces of wood to be fired because it was too heavy to hold easily (Figure 17.30). Early firearms were also unreliable, inaccurate, and slow to load. A skilled archer like a mamluk soldier could fire several arrows in the time it took to reload a gun. Indeed, even after firearms were introduced, many armies still relied on infantry armed with bows and arrows. The Ottomans, for example, used peasant soldiers called *azebs* who carried bows and arrows, sabers, and sometimes halberds (weapons that combined a spear and an axe). *Azebs* bore the brunt of the enemy's frontal attack before moving to the side and allowing cannon and Janissaries with guns, who had been stationed behind them, to fire at the oncoming foe.



Figure 17.30 The Arquebus. The arquebus, an early gun, was so large and difficult to maneuver that it had to be propped on forked rods before it could be fired. (credit: “Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français de l’époque carlovingienne à la Renaissance - illustration Tome 6” by Viollet-le-Duc/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The adoption of firearms like the arquebus required the development of new military tactics to enable them to be used effectively in battle. For example, military commanders adapted the technique of volley fire, which had been used by archers and crossbow fighters, to the use of firearms. Because early guns like the arquebus were so inaccurate and took so long to reload, a row of soldiers was trained to fire and then immediately move to the rear behind other rows of troops who, in turn, stepped to the front, fired, and then moved back. The soldiers in the rear had time to reload their guns as others fired their volleys. To help soldiers remember the complex series of steps to be followed in loading their guns, the Ming general Qi Jiguang composed a song listing them in turn.

In most societies, male members of the nobility, often the only ones who could afford to purchase and pay for the upkeep of horses, had formed the core of the fighting forces. Their role as society’s defenders helped to justify the exalted position their class occupied. When handheld guns became common, armed peasant infantrymen supplanted the mounted elite. The loss of their

warrior role often marked the beginning of the decline in the power of the aristocracy, and the loss of privileges that other social classes had not shared.

As societies adopted the use of guns, some states developed a decisive advantage over others. Rulers who had access to metal to forge guns and the chemicals to make gunpowder were better able to impose their will on societies that did not. As the cost of handheld guns decreased, rulers such as Matthias I of Hungary created corps of armed infantry. Matthias armed approximately one-quarter of his foot soldiers with arquebuses in the fifteenth century. Countries with centralized governments and well-developed bureaucracies that were able to effectively tax their populations had the money to pay for these developments and found it easier to locate and recruit soldiers into the army. States with these advantages grew even more powerful.

Gunpowder thus helped to develop centralized states in Europe. These changes did not happen everywhere, though. States like the Ottoman Empire and Ming China already possessed centralized governments before they adopted gunpowder technology, and the use of firearms did not have a significant impact on the position of their nobility. In the Ottoman Empire, the non-noble Janissaries had formed the core of the Ottoman military before the widespread adoption of gunpowder and remained an elite force afterward. For the military portion of the Janissary corps, the adoption of gunpowder weapons combined with their intense training from a young age made them a formidable fighting force indeed, especially when using weapons that were not simple to use effectively. In Japan, the daimyo elite and their samurai vassals retained their privileged position in society until the nineteenth century, hundreds of years after the Japanese adopted guns. The arrival of guns brought change to a society, but not all societies responded in the same way.

The Age of the Nomad

The adoption of guns by societies in Europe, Asia, and Africa was the beginning of the end for some nomadic cultures. For centuries before this, nomadic societies had often played an important role in world history and were often important agents in bringing about historical change. For instance, life on the Indian subcontinent was transformed by the arrival of mounted Indo-Europeans around 1500 BCE. The sacred texts of the Indo-Europeans, the Vedas, were the basis on which the religion of Hinduism was built, and their social organization formed the basis for the Hindu caste system. Their language, Sanskrit, became the sacred tongue of both Hinduism and Buddhism.

The nomadic tribes of central Asia set in motion changes that contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire. In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the Huns, who occupied central Asia, the Caucasus, and eastern Europe, began to sweep westward, attacking and conquering Germanic tribes that lived on the borders of the Roman Empire. These tribes, the Goths, the Visigoths, and others, fled before their onslaught into Roman territory, destabilizing the empire. In East Asia, mounted nomads had a similar effect on Chinese society. Over the centuries, a variety of tribes—the Xiongnu, the Jurchen, and others—alternately traded with and attacked Han Chinese settlements. During the Qin dynasty (c. 221 BCE), construction of a wall began to protect the more settled areas of China from the roaming riders. When this failed, because the wall was built along only portions of the border between the lands settled by the Chinese and those occupied by nomadic tribes, Chinese emperors gave tribute in the form of gifts and Chinese princesses to mollify more aggressive tribes, which also demonstrated that the status of women was seen as being completely secondary to the agency and needs of men, even those from high social standing.

Beginning in the early modern era, nomadic societies increasingly began to settle down. The adoption of firearms by settled societies undoubtedly jeopardized the continued existence of nomadic societies. When firearms technology was perfected, meaning guns and artillery became more accurate and could fire farther and faster, mounted archers could not compete. This does not completely explain the disappearance of the nomadic way of life, however. Although early firearms were unwieldy and could not easily be fired from horseback, once they became more lightweight, they could have been adopted by nomads, and some nomadic societies, such as the Plains Indians of North America, did adopt them.

Not all nomads were mounted warriors. Mongols and Arab Bedouins were both, as were the Huns and the Xiongnu who plagued the Han dynasty. However, many nomadic groups neither rode horses nor formed armies. The Sami reindeer herders of Scandinavia and Russia and the Gaddi shepherds of the Himalaya were not traditionally warriors. Furthermore, settled societies, like those of Europe, also fielded mounted warriors. The European knights of the Middle Ages disappeared as a result of the widespread adoption of gunpowder and firearms. It also took several centuries after the development of firearms before mounted warriors no longer formed part of the world's armies. European and U.S. combatants in World War I made use of cavalry. It is thus perhaps more correct to say that gunpowder made cavalry (other than modern "cavalry" in the form of tanks) obsolete, than to say that

gunpowder made nomads disappear. Finally, while mounted warriors are today a thing of the past, nomadic societies still exist across geographic boundaries around the world, although their numbers are much smaller. Many modern Mongols and Arab Bedouin, for example, still lead a nomadic lifestyle.

The Past Meets the Present

Nomadic Lifestyles in the Twenty-First Century

In the twenty-first century, many people still lead nomadic lifestyles. Roughly one-quarter of Africa's population consists of nomadic pastoralists who graze herds of cattle and goats. In China, millions of Mongolians also live as herders on the Asian steppes, though the group has been gradually relocating to cities. Climate change, political conflicts, and economic factors are forcing nomadic groups to adopt new practices and are threatening their way of life. Desertification is expanding the size of Africa's Sahel desert region, making it more difficult for pastoralists in West Africa to find grazing lands for their flocks. As they search out grasslands, they have found themselves competing with both small farmers and commercialized agricultural enterprises for access to land and water. This has at times led to violence, just as clashes between nomadic herders and settled farmers did in past centuries. In Cote d'Ivoire in March 2016, such violence resulted in twenty-seven deaths. In the first eight months of 2018, conflicts between farmers and pastoralists cost more than 1,300 Nigerians their lives. Hundreds of thousands more have been displaced by such conflicts.

Just as gunpowder and firearms adversely affected some nomadic groups in the early modern era, so too did the development of land mines affect the Kuchi of Afghanistan and change their way of life. Their herds were destroyed, and armed conflict often made traveling dangerous. For the Kuchi, who are Sunni Muslims, being allied with the Taliban has worsened their situation. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Kuchi were given rights to graze their animals on land claimed by the Shi'a Hazara ethnic group. When the Taliban were routed from power, the Hazara sought revenge by expelling the Kuchi from the pastureland they had been using. Now it is unclear what will happen to the Kuchi.

- In what ways are the problems that nomadic pastoralists face today similar to those of the past? In what ways are they different?
- What are possible solutions to some of the difficulties nomadic people encounter in the twenty-first century?

The rise of firearms played a role in forcing many nomads to adapt to changing military, political, and social realities, which in turn would lead many to move toward sedentarization. However, they were only the *means* by which some modern states enforced their will on nomads; guns were not the *reason* nomadic groups declined. The reasons modern states made war on nomads were various. Often, settled people feared nomads, especially those who waged war on them or who competed with settled people for natural resources. In the case of the North American Plains Indians, for example, settled people not only feared the mounted warriors, but they also coveted the lands they occupied. So long as the Plains tribes claimed extensive hunting grounds, the colonizing farmers, ranchers, and miners could not utilize the natural resources of the American West as they wished.

Modern nation-states with permanent borders also objected to nomads crossing at will from one nation into another. They regarded nomads as a threat to national security and sovereignty and forced them to settle. Modern nation-states also found it easier to tax people who were not always on the move. As nations industrialized, nomads' access to the grasslands and water sources that their herds needed was jeopardized. Private lands were fenced. Water sources were polluted. Grasslands were grazed by animals owned by commercialized livestock interests that produced meat to feed city dwellers. As industrialization made settled life more comfortable, many nomads willingly abandoned their traditional way of life.

Increasingly, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, climate change has also made nomadic life more difficult. Droughts and more severe weather are jeopardizing grasslands and water sources for animals. Lack of grass is disastrous for nomadic pastoralists. The soldiers of the Mamluk Sultanate made use of early cannons at the Battle of Ain Jalut. That was not what made them victorious, however. The Mongol force they faced was much smaller than such armies usually were. The arid climate of the Levant could not supply enough grass for the thousands of horses (five or six per person) that Mongol warriors traveled with, which forced the Mongols to field a smaller army. Now, more nomad homelands are experiencing desertification and harsh winter temperatures, and this may be the final blow for the world's few remaining nomadic societies.

Link to Learning

> Read about the experiences of nomads in Mongolia who are making the decision to settle in cities.

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15.5: Key Terms

arquebus
an early gun that was large and difficult to maneuver

devshirme
the system of acquiring Christian boys from the Balkans to be enslaved, converted to Islam, and trained to serve the Ottoman sultan

Forbidden City
a walled complex of palaces, temples, and gardens built by the Ming dynasty emperors in the center of Beijing

harem
the private household of the Ottoman sultan

humanism
a movement born in fourteenth-century Italy that focused on the study of human beings, human nature, and human achievements rather than the study of God

Janissaries
the elite enslaved infantry corps of the Ottoman army

Mamluk Sultanate
a state in Egypt and the Levant administered and defended by educated, formerly enslaved men called mamluks

Red Turbans
a secret peasant society that rose up against Mongol rule during the Yuan dynasty

Renaissance
a period of intellectual and artistic rebirth inspired by the cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome

timar
a right granted to subjects of the Ottoman sultan to collect taxes in a given area

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15.6: Section Summary

17.1 The Ottomans and the Mongols

Following the sack of Constantinople by crusaders and the Mongols' defeat of the Seljuk Turks, the Ottomans emerged as a power in northwestern Anatolia. Under Osman's successors, they crossed the Dardanelles into Europe, defeating the Serbs at the Battle of Kosovo. When the Mongol conqueror Timur invaded the region, he defeated Bayezid, and the subsequent conflict among Bayezid's sons splintered the Ottoman state. Timur's empire came to include Persia, central Asia, and northern India, but Timur died before he could fulfill his plan to invade China.

Bayezid's son Mehmed I and his grandson Murad II rebuilt Ottoman possessions in Anatolia and Europe. In 1453, among other victories, Mehmed II conquered Constantinople. He rebuilt the city, thereafter known as Istanbul, and invited scholars and artists from Asia and Europe. He was tolerant of his non-Muslim and European subjects and allowed them to remain in Istanbul, though historians see the flight of many scholars to western Europe with the preserved knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome as one factor that helped to spark the Italian Renaissance and the transition to the early modern era. Meanwhile, western European traders began to seek all-water, oceanic routes to South and East Asia.

17.2 From the Mamluks to Ming China

The Abbasids, Ayyubids, and Ottomans all depended on enslaved or formerly enslaved people to staff their armies and run their administrations. Christian boys were taken from their parents, forced to convert to Islam, and trained as soldiers and administrators. In the Abbasid and Ayyubid states, they were called mamluks. In the Ottoman state they were Janissaries. Enslaved women might also become members of the sultan's harem and bear him children. Enslaved people were often placed in positions of trust because, having been taken from their families as children, they were entirely dependent on the ruler for their position and thus loyal to him.

In Egypt, the mamluk soldiers overthrew the Ayyubid sultan in 1250 and established the Mamluk Sultanate. Because succession to the throne was controlled and not hereditary, the Mamluk Sultanate could maintain sway over Egypt and the Levant and fight off challenges from the Mongols until it was defeated by the Ottomans in 1517.

The Ming dynasty came to power in China after revolts drove out the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty. The Hongwu emperor eliminated all challenges to his rule by creating a secret police force, eliminating the position of chief minister, and putting down rebellions in distant provinces. He forbade most foreign trade in order to protect China from foreign influences. The Yongle emperor resumed foreign trade and collected tribute, and Chinese silks and porcelains were traded in Europe, Africa, India, and western Asia. Despite China's great power, the Ming had difficulty controlling the Mongols.

17.3 Gunpowder and Nomads in a Transitional Age

Early forms of guns were difficult to use and often inaccurate, but as they improved, rulers began to replace cavalry with infantry armed with guns. Where mounted warriors had been members of the aristocracy, this change often cost them their privileged position in society. Gunpowder also made it easier for armies to destroy fortifications, ending siege warfare. Centralized governments that adopted firearms technology and could levy taxes to pay for it grew more powerful and were able to dominate other states.

The adoption of firearms made the fighting style of nomadic societies less effective. These societies declined in size and number when governments forced them to settle. Sometimes settled people's fear of nomads forced governments to take action against them. The competition for natural resources also encouraged many nomadic pastoralists to abandon their way of life.

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15.7: Review Questions

Review Questions

1.
What allowed for the development of an Ottoman state independent of the Seljuk Turks' Sultanate of Rum?

a. the Mongol invasion of Anatolia
b. the depopulation of Serbia by the bubonic plague
c. the death of the Byzantine emperor Manuel II
d. the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Kosovo

2.
How did invasion by Timur influence the development of the Ottoman state?

a. The death of all Bayezid I's sons at the Battle of Ankara left the Ottoman state without a ruler.
b. Timur's invasion encouraged the Ottomans' vassals to rally to their aid, strengthening the Ottoman state.
c. Timur's invasion and the defeat of Bayezid I encouraged Turkish vassals to break away from Ottoman rule.
d. The need to rebuild the Ottoman military resulted in higher taxes for Ottoman subjects and subsequent revolts.

3.
How did Europeans respond to the Ottomans' taking control of trade in the eastern Mediterranean and along the Silk Roads?

a. The nations of western Europe launched a Crusade to retake control of the trade routes from the Ottomans.
b. Venetian and Genoese traders welcomed Ottoman control because the Ottoman army protected the trade routes and made them safer.
c. Europeans began to seek an all-water, oceanic route to South and East Asia.
d. European merchants objected to paying taxes to the Ottomans and created overland routes to India and East Asia that bypassed Ottoman-controlled lands.

4.
What area did the Ottoman state not control after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire?

a. most of southern Greece
b. Genoese trading posts on the Black Sea
c. Bosnia and Albania in the Balkans
d. southern Italy

5.
How did Masaccio transform European art during the Renaissance?

a. He was the first artist to paint in oils.
b. He was the first artist to depict nonreligious subjects.
c. He was the first artist to incorporate linear perspective into painting.
d. He was the first artist to paint landscapes.

6.
What was *not* a potential occupation for a child taken in the *devshirme*?

a. scribe
b. soldier
c. palace administrator
d. priest

7.
What effect did the Battle of Ankara have on the Janissary system?

a. It revealed the potential disloyalty of Janissary forces, leading to the demise of the system.
b. It led the sultans to turn to Egypt as a source of new Janissary recruits.
c. It demonstrated the danger of relying on the Turkish nobility for defense, thus encouraging the development of the Janissary system.
d. It forced the Ottomans to rebuild their Janissary corps because so many were killed.

8.
Why was political succession in the Mamluk Sultanate always unstable?

a. Succession did not typically descend from a sultan to his sons, and the army usually chose the new sultan.
b. The Ottomans routinely interfered in the choice of the new sultan.
c. Mamluk sultans had numerous children who fought among themselves for the throne.
d. Mamluk sultans rarely had children, so distant relatives competed who had no clear claim to the throne.

9.
Why did the Mamluk sultans usually treat rebellious Syrian Arabs more leniently than they did rebellious Arab Bedouins in Egypt?

a. The Syrian Arabs were protected by the caliph.
b. The Mamluks needed the assistance of Syrian Arabs in fighting the Ottomans and the Mongols.
c. The Bedouins were a greater threat to the lives and property of Egyptians.
d. The leaders of the Syrian Arabs had once been mamluks themselves.

10.
What was the main reason for the voyages of Zheng He in the fifteenth century?

a. to impress other states with the power of China
b. to encourage trade between China and Europe
c. to explore the lands of the Arabian Peninsula
d. to discover a new trade route to India

11.
Why did members of the Mamluk army oppose rule by non-mamluks?

a. They believed that only their biological relatives were fit to rule.
b. They did not believe that non-mamluks were pious enough.
c. They believed only those who had experienced rigorous training and enslavement were worthy.
d. They resented rule by foreigners.

12.
Which was *not* an example of foreign contact that took place during the Ming dynasty?

a. the voyages of Zheng He
b. conflict with the Mongols
c. the invasion of Vietnam
d. the invasion of Japan

13.
Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, had sympathy for the poor because in his early life he had been what?

a. a poor peasant
b. a nomadic warrior
c. a Daoist monk
d. an aristocratic scholar

14.
How did firearms technology affect the social structure of western European societies?

a. It made it easier for small, decentralized states to challenge larger centralized ones.
b. It completely eliminated nomadic herding as a way of life in Europe.
c. It eventually made aristocratic mounted warriors obsolete.
d. It led to the development of an elite class of aristocratic infantry.

15.
What has *not* been a contributing factor in the demise of nomadic societies?

a. climate change
b. industrialization
c. the desire of modern nations to control borders
d. epidemic disease

16.
How did firearms technology affect nomadic groups?

a. Firearms eventually made the forms of warfare favored by nomadic groups less effective.
b. The adoption of firearms by nomadic groups threatened the existence of settled societies.
c. The adoption of firearms technology eliminated nomadism as a way of life.
d. The need to pay taxes to support the armed forces of centralized states caused nomads to settle as farmers.

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15.8: Check Your Understanding Questions

Check Your Understanding Questions

1.
What motivation did Orthodox Christians have for accepting Ottoman rule?
2.
Why did the Ottoman state grant timars?
3.
In what ways did the empire founded by Timur geographically resemble that founded by Chinggis Khan?
4.
Why do some historians regard the fall of Constantinople as the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern era?
5.
How did the intellectual movement of humanism affect Europeans' view of human beings?
6.
Why did the Abbasid, Ayyubid, and Ottoman states prefer to train enslaved male children to become soldiers and administrators?
7.
In what ways was the Janissary system of the Ottomans similar to the mamluk system in Egypt?
8.
What was the main difference between the two Mamluk dynasties?
9.
Other than religious piety, what motives did the Mamluk sultans have for establishing mosques and charitable institutions?
10.
What effect did the Mongols have on the Ming dynasty?
11.
How successful was Zhu Yuanzhang at improving life for China's poor?
12.
What impact did the adoption of gunpowder have on the European aristocracy?
13.
What impact did the adoption of gunpowder have on the Ottoman Empire?
14.
Why did nomadic societies begin to decline beginning in the early modern era?

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15.9: Application and Reflection Questions

Application and Reflection Questions

1.
What role did religion play in the development of the Ottoman Empire?
2.
In what ways were the actions of Timur and Mehmed II toward conquered cities similar? How were they different?
3.
What were some of the long-term effects of the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire?
4.
How did the rediscovery of the works of ancient Greece and Rome influence European philosophy, art, and scientific inquiry during the Renaissance?
5.
What was life like for enslaved people under the Ottomans and Mamluks?
6.
What benefits did the Mamluk Sultanate derive from making use of formerly enslaved men as soldiers and administrators? What were the drawbacks of this system?
7.
With which foreign powers did the Ming dynasty maintain relationships? What were these relationships like?
8.
Think about other major technological changes that have taken place in the past hundred fifty, fifty, and five years. Have any of them had effects on human society similar to that of gunpowder? If yes, describe those effects. If not, why not?
9.
How has the adoption of firearms technology affected nomadic societies? To what extent did it lead to their decline? What other factors have led to the gradual disappearance or reduction in size of nomadic societies?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

16: Appendix

16.1: Appendix A- Glossary
16.2: Appendix B- Maps and Timelines
16.3: Appendix C- World Maps
16.4: Appendix D- Recommended Resources for the Study of World History

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SECTION OVERVIEW

16.1: Appendix A- Glossary

A

- **Abrahamic faiths** the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which all trace their origins through a common ancestor, the prophet Abraham
- **Acheulean tools** stone tools made by carefully chipping away flakes of the stone core to make them into teardrop-shaped implements that replaced the cruder Oldowan hand-axes
- **animism** the belief that a degree of spirituality exists not only in people but also in plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena
- ***annona*** the Roman government's distribution of grain to the population, which was also a political tool for the emperor
- **arquebus** an early gun that was large and difficult to maneuver
- **asceticism** the practice of self-denial and rejection of pleasures as a way to express religious devotion
- ***Australopithecus*** a very distant ancestor of modern humans who lived in eastern and southern Africa between 2.5 and 4 million years ago

B

- **Babylonian exile** the deportation of Judeans to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem
- **Bantu migrations** the millennia-long expansion of Bantu-speaking peoples southward from West and Central Africa, spreading a common cultural foundation that included language, farming, and ironworking
- **Bedouin** the name given to nomadic tribes of Arabia
- **Berbers** the name used by Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans to describe the native peoples of the Maghreb; today, this population generally self-identifies as Amazigh, or Imazighen
- **Beringia** a section of low-lying land between modern Alaska and Russia, now underwater, that once served as a land bridge between continents
- **biome** a community of vegetation and wildlife adapted to a particular climate
- **Black Death** a pandemic of the plague caused by the bacterium Yersinia pestis with far-reaching economic, political, social, and cultural effects that transformed Asia, Europe, and North Africa in the fourteenth century
- **Bronze Age** the period from 3500 to 1110 BCE when bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was the preferred material for manufacturing tools and weapons

C

- **cabotage** a system wherein groups or individuals are granted the right to trade in another's territory
- **caliph** an Islamic title designating a spiritual and secular leader
- **caliphate** an area under the control of a Muslim ruler called a caliph
- **caravansary** an inn funded by the state or wealthy individuals where travelers could spend the night and store their goods securely
- **cataract** a place in a river where the otherwise placid flow is upset by a waterfall, a shallow portion, or the presence of boulders
- **centuriation** the Roman practice of dividing land into a grid in preparation for development and agriculture
- **Chan Buddhism** a form of Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes meditation; it is widely practiced in Japan where it is known as Zen Buddhism
- **chattel slavery** a form of slavery in which one person is owned by another as a piece of property
- **chivalry** a code of ideal conduct meant to validate the practices of noble warriors by Christianizing knightly violence and behavior
- **chronological approach** an approach to history that follows a timeline from ancient to modern
- **city-state** an independent political entity consisting of a city and surrounding territory that it controls
- **clan** a small group of several families that shared an encampment and herded or hunted together and formed the basic social unit of the seminomadic peoples of Eurasia

- **clients** less well-off Romans who relied on a patron's gifts for subsistence
- **Clovis culture** a culture consisting of mobile bands of hunter-gatherers who camped at resource-rich locations in modest populations across North America
- **Cluniac reform** a movement that aimed to limit the influence of aristocrats in church matters
- **Code of Hammurabi** a list of judicial decisions that the Babylonian king Hammurabi had inscribed on stone pillars throughout his kingdom
- **Code of Justinian** a legal project carried out by Emperor Justinian to compile and edit Roman edicts issued from the second to the sixth century CE
- **Colosseum** a large structure in Rome that was the site of gladiatorial matches and other entertainments
- **Confucianism** a Chinese school of philosophical thought shaping morality, governance, education, and family life
- **Constitutions of Melfi** the oldest surviving written constitution in the world, which increased the power of the monarch of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies by replacing vassals and church officials with royal bureaucrats
- **culture** all the ways in which members of a human society interact with one another and with their environment and pass these ways from generation to generation
- **cuneiform** a phonetic writing system based on the sounds of words and invented by the Sumerians in about 3000 BCE

D

- **Daoism** a Chinese religion that emphasized veneration of nature, the cosmos, and mysticism
- **deffufa** a type of monumental mud-brick structure unique to Nubian civilization and believed to have served a religious function
- ***devshirme*** the system of acquiring Christian boys from the Balkans to be enslaved, converted to Islam, and trained to serve the Ottoman sultan
- **dharma** the Hindu concept of the right way of living as defined by cosmic law
- **dictator** a Roman Republican office with absolute authority over the state for a limited time during emergencies
- ***domus*** the name for a typical Roman house, as well as the family unit
- **Donatist controversy** the Christian schism in North Africa springing from the belief that church leaders who had renounced their faith to avoid persecution held no authority to perform sacraments
- **drystone** a construction method that uses interlocking stones rather than mortar
- ***dynatoi*** members of the Byzantine elite who often compromised imperial authority

E

- **ecumenical councils** meetings organized by emperors that gathered Christian bishops from around the empire to settle matters of doctrine within the Church
- **Exodus** the mass migration of Hebrews out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses

F

- **Fertile Crescent** a crescent-shaped geographical area in the Middle East where agriculture first flourished
- **feudalism** a collection of practices that bound lesser lords to greater lords through land and privileges given in return for personal and military support
- **flagellants** penitents who ritually flogged themselves in response to the Black Death as a means of appeasing God and mitigating the spread of the disease
- ***foederati*** foreign states and tribes that were given semiautonomy as Roman allies in exchange for pledging military service to the Roman Empire
- **Forbidden City** a walled complex of palaces, temples, and gardens built by the Ming dynasty emperors in the center of Beijing

G

- **genus** a taxonomic rank that includes several similar and related species
- **gladiator** an enslaved professional fighter paid to battle before an audience, sometimes to the death
- **global citizen** a person who sees themselves as responsible to a world community rather than only a national one
- **globalization** the interconnectedness of societies and economies throughout the world as a result of trade, technology, and the adoption and sharing of various aspects of culture

- **Golden Bull** a document issued by the Holy Roman emperor Charles IV in 1356 that recognized the role of seven princes in electing Holy Roman emperors
- **Golden Horde** the Mongol group that ruled over portions of central Asia, the former lands of the Rus, and northwest Asia
- **great man theory** the view that it is enough to study the deeds and impact of important leaders to paint an accurate picture of the past
- **Great Schism of 1054** the conflict that solidified the separation of the eastern and western Christian churches
- **Great Western Schism** the period from 1378 to 1417 during which three men simultaneously served as pope of the Roman Catholic Church in western Europe

H

- **hadith** the words and actions of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors that, along with the Quran, form the fundamental basis for Islamic law
- **hajj** the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca
- **Harappan** a term describing the ancient Indus valley civilization, named for one of its largest cities and the first to be discovered by archaeologists
- **harem** the private household of the Ottoman sultan
- **Hebrew Bible** the holy book that, according to Jewish tradition, tells the history of the Hebrew people
- **Hellenism** a high regard for the cultural institutions of Greece including its religion, philosophy, and system of education
- **Hellenistic** a description of Greek history, language, and culture in the period 323–31 BCE
- **hieratic** a simplified form of hieroglyphics employed by Egyptian scribes for recording everyday documents such as receipts and contracts
- **hieroglyphics** a complex writing system developed around 3000 BCE in which written symbols represented both sounds and ideas
- ***hijra*** an Arabic term meaning “emigration” that describes a defining moment for early Muslims as they fled Mecca for Medina in 622 CE
- **historical climatology** the study of historical temperature and climate changes and their effects on human society
- **historical empathy** the ability to see the past on its own terms, without judgment or the imposition of our own modern-day attitudes
- **historiography** the study of how historians have already interpreted the past
- ***Homo erectus*** a member of the genus Homo who emerged in East Africa around two million years ago, living entirely on the ground and walking exclusively in an upright position
- ***Homo habilis*** the earliest member of the genus Homo, appearing in the archaeological record about two to three million years ago
- ***Homo sapiens*** modern humans, members of the genus Homo who emerged in Africa first and later migrated to other areas
- **Hopewell tradition** a widely dispersed mound-building tradition that emerged in the Eastern Woodlands around 200 BCE, linked by a network of trade routes
- **humanism** a movement born in fourteenth-century Italy that focused on the study of human beings, human nature, and human achievements rather than the study of God
- **hunter-gatherers** people who survive by employing the strategies of hunting animals and gathering wild plants rather than by planting crops and raising livestock

I

- **iconography** the use of images and symbols in art
- **imam** the religious leader of Shia Muslims
- **imperial cult** the religious cult that venerated the Roman emperors as gods
- **Inner Asian Steppe** the eastern half of the Eurasian Steppe that stretches into Mongolia and runs along the northern border of China
- **Inquisition** a centuries-long effort by the church to impose religious homogeneity on Western Europe through torture and execution, if necessary
- **intellectual history** the history of ideas, which looks at the philosophies that drive people to make certain choices

- **Iron Age** the period beginning around 1200 BCE when iron became the preferred material for manufacturing tools and weapons
- **Islamization** the religious and cultural conversion of those living under Islamic rule

J

- **Janissaries** the elite enslaved infantry corps of the Ottoman army
- **Jewish diaspora** the dispersion of the Jewish people beyond their ancestral homeland of Israel/Palestine following the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple
- **jihad** a religiously infused conflict waged on behalf of Islam, or any struggle a Muslim undertakes in the name of Allah

K

- **karma** a Hindu concept emphasizing the influence of good deeds and moral behavior on a person's status in life and rebirth after death
- ***kentake*** a Kushite title that roughly translates to "queen mother" and was a powerful position in Meroitic Kush
- **khan** a title claimed by warrior-kings to unite various tribes into powerful confederations and empires
- ***kurultai*** a proto-democratic gathering of a Mongol leader's followers, called to reach agreement on major political decisions

L

- ***lanista*** the trainer and manager of a group of gladiators
- **Late Antiquity** a transitional period between the ancient and medieval worlds that occurred from roughly 150 to 750 CE
- ***latifundia*** large agricultural estates in the countryside, worked by enslaved people to produce profit for the owner
- **Legalism** a school of philosophical thought that helped dynasties such as the Qin use uniform laws and codes to reform and strengthen rulers
- **legion** the basic unit of the Roman army, made up of around five thousand soldiers
- **Levant** a historical geographical term referring to an area in the eastern Mediterranean consisting roughly of modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria
- **Linear A** a script developed by the Minoans but not yet deciphered by modern scholars
- **Linear B** a Mycenaean script developed from Linear A that was used to write an early form of the Greek language
- **Little Ice Age** a period in the early fourteenth century during which global mean temperatures dropped an average of 0.6°C, resulting in droughts and decreased agricultural productivity
- ***lugal*** the Sumerians' term for their ruler

M

- **Maghreb** the western half of North Africa, including most of present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya
- **Magna Carta** an English document that reiterated existing rights of vassals, confirmed the papal position that the church is above the state, and spelled out some basic rights of commoners
- **Mamluk Sultanate** a state in Egypt and the Levant administered and defended by educated, formerly enslaved men called mamluks
- **mamluks** educated, formerly enslaved men who served as soldiers and administrators in Islamic societies beginning in the ninth century
- **mandarins** top officials in the Imperial Chinese bureaucracy, selected by a series of exams on Confucian texts
- **"Mandate of Heaven"** the favor of the gods that conferred a right to rule but could be lost by those less worthy
- **manorialism** a medieval economic system of agricultural production directed by a lord and carried out by serfs or other varieties of unfree laborers
- **manumission** the process of releasing a person from slavery, usually in front of a magistrate or via a slaveholder's will, or through a person's purchasing their own freedom
- ***mawali*** non-Arab converts to Islam in the early Islamic period who had to be adopted by an Arab tribe as part of the conversion process
- **Medieval Warm Period** a time of more temperate climate across the globe from the tenth through the thirteenth century
- **Mississippian tradition** a widely dispersed mound-building tradition that created a number of urban settlements linked by trading networks in the southeastern United States around 700
- **moksha** the release from samsara and the karmic cycle together with the attainment of a complete understanding of the world

- **monsoon** the seasonal pattern of wind and rainfall across South Asia
- **Mousterian tools** stone tools and hand-axes made beginning around 250,000 years ago and consisting of flakes rather than cores
- **mystery religions** religious cults that featured secret rituals (the so-called mysteries) and became popular in Hellenistic cities

N

- **Nazca Lines** a group of geoglyphs made on the desert floor in southern Peru representing both geometric patterns and images of animals
- **Neanderthals** members of the genus Homo who evolved from Homo erectus and lived in Europe and western Asia between 30,000 and 200,000 years ago
- **Neolithic Age** the final phase of the Paleolithic Age, beginning around twelve thousand years ago when human populations began growing crops and domesticating animals
- **Neolithic Revolution** the shift from hunting and gathering to a life based primarily on agriculture
- **nomarchs** regional governors in ancient Egypt
- **Norte Chico** the culture of partially settled agricultural communities in the Andes region; also known as the Caral civilization
- **Nubia** the name Egyptians gave to the expansive area south of the first cataract and extending into sub-Saharan Africa; it included the Kingdom of Kush

O

- **Oldowan tools** sharpened stones used until about 1.7 million years ago for a variety of cutting, scraping, and chopping purposes
- ***optimates*** politicians who supported the old order and the traditional leadership of elites
- **Outremer** the French name for the four Crusader States created after the First Crusade, the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem

P

- **Paleolithic Age** the period of time beginning as early as 3.3 million years ago until nearly twelve thousand years ago, when our distant pre-human ancestors began using stone tools for a variety of purposes
- **papacy** the set of administrative structures associated with the government of the Catholic Church primarily—but not exclusively—linked with the city of Rome
- **papyrus** a type of paper Egyptians made from a common reed plant growing along the Nile
- **pastoralists** nomadic people who rely on herds of domesticated animals for subsistence
- ***paterfamilias*** the patriarch of an extended Roman family, with authority over his wife, children, and any other dependents
- **patron** a wealthy Roman aristocrat sought by clients in need of assistance
- **Peking Man** a subspecies of *Homo erectus* identified by fossil remains found in northern China
- **People of the Felt Walls** Temujin's name for his ethnically and linguistically diverse followers
- **pharaoh** the title of the Egyptian ruler, translated as "big house"
- **polis** a city-state in Ancient Greece
- **polytheists** people who worship multiple gods, usually associated with different aspects of the natural world
- ***populares*** politicians who sought the political support of discontented groups in Roman society
- **primary cause** the most immediate reason an event occurred
- **primary source** a document, object, or other source material from the time period under study
- **principate** the political system established by Augustus Caesar after 27 BCE, which relied on Rome's traditional institutions and practices to legitimize a military dictatorship
- **progressive history** a school of thought that views history as a straight line to a specific and more democratic destination
- **proletariat** the landless working class
- ***publicani*** provincial contractors who bid for the right to collect taxes and profited from the excess money they gathered
- **Pueblo architecture** a building style of the early American Southwest that relied on stone or wooden frames covered in adobe clay
- **Pure Land Buddhism** a branch of Mahayana Buddhism holding that all believers can be reborn into a place of salvation, the Pure Land

Q

- **Quran** the holy scripture of Islam, which Muslims believe was given to humanity by God through Muhammad

R

- **Ramesside kings** the line of kings that ruled New Kingdom Egypt following the reign of Ramses I
- **Rashidun** a term meaning “rightly guided” that describes the first four caliphs after Muhammad’s death: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali
- **Red Turbans** a secret peasant society that rose up against Mongol rule during the Yuan dynasty
- **Renaissance** a period of intellectual and artistic rebirth inspired by the cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome
- **revisionism** the process of altering our interpretation of historical events by adding new elements and perspectives
- **rhetoric** the way words are used and put together in speaking or writing
- **Ring of Fire** the boundary line of a zone of intense seismic activity in the Pacific Ocean

S

- **Sahel** an east–west belt of semiarid grassland that forms a transitional zone between the Sahara to the north and the equatorial rainforest to the south
- **samsara** a Hindu concept explaining the continuance of the soul after death and its transformation
- **samurai** a member of the elite warrior class of Japan, governed by a strict code of behavior
- **satrapy** one of twenty governing districts in Persia administered by royal governors called satraps, who answered directly to the king
- **savanna** a grassy plain with scattered trees found to the north and south of the tropical African rainforest
- **secondary source** a document, object, or other source material written or created after the time period under study
- **serfs** unfree peasants who owed labor to a feudal lord and lived under the lord’s authority
- **sharia** Islamic religious law
- **Shia** one of the two umbrella sects of Islam, whose members believe leadership of the Muslim community should reside in the family of Muhammad only through his son-in-law Ali
- **shogun** a Japanese military commander-in-chief
- **Silk Roads** a series of trade routes circulating luxury goods to and from China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East
- **social constructs** ideas such as class and gender created and accepted by the people in a society that influence the way they think and behave
- **social history** a field of history that looks at all classes and categories of people, not just elites
- **social stratification** the hierarchical order of society in which people sharing the same level of wealth and status make up a distinct class or strata
- **specialization** a societal characteristic in which people perform specific tasks, such as farming (farmer) or producing tools and clothing (artisan), that contribute to the well-being of the community
- **Struggle of the Orders** a political contest during the first centuries of the Republic in which Rome’s commoners sought equal rights with elites
- **Sufism** the mystical expression of Islamic faith
- **sultan** a ruler who claims authority over the Islamic community but not necessarily the title of caliph
- **Sunni** the larger of the two umbrella sects of Islam, whose adherents did not require leadership of the community to come specifically from the descendants of Muhammad through Ali

T

- **Terracotta Army** a collection of life-size clay statues of soldiers, officials, servants, and horses of the Qin emperor and buried in his tomb near Xi’an
- **tetrarchy** the rule of four emperors, two senior and two junior, established by the emperor Diocletian to quell the Crisis of the Third Century
- **Theodosian Code** a document initiated by the emperor Theodosius II compiling laws from around the empire that had been issued since the early fourth century

- **Three Han** the three groups (the Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan) in southern Korea that were among the earliest with tribal chieftains
- **timar** a right granted to subjects of the Ottoman sultan to collect taxes in a given area
- **Triple Alliance** an alliance formed in 1428 between the Aztecs and two neighboring city-states, Texcoco and Tlacopan
- **Twelve Tables** the first set of written laws in Rome, from about 450 BCE

U

- ***ulama*** a class of religious clerics and scholars who act as the primary interpreters of Islamic law
- ***ummah*** the community of Muslims

V

- **vassal state** a state or kingdom that is nominally independent in the running of its internal affairs but must submit to the demands of a dominating empire and usually provide tribute to it
- **vestal virgins** the priesthood of six women who took a vow of chastity and maintained the sacred fire in Rome

Y

- ***yam*** horse relay stations established by Chinggis Khan for long-distance communication on military campaigns; they were later expanded into rest areas and supply depots
- ***yassa*** Chinggis Khan's law code, designed to eliminate the sources of conflict in steppe society and bring harmony to his people

Z

- **ziggurat** an immense stepped tower with a flat top built of mud-brick that served as a temple in Sumerian cities
- **Zoroastrianism** the religion of the ancient Persians, named for its founder Zarathustra, pronounced *Zoroaster* in Greek

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SECTION OVERVIEW

16.2: Appendix B- Maps and Timelines

Chapter 1: Understanding the Past

- The Whole World Figure 1.1

Chapter 2: Early Humans

- Migration of the Earliest Humans Figure 2.6
- The Most Recent Glaciation Period Figure 2.14
- Sites of Natufian Settlements Figure 2.23

Chapter 3: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies

- Locator Map: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies Figure 3.3
- Early Sumer Figure 3.8
- The Fertile Crescent Figure 3.4
- The World's First Empire Figure 3.13
- The Upper and Lower Kingdoms of Egypt Figure 3.17
- The Indus Valley Culture Figure 3.24
- Indus Valley Trade with Mesopotamia Figure 3.26

Chapter 4: The Near East

- Locator Map: The Near East Figure 4.3
- Hammurabi's Realm Figure 4.5
- The Hittite Empire Figure 4.6
- The Neo-Assyrian Empire Figure 4.8
- The Neo-Babylonian Empire Figure 4.9
- Three Kingdoms in Egypt Figure 4.18
- Trade Routes in the Eastern Mediterranean Figure 4.26
- The Persian Empire Figure 4.30
- The Divided Monarchy Figure 4.40

Chapter 5: Asia in Ancient Times

- Locator Map: Asia in Ancient Times Figure 5.3
- Topography of Ancient China Figure 5.4
- The Eurasian Steppe Figure 5.9
- Northern Wei Dynasty Figure 5.10
- Ancient Korea Figure 5.11
- The Ring of Fire Figure 5.15
- Southeast Asia Figure 5.17
- The Indian Subcontinent Figure 5.20

Chapter 6: Mediterranean Peoples

- Locator Map: Mediterranean Peoples Figure 6.3
- The Bronze Age World Figure 6.4
- The Path of the Sea Peoples Figure 6.6
- Phoenician Cities and Colonies Figure 6.7
- Persia and the Greeks in 499 BCE Figure 6.14
- The Peloponnesian War Figure 6.16

- The Conquests of Alexander the Great Figure 6.23
- The Hellenistic World Figure 6.25
- Rome's Conquests in Italy Figure 6.29
- Hannibal's Invasion of Rome Figure 6.30
- The Expansion of Rome Figure 6.32
- Rome and King Mithridates Figure 6.34
- The Roman Empire through 44 BCE Figure 6.35

Chapter 7: Experiencing the Roman Empire

- Locator Map: Experiencing the Roman Empire Figure 7.2
- Spartacus's Revolt Figure 7.7
- Trade Routes of the Roman Empire Figure 7.10

Chapter 8: The Americas in Ancient Times

- Locator Map: The Americas in Ancient Times Figure 8.3
- The Populating of the Americas Figure 8.4
- A Natural Migration Path Figure 8.6
- Norte Chico Sites Figure 8.8
- Poverty Point Figure 8.11
- The Maya World Figure 8.16
- Chavín Culture and Its Influence Figure 8.20
- Moche, Nazca, and Tiwanaku Cultures Figure 8.21
- The Triple Alliance Figure 8.28
- The Inca Empire Figure 8.35
- Traditions of the American Southwest Figure 8.38

Chapter 9: Africa in Ancient Times

- Locator Map: Africa in Ancient Times Figure 9.3
- A Diverse Continent Figure 9.4
- The Kalahari Desert Figure 9.8
- Lake Victoria Figure 9.9
- Africa's Wealth of Languages Figure 9.12
- The Bantu Migrations Figure 9.13
- The Kingdom of Kush Figure 9.14
- Phoenician Settlements and Trade Routes Figure 9.19
- Hannibal's War (218–203 BCE) Figure 9.21
- Trans-Saharan Trade Figure 9.24

Chapter 10: Empires of Faith

- Locator Map: Empires of Faith Figure 10.3
- The Roman Empire Moves East Figure 10.6
- Germanic Kingdoms Figure 10.10
- Reconquests of Justinian Figure 10.13
- Sasanian Persia Figure 10.14
- The Aksum and Himyar Empires Figure 10.15
- The Kushan Empire Figure 10.18
- Territories of Arab Tribes Figure 10.21

Chapter 11: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates

- Locator Map: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates Figure 11.3
- The Byzantine and Sasanian Empires Figure 11.4
- Himyar and Aksum Figure 11.6
- Byzantines versus Sasanians Figure 11.8
- Mecca as a Trade Hub Figure 11.11
- The Eighth-Century Islamic Caliphate Figure 11.13
- Khurasan Province Figure 11.18
- Baghdad Between 767 and 913 CE (150 and 300 AH) Figure 11.19

Chapter 12: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia

- The Ghaznavid Dynasty Figure 12.3
- The Delhi Sultanate Figure 12.4
- The Sui Dynasty Figure 12.8
- China's Grand Canal Figure 12.9
- The Tang Dynasty Figure 12.13
- The Silk Roads in the First Century CE Figure 12.14
- The Battle of Talas River Figure 12.16
- Indian Ocean Trade Routes Figure 12.18
- Srivijaya Trade Routes Figure 12.21
- The Kingdom of Aksum Figure 12.22
- The Swahili Coast Figure 12.23
- The Three Kingdoms Figure 12.26
- Japan, Korea, and China in Context Figure 12.27

Chapter 13: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement

- Locator Map: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement Figure 13.3
- Post-Roman Western Eurasia Figure 13.4
- Medieval Cordoba Figure 13.10
- The Abbasid Caliphate Figure 13.11
- The Fatimid Caliphate Figure 13.12
- The Seljuk Empire Figure 13.14
- Routes of the Early Crusades Figure 13.19
- The Crusader States Figure 13.20

Chapter 14: Pax Mongolica: The Steppe Empire of the Mongols

- Locator Map: Pax Mongolica: The Steppe Empire of the Mongols Figure 14.3
- The Collapse of the Tang Dynasty Figure 14.5
- Mongol Tribes and the Three Steppe Kingdoms Figure 14.7
- The Mongol Empire Figure 14.9
- The Four Khanates of the Mongol Empire Figure 14.10
- The Western Mongol Empire Figure 14.11
- The Fourth Crusade Figure 14.12
- Growth of the Delhi Sultanate Figure 14.15

Chapter 15: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa

- Mansa Musa Figure 15.1
- Locator Map: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa Figure 15.3
- The Niger River Figure 15.5
- The Early Spread of Christianity Figure 15.7

- The Spread of Islam Figure 15.9
- Ghana and the Trans-Saharan Trade Figure 15.11
- The Ghana and Mali Empires Figure 15.12
- Mapungubwe Figure 15.13
- Songhai Empire Figure 15.17
- The Almoravid Empire Figure 15.19
- The Almohad Empire Figure 15.20

Chapter 16: Climate Change and Plague in the Fourteenth Century

- Mongol China and Beyond Figure 16.3
- The Mongol Empire Figure 16.5
- The Fourteenth Century Begins Figure 16.8
- Route of the Black Death Figure 16.13
- The Late Fourteenth-Century Islamic World Figure 16.16

Chapter 17: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming

- Locator Map: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming Figure 17.3
- Incursions of the Seljuk Empire against the Byzantines Figure 17.4
- The Timurid Empire Figure 17.8
- The Mamluk Sultanate Figure 17.21
- The Forbidden City Figure 17.25

Timelines in Volume 1, to 1500

- Timeline: Early Humans Figure 2.2
- Timeline: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies Figure 3.2
- Timeline: The Near East Figure 4.2
- Timeline: Asia in Ancient Times Figure 5.2
- Timeline: Mediterranean Peoples Figure 6.2
- Timeline: The Americas in Ancient Times Figure 8.2
- Timeline: Africa in Ancient Times Figure 9.2
- Timeline: Empires of Faith Figure 10.2
- Timeline: The Rise of Islam and the Caliphates Figure 11.2
- Timeline: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia Figure 12.2
- Timeline: The Post-Roman West and the Crusading Movement Figure 13.2
- Timeline: Pax Mongolica: The Steppe Empire of the Mongols Figure 14.2
- Timeline: States and Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa Figure 15.2
- Timeline: Climate Change and Plague in the Fourteenth Century Figure 16.2
- Timeline: The Ottomans, the Mamluks, and the Ming Figure 17.2

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SECTION OVERVIEW

16.3: Appendix C- World Maps



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Figure C3 Map of Central America. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)



Figure C4 Map of Europe. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)



Figure C5 Map of the Middle East. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)



Figure C6 Map of North America. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)



Figure C7 Map of South America. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)



Figure C8 Map of Southeast Asia. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

16.4: Appendix D- Recommended Resources for the Study of World History

How to Study World History

World History Sources includes various strategies for analyzing historical documents.

Resources for Primary Sources

World History Encyclopedia includes timelines and primary sources.

Digital Public Library of America: Primary Source Sets includes collections of primary sources.

DocsTeach includes many primary sources.

Internet History Sourcebooks Project includes historical texts.

Library of Congress: World Digital Library Collection presents various historical documents.

MIT Visualizing Cultures aims to reconstruct the past.

Smithsonian Collections showcases the Smithsonian's vast collection of objects from the natural and cultural world.

Resources for Maps

Geology.com Maps includes many different maps.

CIA World Factbook presents a variety of world, regional, and country maps.

National Geographic MapMaker connects to an interactive mapmaking tool.

Resources for Videos

CrashCourse World History includes brief educational videos on a variety of world history topics.

Website Collections

World History Matters is a collection of various historical websites.

Roy Rosenzweig Center for history and New Media includes access to online resources for teachers, online collections, exhibits and collecting sites, and open-source software.

Resources for Art History

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History includes collections from various periods of world history.

SmartHistory presents an art history overview and collections organized by religion and time period.

Magazine Articles

BBC's History Extra

Podcasts

The Almost Forgotten

BBC's History Extra

The Fall of Civilizations

Fifteen Minute History

The History Chicks

The Ancients

The History of Rome

Not Just the Tudors

Revolutions

The History of the Twentieth Century

The Cold War Vault

The History of China

The China History Podcast

The History of Japan

New Books Network

3D Tours

Virtual Rome: What Did Ancient Rome Look Like?

Virtual Tour in Ancient Athens (5th century BC) – 3D Reconstruction

Virtual Museum Content

Natural History Museum

The British Museum

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

17: Resources

17.1: Prehistory

17.1.1: Chronology

17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory

17.1.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.1.4: Key Terms

17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa

17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution

17.1.7: Summary

17.1.8: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.1.9: Links to Primary Sources

17.2: Early Middle Eastern and Northeast African Civilizations

17.2.1: Chronology

17.2.2: Introduction - Defining Civilization

17.2.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.2.4: Key Terms

17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia

17.2.6: Sumerian City-States

17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires

17.2.8: The Significance of Mesopotamia for World History

17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel

17.2.10: Early Israelites

17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel

17.2.12: The Importance of the Israelites and Ancient Israel

17.2.13: Ancient Egypt

17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt

17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush

17.2.16: Summary

17.2.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.2.18: Links to Primary Sources

17.3: Ancient and Medieval India

17.3.1: Chronology of Ancient and Medieval India

17.3.2: Introduction - A Political Overview

17.3.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.3.4: Key Terms

17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)

17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)

17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)

17.3.8: The Mauryan Empire (321-184 BCE)

17.3.9: Regional States, Trade, and Devotional Religion- India 200 BCE-300 CE

17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)

17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300
17.3.12: Conclusion
17.3.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.3.14: Links to Primary Sources
17.4: China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
17.4.1: Chronology of China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
17.4.2: Introduction to China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
17.4.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.4.4: Key Terms
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia
17.4.11: The Song Dynasty
17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty
17.4.13: Conclusion
17.4.14: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources
17.5: The Greek World from Bronze Age to Roman Conquest
17.5.1: Chronology
17.5.2: Introduction
17.5.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.5.4: Key Terms
17.5.5: Geography and Topography
17.5.6: Periods of Greek History
17.5.7: Methodology- Sources and Problem
17.5.8: From Mythology to History
17.5.9: Archaic Greece
17.5.10: The Classical Period
17.5.11: Hellenistic Period
17.5.12: Conclusion
17.5.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.5.14: Links of Primary Sources
17.6: The Roman World from 753 BCE to 500 BCE
17.6.1: Chronology
17.6.2: Introduction
17.6.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.6.4: Key Terms
17.6.5: Geography and Topography of Rome and the Roman Empire
17.6.6: Basic Chronology and Periods of Roman History
17.6.7: Sources and Problems
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic

17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
17.6.10: The Early Empire
17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
17.6.12: Conclusion- From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages
17.6.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.6.14: Links to Primary Sources
17.7: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE
17.7.1: Chronology
17.7.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE
17.7.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.7.4: Key Terms
17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire
17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian
17.7.7: Perspectives - Post-Roman East and West
17.7.8: The British Isles - Europe's Periphery
17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
17.7.11: Global Context
17.7.12: Daily Life in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empires
17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse
17.7.14: The Tenth-Century Church
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors
17.7.16: Conclusion and Global Perspectives
17.7.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.7.18: Links to Primary Sources
17.8: Islam to the Mamluks
17.8.1: Chronology
17.8.2: Introduction
17.8.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.8.4: Key Terms
17.8.5: Geography of the Middle East
17.8.6: Rise of Islam
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
17.8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate
17.8.10: The 'Abbasid Caliphate
17.8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate
17.8.12: The Crusades
17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate
17.8.14: Conclusion
17.8.15: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.8.16: Links to Primary Sources
17.9: African History to 1500
17.9.1: Chronology

17.9.2: Introduction
17.9.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.9.4: Key Terms
17.9.5: Writing the History of Ancient and Medieval Africa
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe
17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
17.9.10: Conclusion
17.9.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.10: The Americas
17.10.1: Chronology
17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas
17.10.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.10.4: Key Terms
17.10.5: Mesoamerica
17.10.6: The Maya
17.10.7: The Aztec
17.10.8: Early Andes
17.10.9: North America
17.10.10: Conclusion
17.10.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.10.12: Links to Primary Sources
17.11: Central Asia
17.11.1: Chronology
17.11.2: Introduction to Central Asia
17.11.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.11.4: Key Terms
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations
17.11.6: Islam
17.11.7: The Mongol Era
17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai
17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)
17.11.10: Timur
17.11.11: Conclusion
17.11.12: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.11.13: Links to Primary Sources
17.12: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE
17.12.1: Chronology
17.12.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE
17.12.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading
17.12.4: Key Terms
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe
17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade

17.12.7: Growth in Agriculture
17.12.8: A Roman Empire?
17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation
17.12.10: Expansion of Christendom
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century
17.12.12: The Crusades
17.12.13: The Twelfth Century in Western Europe
17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse
17.12.15: The Twelfth-Century Renaissance
17.12.16: The Third Crusade
17.12.17: The Fourth Crusade
17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe
17.12.19: Later Crusades and Crusading's Ultimate Failure
17.12.20: Scholasticism
17.12.21: Daily Life at the Medieval Zenith
17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises
17.12.23: War
17.12.24: Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages
17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy
17.12.26: The European Renaissance
17.12.27: States in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance
17.12.28: Iberia and the Atlantic- New Worlds
17.12.29: Conclusion
17.12.30: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.12.31: Links to Primary Sources

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.1: Prehistory

Learning Objectives

To be able to address the following questions:

1. What were some factors that led to hominid bipedalism?
2. How did climate affect hominid development?
3. How and why did Homo sapiens expand out of Africa?
4. How and when did Homo sapiens populate the Americas?
5. What was a hunter-gatherer existence like?
6. Why did Homo sapiens start to prefer agriculture?
7. How did agriculture start to change human relationships?

17.1.1: Chronology

17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory

17.1.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.1.4: Key Terms

17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa

17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution

17.1.7: Summary

17.1.8: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.1.9: Links to Primary Sources

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17.1.1: Chronology

8-6 Million Years Ago	Bi-pedal Hominids in Africa
2.6 Million Years Ago	Homo Habilis begin to use tools
43,000 BCE	Homo sapiens expand out of Africa
50,000-10,000 BCE	Homo Sapiens complete their migration to all continents
22,000 - 14,000 BCE	Last Glacial Maximum
c. 9,000 BCE	Younger Dryas Event
c. 9,000 BCE	Jericho reaches its height
c 7,000 BCE	Çatalhüyük reaches several thousand inhabitants
2,000 BCE	Paleo-Eskimos appear in the Artic
2,000 BCE	Humans begin to make pottery

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17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory

In 1952, at the age of 77 and suffering with an abdominal hernia long overdue for surgery, Sellards returned to Vero to collect charcoal or bone suitable for the newly invented technique of radiocarbon dating. … His longtime field assistant Glen Evans accompanied him, having left Texas with careful instructions from Sellard's physician about what to do if the hernia suddenly bulged. It did, and Sellards collapsed unconscious at the excavation. … But the moment Sellards regained consciousness he insisted on continuing to excavate.[1]

The above case of Florida State Geologist Elias Sellards demonstrates that the study of "human antiquity" or man's earliest origins is one surrounded by passion, controversy, and a deep well of curiosity. Our curiosity about our earliest origins has not only given birth to fictional characters like Indiana Jones and Captain Kirk, but also is largely responsible for the growth of archaeology in the early twentieth century. Western scholars and explorers were not content with simply reaching remote places; they were curious about their earliest human inhabitants. While the motives of early excavators may have been quite simple (Well-known paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey got his start collecting stones as a child), archaeologists and paleoanthropologists eventually created an entirely new field of historical investigation: prehistory. Multiple pioneers have hacked through underbrush or spent months excavating **Paleolithic** sites. Not until recently, however, have scientific advances, local knowledge, and anthropological theory merged with the curiosity of western explorers to craft a more accurate version of human origins and evolution.

Written texts are the primary sources most historians are trained to work with and are those they are most comfortable using. However, if we are to understand humanity's origins, we have to recognize that written language is a relatively recent invention (around 5,000 years old); therefore, much of what we know about human beginnings must be borrowed from the findings of colleagues in other disciplines like geology, botany, and archaeology. In all of the regions mentioned below, archaeologists have excavated and analyzed physical evidence relating to our pre-historic ancestors. Up until recent times, though, it was difficult to understand migration patterns and chronology without a method to determine the age of anything from a human skull to a cutting tool. Archaeologists in the 1930s and 40s used imprecise terms like "stone bowl cultures," a nomenclature that referred more to the details of the articles unearthed than their historical context.[2] This began to change with the advent of radiocarbon dating or C14 dating in the 1940s. Through this method, we were able to place thousands of organic archaeological materials in their proper historical context even without textual evidence. For artifacts over 40,000 years old, the amount of radioactive carbon we can recover doesn't permit accurate measurement. However, we do have a number of techniques to trace human origins even further back, including aerial photography, side-scanning radar, and potassium-argon dating. All these techniques get around the lack of radioactive carbon in that they don't date the organic material, but instead the terrain in which they were found, allowing us to trace human origins back millions of years to the beginnings of bipedalism.

The goal of this chapter, though, is not to trace human evolution from its beginnings, but to set the scene for the beginnings of civilization. In this chapter we will explore why hominids moved, how they survived, and how they came to develop agriculture. We also hope to lay out why humans in far flung parts of the world responded similarly to changing conditions around them and hence developed civilizations at roughly the same time.

This chapter begins at the origins of bipedalism some eight million years ago and brings us up to eight thousand years ago with the **Neolithic** Era or "new stone age." Bipedal hominids would develop during the Pliocene era and our closest ancestors during the more recent **Pleistocene**. Finally, modern ***Homo sapiens*** would appear during the **Holocene**. During the **Holocene** humans would perfect tool usage during the **Paleolithic** Era, and would usher in agriculture during the Neolithic. Our chapter ends as humans prepare to enter the Bronze and Iron Ages.

1 David J. Meltzer, The Great Paleolithic War: How Science Forged an Understanding of America's Ice Age Past (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1.

2 J.E.G Sutton, "Archeology and Reconstructing History in the Kenya Highlands: The Intellectual Legacies of G.W.B. Huntingford and Louis S.B. Leakey," History in Africa 34, (2007): 313.

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17.1.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. What were some factors that led to hominid bipedalism?
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17.1.4: Key Terms

- Abu Hureya
- Beringia
- Çatalhüyük
- Dolni Vetoniçe
- Holocene
- Homo erectus
- Homo habilis
- Homo sapiens
- Ice Age
- Jericho
- Natufians
- Neanderthals
- Neolithic
- Oldowan Industry
- Paleolithic
- Pleistocene

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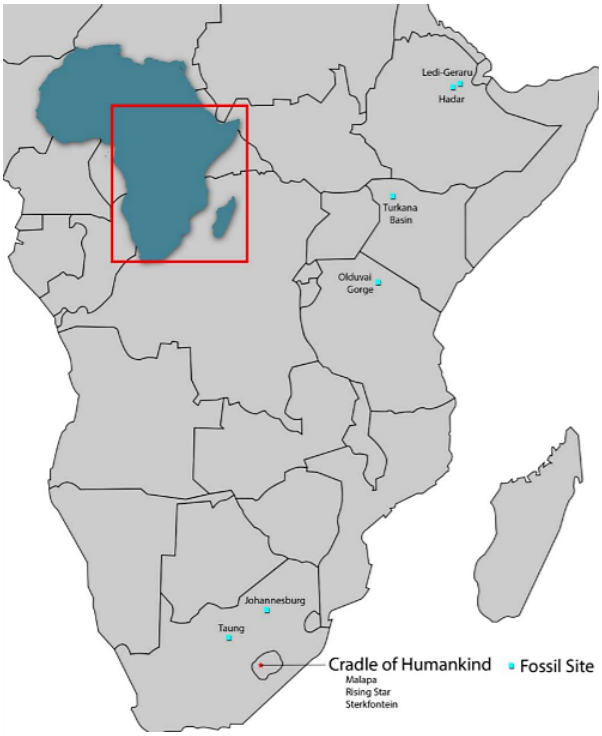
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17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa

The fossil record in Africa clearly establishes that a human lineage diverged there from African apes sometime between eight to six million years ago. Beginning as far back as eight million years ago, various species of hominids (the ancestors of modern humans or Homo sapiens) began to walk upright. This bipedalism would allow these hominids to use their hands to develop, craft, and use tools. Bipedalism would also eventually contribute to a move out of forests into the savanna and turn hominids into big game hunters and gatherers. Paleoanthropologists once theorized that hominids became bipedal to adapt to life in the grasslands. However, the fact that fossils of bipedal hominids were found alongside fossil remains of wood, seeds, and other forest dwellers has cast some doubt on that theory. In fact, bipedal hominids may have lived in the forest for some time. While some bipedal hominids may have stayed in the forest, climate changes did drive others to move into new areas within Africa and beyond it.

17.1.5.1: Climate, Hominin in Evolution, and Migrations

As far as thirty million years ago hominids were reacting to changes in their environment. ("Hominids" refers to all Great Apes including humans and their ancestors. "Hominins" is often used when speaking more specifically about modern humans and their more recently extinct ancestors. We will use "hominids" here because it covers all of the groups we will reference including modern humans). The earth cooled, producing more fragmented environments. As already mentioned, some hominids may have stayed in the trees, but those that left the forest began to thrive in grasslands. These savannas and prairies expanded during the Miocene, the geologic era lasting from 24 – 2 million years ago. This grassland expansion prompted baboons and hominids to move out of the forest.



Map **17.1.5.1**: Early Hominid Fossil Sites (CC BY-SA 4.0; Corey Parson via Original Work)

During the Pliocene epoch (5 – 1.6 million years ago), another series of environmental changes made these grasslands even more prevalent, leading to a transformation that geologists call the "turnover-pulse hypothesis." Animals with adaptations such as angled knee joints and arched feet survived on the grasslands, while those with longer arms or curved fingers who were better suited to the woodlands did not. For hominids, this favorable grassland environment meant the "development of several closely related species. Large-toothed hominids known as robust australopithecines appeared in Southern and Eastern Africa." [3] Towards the end of the Pliocene, around 2.4 million years ago, the first members of our genus—*homo* (***Homo habilis***)—appeared, the first hominid to make stone tools.

The **Pleistocene** epoch (1.6 million – 10,000 years ago) saw at least twenty-five periods of glaciation and warming. Glaciation resulted from dips in global temperature which had two major effects on hominid development. First, with sea levels dropping due to glaciation, hominids migrated to Australia and the Americas for the first time. Second, while many migrated out of colder climates, those that remained developed physical adaptations. Homo neanderthalensis (Neaderthals), a hominid that disappeared 28,000 years ago, became stockier and more powerful to deal with the difficulties of this icy climate.

While not as dramatic as previous developments, the current **Holocene** period has seen its share of significant climatic events. The Younger Dryas event (c. 12,000 BCE) was a drop in global temperatures accompanied by a corresponding change in vegetation distribution. Reduced rainfall from 2200 – 1900 BCE made conditions very difficult for civilizations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, the Medieval Warm Period represents "one of the most recent periods of climate change."[4]

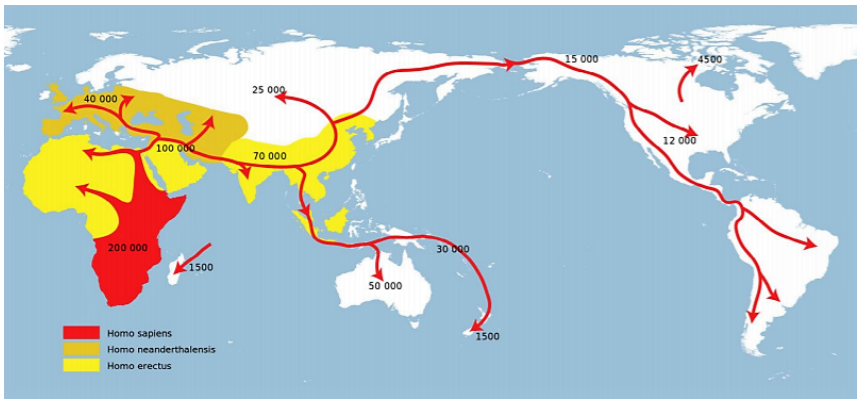
Like *neanderthalensis*, ***Homo sapiens, Homo erectus, Homo habilis***, and other hominids all reacted to changing climate conditions. *Homo erectus* and *Homo habilis* migrated, hunted, and used fire, while *neanderthalensis* had some use of language and tools and buried their dead. For millions of years, in fact, hominids had been using slivers of volcanic stone and cutters probably to hack through animal skin. The cutters were often found close together, suggesting that early hominids even had a division of labor between hunters who would have to pursue their prey and butchers who could wait nearby at the butchering site. There is even evidence of task division by gender among *neanderthalensis*. Multiple sites in Europe show different patterns of wear on male and female teeth, indicating a gendered task division in tasks where teeth were used to hold, break, or strip objects.[5]

However, by 25,000 years ago all other hominins were extinct; only *Homo sapiens sapiens*, our species, survived. Paleoanthropologists attribute this survival to larger brains, durability, and ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Based on migration patterns and archaeological evidence, *Homo sapiens sapiens* appear to have been the only hominids to build sea-worthy boats, create art, have organized religion, and live in any climate.[6]

17.1.5.2: Homo sapiens Migration

While *Homo sapiens* were decidedly more advanced than other hominids, when they first moved out of Africa some 45,000 years ago, they were only equipped with stone tools for hunting and cutting. Despite those initial limitations, 30,000 years later *Homo sapiens* would inhabit almost every environment on earth and had a presence in every continent except Antarctica. *Homo sapiens* in fact moved further and faster than all other hominids. While it is hard to attribute a single factor to all *Homo sapiens* migration, we do see that multiple human societies required migration to arrive at a more sophisticated level of development. *Homo sapiens* migration accelerated close to 40,000 years ago, where humans reached continental Eurasia.

Modern humans (50,000 – 10,000 years ago) completed the migration to all the continents except Antartica, moving first into Australia, Eastern Siberia, the Pacific margins, Japan, and the Americas. Then from 10,000 years ago to 1,500 CE, humans arrived in the Arctic, the Indian Ocean, the deep Pacific, and tropical rain forests. Migration occurred in a "staccato" pattern with "easiest" areas colonized quickly, while more "difficult" areas remained uninhabited for thousands of years. A region's "easiness" is calculated from estimates about available plant and animal biomass and net productivity—that is, how quickly it returns—in each habitat. For example, tropical savannas and grasslands of East Africa were colonized first as the biomass there sustained the first bipedal hominids.



Map **17.1.5.2**: The Spreading of *Homo sapiens* Author: NordNordWest Source: Wikimedia Commons License: Public Domain

Hominids first left "sub-Saharan Africa … through the northern savannahs, up the Nile corridor or across the straits of Bab el Mandeb to the Arabian Peninsula." [7] Evidence exists of *Homo erectus* in Morocco, Chad, and Algeria, and it appears that they eventually left Africa via the Arabian Peninsula. After leaving Africa about 1.5 million years ago, choppers, handaxes, and spheroids found at sites like Ubeidiya in Israel put *Homo erectus* in the Levant. Some scholars argue for the existence of a second migration out of Africa and into the Jordan Valley 500 to 600 thousand years ago.

17.1.5.2.1: Asia

Some evidence suggests the presence of *Homo ergaster* and *Homo erectus* as having occurred in Java over a million years ago. Chinese *Homo erectus* fossils date between 800,000 to 400,000 years ago. *Homo sapiens* began to leave Africa around 40,000 years ago, and hunter gatherers appeared in China by the end of the last **Ice Age** (36,000 to 16,000 BCE) as continental ice in central Asia began to melt.

17.1.5.2.2: Europe

Animal bones and pebble tools place hominids near Rome just before the beginning of the Middle **Pleistocene** (730,000 years ago). This seems to be the first hominid incursion into Europe. Hominid remains in Spain suggest colonization in Iberia up to two million years ago, but there are not nearly enough remains (no more than twenty inhabitants in any given site) to provide any certainty in terms of which hominids they correspond to or when they lived there. Either way, colonization of Europe can be considered "late." This tardiness may have been related to a lack of animal food sources. Not until around 500,000 years ago did "new species of deer, bovid, rhino, and horse appear" [8] in Europe. Around the same time, the cheetah, saber-tooth tiger, and dirk-tooth cat declined in the region, making more carcasses from the aforementioned species available to hominid foragers.

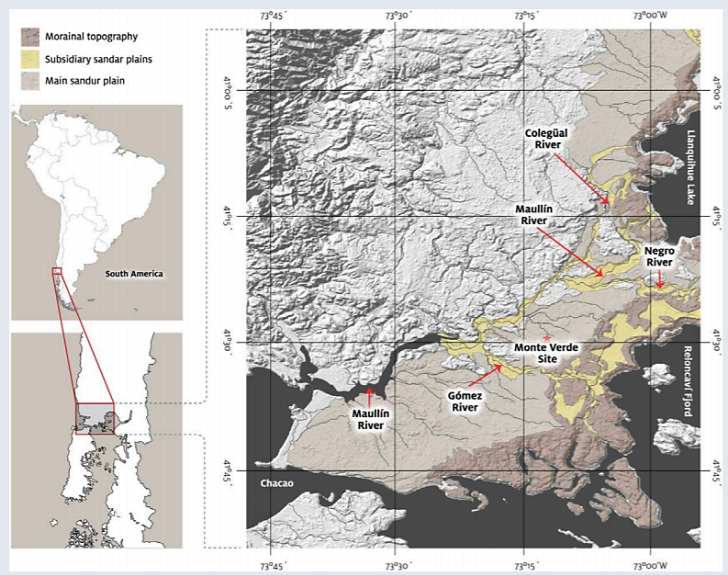
17.1.5.2.3: Australia, Papua New Guinea, Sahul

Evidence of tools from 30,000 years ago exists in Australia, and from even longer in New Guinea. The lack of "a dry land crossing to Sahul" (the land mass that once connected New Guinea and Australia) meant that an ocean journey of somewhere between sixty-five and 100 kilometers was required from mainland Asia. This made Australians and New Guineans the first sea-going colonizers. Once in Sahul, how humans populated Australia is still the subject of some debate between those who support the "coastal hugger" theory and those who support the idea of population by "overlanders." The more difficult of the two means of populating Australia is overland, as it is more arid than the coasts, and the evidence for tools overland is not as advanced as that for the coast.

17.1.5.2.4: Peopling the New World

North and South America were the last continents to be settled by humans. Most scholars think that the Americas were populated from **Beringia** over land. Around 12,000 years ago, mammoth hunting became more common and supported larger populations on both the Asian and American sides of **Beringia**, a landmass (now divided by the Bering Strait) which at that time connected North America and Asia. On the Asian side, outlines of houses with stone-lined hearths have been found, remnants indicating permanent settlement that didn't necessarily have colonization as an end goal. But colonize they did, one group pushing southward between 10,000 and 3,000 years ago and establishing settlements that would become the origins of modern Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Inuit populations. Another group migrated southeastward through Alaska, their descendants making it as far as Chile and Argentina.

While we know about when American colonization began, the pace and means of colonization are still debated. Complicating the discussion of timing is the fact that the Late Wisconsin Ice sheet blocked the overland route from about 30,000 years ago, when two sheets merged, up until about 12,000 years ago, when they opened after a thaw. At this point in time, only a handful of sites support possible pre-10,000 BCE occupation: Monte Verde in Chile, Meadowcraft near Pittsburgh, and Page-Ladson in Florida. As recently as 2015, excavations at Monte Verde and Chinchihuapi have strengthened the "possibility of an earlier human presence on the continent" to as far back as 17,000 BCE. This date has continued to move back in time as archeologists consider evidence of more mobile humans who did not leave large artifact clusters because of their ephemeral nature, but nonetheless may have been present before more sedentary groups.



Map **17.1.5.3**: Geomorphological Context of the Monte Verde Site (CC BY 4.0; Tom Dillehay via PLOS)

For now, however, the clearest evidence for when the Americas were widely populated comes through the Clovis point, a specific arrowhead shape that was unique in its ubiquity and sophistication. The Clovis point was also found in mammoths that had grown extinct by 10,500 years ago, this discovery meaning that humans were common in North America by then. From Beringia, humans moved at a rate of roughly 10 miles a year until they reached Tierra del Fuego and fully populated the Americas (with the exception of some tropical areas mentioned above).[9]

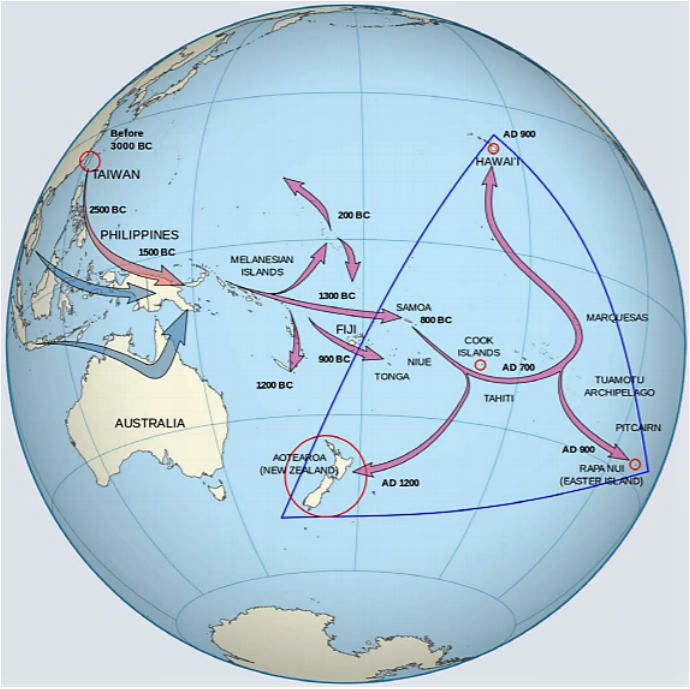
17.1.5.2.5: The Arctic

The first Paleo-Eskimo populations appeared around 4,000 years ago after arriving from Eastern Siberia, populations that were left behind by the American colonists already mentioned. The Arctic climate is harsh, to say the least, and these populations needed sophisticated weapons and tools to be able to survive it, which explains their late arrival.

The Arctic colonists expanded rapidly across Alaska, through Canada, and into Greenland, assisted by their arctic “small tool kits” that included the important toggle headed harpoons to kill walrus and seal.

17.1.5.2.6: Polynesian origins

The origins of Polynesian humans are still very much in doubt. Groups of Polynesian mariners had existed 50,000 years ago, but they were not colonizers. In fact, many scholars argue that eventual colonization actually began as exploration. Around 2,500 years ago, we see more permanent settlements in Fiji, Tonga, and other areas of the “remote” Pacific, as remnants of pottery have been found there. Based on linguistic and technological similarities among Polynesian cultures, some scholars argue that Fiji, Somoa, and Tonga were a crucible of sorts where Polynesians were “made” from groups from throughout Asia. Once these cultural groups had a certain identity, they began to colonize Easter Island, Hawaii, and New Zealand about and beyond 1,000 CE.



Map **17.1.5.4**: Polynesian Migration (CC BY 3.0; David Eccles via Wikimedia Commons)

We can't use land migration patterns to understand oversea migration. The Pacific was somewhat of a highway, where currents and winds were wellknown and frequently used by mariners. Migrating humans were much more likely to wander aimlessly on land than they were to let currents take them to unknown parts of the ocean. Pacific mariners tacked to use the winds in their favor and, despite population pressures, Pacific mariners were too adept at seafaring to suggest a simple casting out of people into the Pacific in hopes of finding something. Once Pacific colonization did commence, settlers were very deliberate about it, taking with them families, and plants, and animals. It seems that they had every intention of recreating "home." In sum, the exploration was neither extremely heroic nor extremely risky but instead was calculated and not left to chance.

17.1.5.3: Hunter-gatherers

This chapter explores the importance of farming to the creation and expansion of early civilizations. However, farming was only invented 13,000 years ago, meaning that for most of human history, our food has come through foraging. Early hominids like australopithecines, *Homo habilis*, and *Homo erectus* ate mostly plant food. Homo sapiens became more sophisticated foragers as they began to fish with hooks and, more recently, nets, and as they used stone grinding tools to produce flour.

As food gathering techniques evolved for these Paleolithic foragers, so did their behavior as organized groups. Modern humans became mobile to prevent resource depletion; they controlled population through dispersion or infanticide, and they began to "live and work cooperatively." Modern foragers also began to divide tasks and share food with others, a feature that distinguishes them from other animals like chimpanzees that live in communities but feed individually. Sharing food is, of course, much easier to do when there is a surplus, and, with increasing tool use, Paleolithic humans became even more adept at foraging, leading to the higher likelihood of food surpluses.

Tool use not only helped humans live cooperatively, but it also may have helped hominids develop abstract thought—evidence of tool use may give us a clue as to when this development began. We know that other animals use tools, but even as long as 2.6 million years ago, we see evidence of the creative thinking required to make more effective tools. ***Homo habilis*** in fact takes its name ("handy man") from the fact that they were the first known hominid tool-makers. Soon after individual tools appeared, the **Oldowan** Industry became the first widely used toolset, "consisting of flaked and smashed quartz riverside pebbles made into poorly formed choppers and sharp stone flakes, [and] lasted for 1 million years with little change [from 2.6 to 1.5 million years ago]." [10] The Oldowan were followed about 1.5 million years ago by hand axes that remained unchanged for more than a million years. Many scholars argue that these smaller-brained hominids like *Homo habilis*, *homo ergaster*, and *Australopithecus* were both unable and unwilling to innovate much beyond their simple but effective tools, especially considering how harsh their environment

could become. Fire was another important tool, first used by *Homo erectus* about 1.6 million years ago. Fire would become important to migrants to colder climes in Europe and Asia and to foragers who could now eat foods that were poisonous if ingested raw. *Homo erectus* also cooked foods they had previously eaten raw, thereby expanding their lifespan by eliminating toxins found in raw meats.



Figure **17.1.5.1**: Paleolithic Chopper (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Archaeodontosaurus" via Wikimedia Commons)

Homo sapiens would add more meat to their diet when advances in tool-making led to an increase in big game hunting during the late Pleistocene. For example, excavations near **Dolni Vetoniçe** in the Czech Republic have helped reveal a society that "used mammoth remains not only for meat, but for fuel, construction, jewelry, and portable art." The inhabitants of Dolni Vetoniçe also made thousands of ceramic figurines, bird bone flutes, and ivory carvings of human heads. The cave paintings of Lascaux also reflect this increased skill as hunters and painters both. The colors and types of paint they used were vibrant and durable, and the scenes they depicted demonstrated their use of diverse hunting techniques. There we see depictions of humans hunting not only deer, but also woolly rhinoceros and mammoths.

Also at Lascaux, we see evidence that hunter-gatherers had both religious beliefs and gender specific tasks, reflecting a sophistication that we usually only attribute to sedentary humans. The fact the humans and animals were depicted together so often at Lascaux may be evidence of a belief that man descended from these animals. Or perhaps the bison, rhinoceri, and birds were painted on the walls to produce "hunting magic" designed to make expeditions more successful. Finally, it was mostly men depicted in these higher-risk hunting activities, suggesting that women were the artists, participated less in the hunt, or both.

Closer to the Neolithic era, societies began to experience a growing role for women reflected through their representation in "Venus" statuettes. (See Figure 1.5) As we get closer to the Neolithic era, we see the relative role of women increasing; their place in ritual increases, their stature increases, their economic importance increases, and their childbearing uniqueness becomes more greatly emphasized.



Figure **17.1.5.2**: Bull, Bird, and Human from Lascaux Cave (CC BY-SA 2.5; User "Peter80" via Wikimedia Commons)

Increased sophistication was not limited to big game hunters, however. Campsites, rock art, and burial sites near Lake Mungo in Australia reveal how these early humans used pottery for cooking and had a diverse diet of birds, fish, and shellfish, a diet that seems to have kept them well-nourished. [11] Australia was a society of hunter-gatherers until European colonization. Mobility was essential, with the continent's lack of widespread rainfall and rich soil. As a result, aboriginal Australians needed an extensive knowledge of their terrain and where to move when. Tasmanians would ambush wallabies at their seasonal grazing territory, while aborigines in the central deserts had to know when water holes would go dry. We also learn from the remains of Australian aborigines that foragers could be quite complex if they continued to hunt and gather for thousands of years. Aborigines painted, developed advanced weapons like the boomerang, warred against one another, developed creation myths, passed down oral histories, and played musical instruments.

17.1.5.4: Endnotes

3 Lauren Ristvet, In the Beginning: World History from Human Evolution to the First States (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007), 4.

4 Ibid., 3-5.

5 Almudena Estalrrich and Antonio Rosas, "Division of Labor by Sex and Age in Neandertals: An Approach Through the Study of Activity-Related Dental Wear," Journal of Human Evolution 80, (March 2015): 51-63.

6 Ristvet., 24-26.

7 Clive Gamble, Timewalkers: Prehistory of Global Colonization (Bath, Avon: The Bath Press, 1993), 125-128.

8 Ibid., 135.

9 Dillehay TD, Ocampo C, Saavedra J, Sawakuchi AO, Vega RM, Pino M, et al. (2015) "New Archaeological Evidence for an Early Human Presence at Monte Verde, Chile," PLoS ONE 10(11): e0141923. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0141923: 208.

10 Ristvet, 17-22

11 Ibid., 27-30.

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17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution

Historian Lauren Ristvet defines agriculture as the "'domestication' of plants… causing it to change genetically from its wild ancestor in ways [that make] it more useful to human consumers."[12] She and hundreds of other scholars from Hobbes to Marx have pointed to the **Neolithic Revolution**, that is, the move from a hunter-gatherer world to an agricultural one, as the root of what we today refer to as civilization. Without agriculture we don't have empires, written language, factories, universities, or railroads. Despite its importance, much remains unclear about why and where agriculture began. Instead, scholars hold a handful of well-regarded theories about the roots (pun intended) of agriculture.

Most scholars agree that the Ice Age played a fundamental role in the rise of agriculture, in the sense that it was impossible during the much colder and often tundra-covered period of the Pleistocene, but inevitable during the Holocene thawing. Only 4,000 years before the origins of agriculture, the planting of anything would have been an exercise in futility. During the Last Glacial Maximum (24,000 – 16,000 years ago), average temperatures dropped "by as much as 57˚ F near the great ice sheets…"[13] This glaciation meant not only that today's fertile farmlands of Spain or the North American Great Plains were increasingly covered in ice, but also that other areas around the world could not depend on constant temperatures or rainfall from year to year. Pleistocene foragers had to be flexible. The warming trend of the Holocene, by contrast, resulted in consistent rainfall amounts and more predictable temperatures. The warming also altered the habitats of the megafauna that humans hunted, alterations that in some cases contributed to their extinction. Therefore, as animal populations declined, humans were further encouraged to plant and cultivate seeds in newly-thawed soil.

When we start to examine other factors that allowed humans to transition to agriculture, we find that the climate factor looms even larger. For example, agriculture was usually accompanied by sedentarism, but we see communal living and permanent settlements among multiple groups of hunter-gatherers. *Homo sapiens* had also begun to domesticate animals and plants alike during the Pleistocene. Humans were already being buried alongside dogs as early as 14,000 years ago.[14] As we'll see below, gatherers were developing an increasing taste for grains long before they would abandon a foraging lifestyle. Essentially, humans were ready for agriculture when climate permitted it.

We discuss elsewhere the timing of agriculture's appearance in all of the continents, but generally speaking by about 8,000 years ago, farmers in West Asia were growing rye, barley, and wheat. In northern China, millet was common 8,500 years ago. In the Americas, the domestication of maize began around 8,000 years ago in Mesoamerica, while at about the same time, Andean residents began cultivating potatoes. Once all of these areas realized agriculture's potential as a permanent food source, they began to adapt their societies to increase their crop consistency and crop yields. We'll discuss how agriculture affected societal development below.

17.1.6.1: First Farmers of West Asia [or the Fertile Crescent]

In later chapters we will discuss Mesopotamia, the area between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers that agriculture would make the "cradle of civilization." (See Map 2.1). However, the incubator of Mesopotamian and Fertile Crescent agriculture and cultural patterns dated back to the foragers of the nearby Eastern Mediterranean, thousands of years before. The rye, barley, and wheat in West Asia were first harvested by late Pleistocene foragers called the Kebarans who ground wild wheat and barley into a porridge.[15] Kebarans consumed the porridge as part of their broad spectrum diet that also included land mammals, birds, and fish. Advancing into the Holocene we see the "**Natufian Adaptation**," where residents of this same area began to see the benefits of sedentary living in a precursor to the advent of agriculture. The Natufians consumed the same rye, barley, and wheat that their Kebaran predecessors had, but because their teeth were well-worn it appears they ate relatively more of it. Having a constant source of these grains enabled their eschewing long hunting or gathering soujourns; instead, the Natufians drew more of their meat from in and around Lake Huleh in modern Israel. Near Lake Huleh was Ain Mallaha, one of the earliest examples of year-round human settlement and an important precursor to sedentary agriculture.

Another permanent settlement in Southwest Asia seems to have been more directly responsible for the decision to actually domesticate grain, rather than simply cultivate wild varieties. Abu Hureya in Syria was deeply affected by the Younger Dryas event of 11,000 years ago, an event which caused many of their wild food staples to disappear. Rather than migrating out of the area, the Abu Hureyrans cultivated rye. Soon afterward, other sites in the Levant began to see the planting of barley, while wheat was cultivated in both the Levant and Anatolia.[16]

17.1.6.2: First Permanent Settlements in West Asia [of the Fertile Crescent]

The transition from foraging, to collecting to cultivating took place over several centuries, but these gradual changes did serve to mark a very distinct era of permanent settlement during the Neolithic Period. Increased rainfall around 9600 BCE meant that the Jordan River would swell yearly, in the process depositing layers of fertile soil along its banks. This fertile soil allowed locals to rely on agriculture for survival. Soon after they founded **Jericho** just north of the Dead Sea: "perhaps the very first time in human history that a completely viable population was living in the same place at the same time."[17] By Jericho's height, around 9000 BCE, the settlement's population reached the hundreds. This increase cannot be considered an urban boom of course, and the transition away from foraging occurred gradually. For example, excavations from this area have unearthed no separation of tasks or dwellings by gender or skill. However, by the end of Jericho's development, maintaining large populations in one place would prove to produce other extensive adjustments.[18]



Map **17.1.6.1**: The Jordan River (Public Domain; User "Interiot" via Wikimedia Commons)

Jericho's residents did distinguish themselves from their hunter-gatherer predecessors, however, through their relatively extensive construction projects. They used mud bricks to build a wall that encircled the settlement probably for flood control, a tower, and separate buildings for grain storage.

The former foragers now living at Jericho could rely on fish or other aquatic creatures for meat as they experimented with permanent settlement, but those foragers living further away from large bodies of water would need another source of meat. This need increasingly was met by animal domestication. Domestication would prove to be a slow process, as humans learned the hard way that zebras bite, impalas are claustrophobic, and bighorn sheep do not obey orders. In other words, some animals cannot be domesticated, but this is information only understood through trial and error. By about 7,500 BCE, however, humans in the Taurus and Zagros mountains employed selective breeding to eventually domesticate mountain sheep and goats. The temperament and size of pigs and cows delayed their domestication until the 6,000s BCE, but this process proved equally, if not more important, than that of sheep and goats.

As agriculture and animal domestication progressed, settlements around the Mediterranean became larger and more sophisticated. By 7,000 BCE on the Anatolian plateau, Çatalhüyük reached several thousands of inhabitants. The residents at Çatalhüyük buried their dead, constructed uniform adjacent houses with elaborate designs painted on their interior walls, and had multiple workshops where (among other activities) they wove baskets, and made obsidian mirrors as well as daggers with "carved bone handles."[19] Catalhüyük denizens wove wool into cloth; developed a varied diet of peas, nuts, vegetable oil, apples, honey, and the usual grains; and improved weapons technology with sharper arrows added to their use of daggers and lances. These gains may seem modest by our standards, but the legacy of communal living and, ultimately, political centralization that they introduced was extraordinary.



Figure **17.1.6.1**: Çatalhüyük at the Time of the First Excavations (CC BY-SA 3.0; Omar Hoftun via Wikimedia Commons)

Jericho and Çatalhüyük were surely some of the most notable early settlements, but they were not alone. The appearance of these two settlements was accompanied by the increasing presence of village life across the world. Most early agricultural villages in Southwest Asia and around the world were very similar in appearance; they had around twenty residents and were organized around grain cultivation and storage. Small huts were organized in a "loose circle," and grain silos were placed between each hut. Labor was a communal activity, and village members all spent time hoeing the fields or hunting. The most valuable asset to a community was the grain itself, but neither it nor the land where it grew it belonged to one individual.

This model existed for hundreds and even thousands of years in some areas, until the villages stopped hunting and domesticated animals. For many scholars, the abandonment of hunting represents the "real" Neolithic Revolution. As communities completely abandoned hunting and gathering, they dedicated more energy to warfare, religion, and construction; in consequence, dwellings and settlements grew, along with a concomitant focus on tool and weapon making.[20]

17.1.6.3: Leaving Paleolithic Culture Behind

While the Neolithic Era is described in greater detail elsewhere, it is important to understand Paleolithic and Neolithic differences in order to convey a sense of just how revolutionary the shift to agriculture was for humanity. For example, agriculture contributed to (along with religion and trade) the development of class. Before agriculture, hunter-gatherers divided tasks like seed gathering, grinding, or tool-making. However, without large scale building projects like aqueducts or canals required for agriculture, hierarchies were much less pronounced. The intensification of agriculture during the Neolithic required irrigation, plowing, and terracing, all of which were labor intensive. The amount of labor required could not be met through simple task division; someone had to be in charge. This meant the establishment of ruling elites, a societal grouping that had not existed during the Paleolithic.

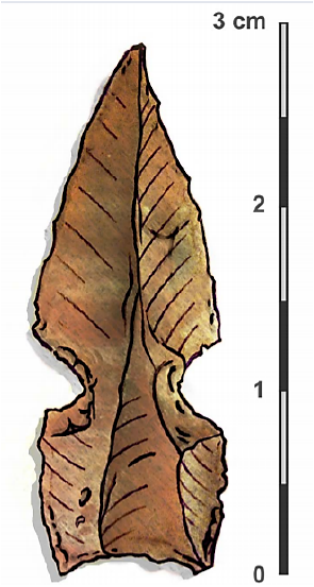


Figure **17.1.6.2**: Khiam Point from Nahal Hemar (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Illujanka" via Wikimedia Commons)

While violence certainly existed during the Paleolithic period, organized warfare was an invention of the Neolithic. Agriculture meant larger populations and settlements that were more tightly packed and closer to one another. These closer quarters created new social and economic pressures that could produce organized violence. Agricultural intensification produced stores of food and valuables that could be seized by neighbors. During the 9,000s BCE, settlements like Jericho began to build defensive walls, while skeletons unearthed in the area reveal wounds from new types of projectiles (like the Khiam Point) developed during the era.[21]

Family life also changed significantly during the Neolithic. Sedentary communities invested more time and resources into the construction of permanent homes housing nuclear families. People spent less time with the community as a whole and within homes it became easier to accumulate wealth and keep secrets.

The shift in gender roles after agriculture seems to be even more pronounced, as the role of women became more important as humans moved out of the Paleolithic and into the Neolithic era.

During the Paleolithic Era, and until recently in fact, a child would be breastfed until he or she was three or four years old, a necessity preventing mothers from joining long-distance hunting expeditions without their toddlers. However, a breastfeeding woman could complete tasks that "don't require rapt concentration, are relatively dull and repetitive; they are easily interrupted, don't place the child in danger, and don't require the participant to stray far from home."[22] Spinning, weaving, and sewing were some of these tasks. Also, the essential tasks of preparing food and clothing could be accomplished with a nursing toddler nearby. These tasks that may be consigned as "women's work" today are among the most important tasks (and very time consuming ones before the industrial revolution) that a human could perform. In fact, they were so time consuming that women would spend most of their day on them, often being assisted by men.



Figure **17.1.6.3**: Different types of carved Venus figurines, Anthropos Museum, Brno, Czech Republic (CC BY-SA 3.0; Mercy from Wikimedia Commons via Wikimedia Commons)

Over time, Paleolithic women gathered new species of berries as well as bird eggs, and learned which mushrooms were nontoxic. Women also were the principal gatherers of mosses for sleeping mats and other plants for shelter. When men returned with a kill, the women then began an involved process of dressing and butchering it. Sinews from animals and fibers from plants became rope to tie or fasten the hides as well as baskets. Women thus were essential to any kind of productivity or progress associated with hunting. Women used sinews and fibers to create netting for transport and for hunting and fishing. In hunting societies with elements of horticulture, women were responsible for, and could provide, such food as legumes, eggs, and grains. Food gathering and weaving, especially in the dry Mediterranean, was an outdoor and community activity that also served as a preschool and apprentice system for children. So women were also community educators.

17.1.6.3.1: Neolithic Women

While Paleolithic women certainly had important responsibilities, the added tasks of herding and animal domestication expanded their roles tremendously in the Neolithic era. Neolithic survival required not only effective food storage, but also increased production. Children on a farm can be more helpful and put in less danger than those on a hunt. Neolithic women increasingly bore more children, either because of increased food production or to help augment it. This increase in child bearing may also have offset an increase in mortality due, for example, to disease. Because dangers from disease grew in new villages due to the ease with which deadly diseases spread in close quarters, and nearby domesticated animals whose diseases spread from animal to humans, more children would be necessary to replace those who had succumbed to illness.

While Neolithic women carried an increased child-bearing responsibility, their other responsibilities did not necessarily wane. Though women may not have fired pottery when it began to appear some 6,000 years ago, they appeared on it in decorative symbols of female fertility. Around 4,000 BCE, gendered tasks shifted again with the domestication of draft animals. Food production once again became men's domain, as herding was incompatible with childrearing. Later, in Neolithic herding societies, women were often responsible for the actual domestication of feral babies, nursing them and raising them. Men would shear sheep, help weave, market the textiles, and cultivate the food that was prepared in the home.

We should say that this was not the case with all agricultural societies, as many horticulturalists who were able to cultivate crops closer to home were able to remain matrilineal. For example, we have the case of Minoan women on the Mediterranean island of Crete that we discuss in more detail in Chapter Five. On Crete's hilly terrain, women were able to cultivate terraced horticulture and keep herds of sheep and goats nearby. Therefore, as women lost power and influence elsewhere due to more intensive agriculture, Minoan women actually expanded their control over Crete's economic and cultural life and would help give rise to Classical Greece.

17.1.6.4: Toward First Civilizations

We will discuss the Bronze Age elsewhere, but we should mention here that new pursuits like mining added to the domestic burden on women. The advent of the Bronze Age led to far-spread searching and mining for copper and other metals like arsenic or tin to harden it and create the bronze alloy. Mining consequently become a male pursuit. Between 9,000 and 4,000 BCE, as metal become a source for wealth and subsistence, men's roles shifted from being secondary to being both the food collectors and the economic backbone of individual families and societies.

These Neolithic developments in sedentary agriculture and village life would be the foundation for an explosion of cultural development three thousand years later in Egypt and Mesopotamia (addressed later in this text). By the Age of Exploration in the 1500s CE, most of the world had adopted agriculture as a primary means of subsistence, and the foundation of great civilizations.

17.1.6.5: Endnotes

12 Ibid., 36.

13 Ibid., 36-37.

14 Chris Scarre, ed. The Human Past: World Prehistory and the Development of Human Societies. 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 183-84.

15 Ristvet, 41.

16 Ristvet, 41-42.

17 Steven Mithen, After the Ice: A Global Human History, 20,000 – 5,000 BC. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 59.

18 Robert Strayer, Ways of the World: A Brief Global History with Sources, 2nd ed (New York, Bedford St. Martins, 2013), 40

19 Mithen, 94.

20 Ristvet, 66.

21 Scarre, 192, 215.

22 Elizabeth Wayland Barber, Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years – Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times, (New York: Norton, 1995), 30.

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17.1.7: Summary

The story of world civilizations really begins six to eight million years ago when ancestors of modern humans began to walk upright. Millions of years of evolutionary response to changing climates and environment led to the existence of our species, *Homo sapiens*. While other hominids migrated out of Africa, had language, and made fire and tools, it was *Homo sapiens* who were able to navigate open oceans and eventually populate the entire planet. Over the last 50,000 years or so, *Homo sapiens* became modern humans by improving their hunting, their building techniques, their community living, and their food gathering and storage. About 10,000 years ago, the Neolithic Era began. Humans began to live in larger, permanent settlements where a permanent food source needed to be nearby. These were the beginnings of agriculture. This “agricultural revolution” deeply affected gender relationships, class distinctions, and economic priorities as most humans left their foraging days behind them, the importance of which will be discussed in later chapters.

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17.1.9: Links to Primary Sources

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Oldowan & Acheulean Stone Tools
anthromuseum.missouri.edu/minigalleries/handaxes/intro.shtml

Dolni Vetoniçe
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Natufian site of Eyan/Ain Mallaha
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Çatalhüyük
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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.2: Early Middle Eastern and Northeast African Civilizations

17.2.1: Chronology

17.2.2: Introduction - Defining Civilization

17.2.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.2.4: Key Terms

17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia

17.2.6: Sumerian City-States

17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires

17.2.8: The Significance of Mesopotamia for World History

17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel

17.2.10: Early Israelites

17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel

17.2.12: The Importance of the Israelites and Ancient Israel

17.2.13: Ancient Egypt

17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt

17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush

17.2.16: Summary

17.2.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.2.18: Links to Primary Sources

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17.2.1: Chronology

17.2.1.1: Ancient Mesopotamia

c. 10,000 BCE Beginnings of the Agricultural Revolution

c. 3500 BCE Appearance of Sumerian city-states in lower Mesopotamia

c. 3200 BCE Early use of cuneiform

c. 2900 BCE Production of bronze

2334 – 2100 BCE Akkadian Empire

c. 2000 BCE Gilgamesh first recorded in cuneiform

1792 – 1595 BCE Babylonian Empire

1792 – 1750 BCE Reign of Hammurabi

900 – 612 BCE Assyrian Empire

626 – 539 BCE New Babylonian Empire

605 – 562 BCE Reign of Nebechadnezzar

17.2.1.2: Ancient Israel

c. 1300 – 1200 BCE Israelites leave Egypt (following Moses)

c. 1050 – 1010 BCE Israelites establish a kingdom

c. 1000 – 970 BCE Reign of King David

c. 979 – 930 BCE Reign of King Solomon

931 BCE Israel divides into two kingdoms

586 – 539 BCE Babylonian captivity of Israelites

17.2.1.3: Northeast Africa (Egypt and Nubia)

c. 7000 BCE Beginnings of Agricultural Revolution in Northeast Africa

c. 6000 – 3500 BCE Desiccation of the Sahara Desert pushed people towards Nile River Valley

c. 4000 BCE Towns and villages grew along the Nile River

c. 3100 BCE Unification of Egypt

3100 – 2600 BCE Egyptian Archaic Period

2660 – 2160 BCE Egyptian Old Kingdom

2400 – 1450 BCE The Kingdom of Kerma

2040 – 1640 BCE Egyptian Middle Kingdom

1640 – 1570 BCE Egypt’s Second Intermediate Period (Egypt under Hyksos Rule)

1530 – 1070 BCE Egyptian New Kingdom

1350 – 1325 BCE Amarna Period (under Pharaoh Akhenaten)

1040 – 332 BCE Egyptian Late Period

750 – 656 BCE The Kingdom of Kush ruled Egypt, creating the “Ethiopian Dynasty”

750 – 593 BCE Kingdom of Kush (with capital at Napata)

656 – 639 BCE Assyrians occupied Egypt

593 BCE Egyptian army sacked Napata, the capital of Kush

593 BCE The Kingdom of Kerma moved its capital to Meroe

525 BCE Persian conquest of Egypt

323 BCE Alexander the Great conquered Egypt/Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt

30 BCE Roman conquest of Egypt

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17.2.2: Introduction - Defining Civilization

The term **civilization** often elicits mostly idealized images of ancient empires, monumental architecture, and the luxurious lives of ruling classes. Civilization, however, is a tricky term. In the United States, students of history studied Western Civilization, almost exclusively, through the 1950s. In their studies, civilizations were advanced societies with urban centers, rooted in European or Middle Eastern culture. America's origins in these western civilizations was used to explain our own high level of development. However, more recent scholars have definitely broadened the geographical focus by recognizing that worldwide from 3500 to 1000 BCE at least seven independent civilizations emerged in different regions. These recent scholars also continue to debate the definition of civilization, and the current compromise amongst World Historians is to recognize characteristics that civilizations tended to share. Common characteristics of civilizations included food surpluses, higher population densities, social stratification, systems of taxation, labor specialization, regular trade, and accumulated learning (or knowledge passed down from generation to generation). The list here is not all-inclusive by any means, but it indicates the complexity of the societies that scholars have labeled civilizations.

In addition to heated debates about its exact definition, civilization is a loaded term, meaning that it can contain a value judgment. If we use the term carelessly, it seems to indicate that some societies are deemed civilized and worthy of inclusion, while others are uncivilized and thus not worth our study. In part, our sensitivity to this issue is a response to the tendency of past historians, including many of those working in Europe in the 1800s, to assume that there was a natural progression from an uncivilized state to civilization. These historians viewed people who had values, ways of living, and religious beliefs different than theirs as uncivilized. They further believed that these allegedly uncivilized peoples were behind or needed to catch up with those who were civilized. Today, World Historians try to appreciate the great diversity of human experiences and consciously remove these sorts of value judgments. World Historians avoid assumptions that some societies in the past were better or further along than others. Therefore, many World Historians remain wary of the uncritical use of the term civilization.

For our purposes, let us leave aside any value judgments. Societies labeled as civilizations were not inherently better than any others. In fact, as we will see, civilizations demonstrated various vulnerabilities. Considering things like war, slavery, and the spread of diseases, there were sometimes advantages to living outside the nexus of civilizations. For example, in comparing societies, scholars have found that in many instances people residing in decentralized states were healthier and lived longer than did their counterparts in early civilizations. However, people living in societies with social stratification, labor specialization, and trade usually left more written records and archeological evidence, which historians can analyze to narrate our past. The available resources mean that civilizations tend to be better represented in the written historical records. As you read about past civilizations, keep in mind that historians are currently enhancing our understanding of societies that perhaps remained mobile, rejected hierarchies, or preserved their histories orally. These societies were also part of our shared past, even if they are harder to study or have received less scholarly attention.

This chapter focuses on early civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and Northeast Africa. The civilizations in these regions left written records. They also all initially had economies based on farming and developed alongside rivers. Their locations alongside rivers allowed populations in the Fertile Crescent and Northeast Africa to grow the surplus food that they used to support urbanization, social stratification, labor specialization, and trade.

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17.2.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. Explain why the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were significant for ancient Mesopotamians.
2. Describe the characteristics of civilizations that were found in ancient Mesopotamia.
3. What does the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tell scholars about Mesopotamian values, views of the environment, and conceptions of the afterlife?
4. How did the rulers of ancient Mesopotamian empires attempt to bring together and control the people within their realms?
5. Describe the legacies of the civilization in ancient Mesopotamia.
6. Explain the central beliefs of Judaism that are evident in the early written tradition.
7. How did the United Kingdom of Israel develop and who were its key leaders?
8. Describe how the Israelites and their traditions have been influential.
9. How did the Nile River and the region's climate and geography influence the development of Egyptian civilization?
10. Which characteristics of civilizations were seen in Ancient Egypt?
11. What major continuities were evident throughout Dynastic Egypt?
12. Describe Egypt's intermediate periods.
13. Explain the significance of pyramids.
14. Describe the major innovations of the New Kingdom.
15. What are the legacies of Ancient Egypt?
16. Compare the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt.
17. What were the defining features of Nubian civilization?
18. Describe Kerma and Kush's relationship with Egypt.

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17.2.4: Key Terms

- Amarna Period
- Assyrian Empire
- Aten
- Cataract
- City-states
- Civilization
- Covenant
- Cuneiform
- Desiccation
- Divine kingships
- Empire
- Exodus
- Hammurabi's Code
- Hieroglyphics
- Kerma
- Kush
- Levant
- Meroe
- Meroitic
- Mesopotamia
- Middle Kingdom
- Monotheism
- Nebuchadnezzar II
- New Kingdom
- Nile River
- Nubia
- Old Kingdom
- Ostraca
- Palette of Narmer
- Polytheistic
- Prophets
- Pyramids
- Sargon of Akkad
- Sumerian King List
- The Ten Commandments
- Valley of Kings
- Western Deffufa
- Ziggurat

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17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is located in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. Archeologists have found some of the earliest known sites of agricultural production in the Fertile Crescent. Although much of this region received little or irregular rainfall, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers provided large amounts of freshwater, facilitating agricultural production and the development of early civilizations. The Greeks later recognized the significance of the river systems to these ancient societies and referred to the region as “the Land between the Rivers” or **Mesopotamia.**

The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers both originate in the Taurus Mountains of eastern Anatolia and flow southward to empty into the Persian Gulf. The rivers carry and deposit silt downstream, enriching the soil. In general, the richer soils and availability of water in areas that in the north otherwise had little rain, or else towards the south had concentrated months of rainfall followed by long, dry spells, encouraged settlement near the rivers. The areas closer to the Persian Gulf, known as Lower Mesopotamia, in particular, were attractive to early settlers because they had extremely fertile soils. People built some of the earliest cities, including Uruk, Eridu, and Ur, in Lower Mesopotamia.



Map 17.2.5.1: The Fertile Crescent (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Ras67” via Wikimedia Commons)

While the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers did provide water to the region, their floods were unpredictable and could even be catastrophic when they washed away entire settlements. In response, the region’s residents created irrigation canals and drainage ditches to control the flow of water. They also stored water in reservoirs to use during the dry months of the year. Additionally, in parts of Lower Mesopotamia, the courses of the rivers and their tributaries changed frequently, so people either had to move to follow the water’s new path or divert a river to continue supplying water for their settlement. As regular access to water supported agricultural surpluses and population growth, people tended to fare better against the unpredictability of the floods, seasonal changes, and the rivers’ changing courses when they lived in settlements capable of maintaining irrigation canals, drainage ditches, and water reservoirs.

The rivers offered another benefit to ancient Mesopotamians. Just as the rivers were definitely important to meet people’s everyday needs for water and for agricultural production, so they also facilitated trade. While people made use of local resources, like mud to build their homes, in general, Lower Mesopotamia lacked other desired resources, including wood, stone, and precious metals. Traders were able to use the rivers to bring in these resources from Assyria, Anatolia, the Levant, and areas adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Early Mesopotamians also obtained goods from as far away as what today are northern Pakistan and India. Merchants used overland routes that crossed the Iranian Plateau and sea routes, exchanging Mesopotamian products like grains and textiles for luxury goods from the east. Royal cemeteries show that by 2500 BCE Mesopotamian elites were buried with a variety of imports, including beads brought from the Indus River Valley. The rivers and the overland trade routes also facilitated communication and, with it, the sharing of ideas and technologies.



Map **17.2.5.2**: Trade Routes in Early Mesopotamia | In the third millennium BCE, people in Lower Mesopotamia used river routes to trade northward. They also used sea routes through the Persian Gulf, and they connected with traders to the east by crossing the Iranian Plateau. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Corey Parson via Original Work)

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17.2.6: Sumerian City-States

Lower Mesopotamia, or the southern areas of Mesopotamia towards the Persian Gulf, drew settlers, who moved to take advantage of rich soils and the availability of water in the area commonly known as Sumer. The people who lived in Sumer are generally referred to as Sumerians. Prior to 3,000 BCE, Sumerians, whose origins remain a subject of debate, founded a number of independent cities in Lower Mesopotamia. In these cities, Sumerians had organized religions, centralized governments, social hierarchies, and access to trade networks. As these cities expanded, their leaders claimed control over adjacent territories, forming at least a dozen **city-states**, which became the basic organizational structure of Sumerian civilization in the third millennium BCE. By incorporating the surrounding territories into city-states, urban centers were able to draw on more resources.

Sumerian cities had certain characteristics in common. First, a temple complex or a ziggurat was usually the visual focus of the urban landscape. Sumerians believed that their entire city belonged to its main deity, and built a massive temple, the most important building in the city, to be the dwelling place of their city's main god or goddess. A complex that comfortably housed many of the priests and priestesses who served the city's deity surrounded each temple. In addition to attending to the religious needs of the community, temples complexes also owned land, managed industries, were involved in trade, and acted as banks. Their wide-ranging roles meant that temples often had additional outbuildings, like granaries and storage sheds, in the surrounding countryside. Sumerians were **polytheistic**, meaning they worshipped multiple gods and goddesses. Because Sumerians believed each god had a family, they also built smaller shrines and temples dedicated to these divine family members. Therefore, each city would have a number of temples while many Sumerian homes had small altars dedicated to other gods. Sometimes, urban temples or ritual spaces were built atop a **ziggurat**, a solid rectangular tower made of sun-dried mud bricks. Archaeological evidence shows that temple complexes were expanded and rebuilt over time and, by the late third millennium BCE, temples in many of the Sumerian city-states were raised on platforms or else situated on a ziggurat. The towering architecture of the ziggurat stressed the significance of the temple to the surrounding community. The bestpreserved ziggurat, the Great Ziggurat of Ur, was constructed with an estimated 720,000 baked bricks and rose to a height of about 100 feet. The people of Ur constructed this ziggurat for their patron deity, the moon goddess Nanna. They likely brought regular offerings to Nanna and also received food rations from the Great Ziggurat of Ur.



Figure **17.2.6.1**: The Great Ziggurat of Ur | Located in what is today the Dhi Qar Province of Iraq, Sumerians originally built the ziggurat in the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100 BCE). It has been restored several times since, including fairly recently in the 1980s. (CC BY 3.0; User "GDK" via Wikimedia Commons)

Viewing nature as unpredictable, people brought offerings to their city's temple complexes or ziggurat, hoping to please the gods who controlled the natural forces of their world. Priests and priestesses collected and redistributed the offerings, demonstrating the vital roles they played in Sumerian society. The relatively privileged position of priests and priestesses at the temple complex also shows Sumerian social stratification (the development of a hierarchy) and how agricultural surpluses supported the specialization of labor. Some of the early leaders of Sumerian cities may have been "priest-kings," who attained elevated positions through their association with the temples. The later rulers of city-states definitely supported the temples, claiming to be acting on behalf of the gods who brought divine favor to their followers.

Sumerian city-states had local rulers, who lived in large palaces, but most of these local rulers were not considered kings. So far, archeologists have dated the earliest known royal palaces to c. 2600 BCE and conclude that Sumerian city-states had centralized governments with secular rulers by at least that timeframe. While there does seem to have been a sense of inhabiting a shared space in Southern Mesopotamia, referred to as "the Land" in written records, city-states had distinctive identities. In part, their distinctive identities revolved around their main deity. The rulers of city-states alternately supported, competed with, and fought against one

another. The **Sumerian King List** (Figure 17.2.6.2), a manuscript that listed early kings and described their reigns (with some presumably fictive and exaggerated elements), provides evidence of these alliances, competition, and war. For example, it describes En-mebarages as the second to last king of the 1st Dynasty of Kish, "…who carried away as spoil the weapons of the land of Elam, became king, and reigned 900 years…"[1] Local rulers often came to power after proving themselves militarily.



Figure 17.2.6.2: The Sumerian King List (Public Domain; Taiwania Justo via Wikimedia Commons)

Furthermore, the Sumerian King List recognized only rulers who had established control over multiple city-states as kings (with the title of *lugal* in the Sumerian language) belonging to distinct dynasties. While it lasted, a dynasty generally passed down the kingship through the male line. According to the Sumerian King List, the seat of power, held by hereditary kings, shifted from city-state to city-state with the rise and fall of dynasties through the third millennium BCE. Significantly, the Sumerian King List began its recorded history "when kingship came down from heaven," legitimizing secular kings through their association with gods.[2] Sumerian kings, often along with more local rulers, led armies, collected taxes, organized labor for state projects, and meted out justice. At the top of the hierarchy and with control over multiple city-states, kings expected obedience from local rulers and their subjects, and support from the priests and priestesses of the temples.

Kings, local rulers, priests, and priestesses held influential positions in Sumerian societies. However, farmers, taken as a whole, made up an estimated 90% of the population. Other skilled people included animal-breeders, merchants, craftspeople, fishermen, doctors, soldiers, architects, and scribes. Surplus agricultural production collected as tribute as well as wealth generated by trade supported such labor specialization. One important outcome of labor specialization was innovation in metalworking. In approximately 2900 BCE, metalworkers began producing bronze, which was stronger than copper. Stronger weapons and farming tools gave Sumerians advantages when it came to combat and agricultural production.

Social stratification is further evident as some Sumerians and even institutions, including temples, owned slaves. Slaves performed a variety of tasks like construction, weaving, agricultural and domestic labor, tending animals, and even administrative work as scribes. Some slaves were chattel slaves, meaning that society treated them as property with no rights. Usually, chattel slaves were prisoners of war or slaves bought from outside communities. They were branded by barbers or tattoo artists and forced to work at the will of their masters. If they tried to run away, the law required slaves to be returned. The more widespread type of servitude in most Sumerians societies was likely debt slavery, which was generally temporary until a debtor paid off a loan and its interest. Over the past century or so, archaeologists have added a great deal to our understanding of Sumerian social distinctions through their work at numerous excavation sites, but many gaps in our knowledge still exist.

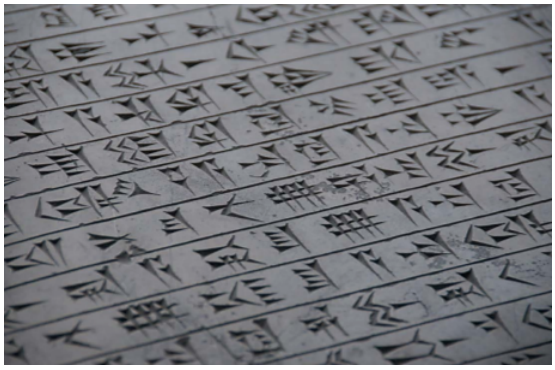


Figure 17.2.6.3: Cuneiform | Cuneiform script on a clay tablet currently housed at the National Archaeological Museum in Tehran. (CC BY 2.0; A. Davey via Wikimedia Commons)

The archaeological discovery of cuneiform tablets at these excavation sites has aided efforts to learn about this civilization. Sumerians developed **cuneiform**, a written script of wedge shaped marks, around 3200 BCE. Cuneiform was one of the earliest, if not the very first, written script in the world. The Sumerian King List, discussed above, was recorded in cuneiform. Merchants, scribes, administrators, priests, and others kept written records describing financial transactions, court proceedings, administrative decisions, and architectural plans. They also wrote legends, epic poems, chants, and prayers. Most people were not literate, so scribes—who had been specially trained in scribal schools—generated many of the records. While in school, in addition to copying written passages, scribes learned arithmetic. The Sumerians system of arithmetic was based on the number 60, which we still use to divide time into hours, minutes, and seconds. Scribes used styluses made of reed to write on clay tablets that were dried and could be stored. The discovery of cuneiform tablets has greatly aided archaeologists, but only a small percentage of the tablets found to date have been translated.

Using archaeological and written evidence, scholars have pieced together what they can about everyday life for Sumerians, though some questions remain. For instance, it has been a challenge to determine the layout of urban spaces beyond the prominence of the temples and the relative grandeur of palaces. From archaeological finds, scholars suspect that Sumerian cities were divided into neighborhoods by occupation and according to kinship groups, but uncertainties about specifics linger. Legal documents and tax records show that people owned property in both the cities and the countryside. Also, evidence suggests social stratification, as some Sumerians owned fairly large chunks of land, while others had much smaller plots or presumably no land at all. Wills, court proceedings, and temple documents show that land and temple offices were usually bought or else acquired through military or other service to the state. A man inherited land, property, offices, and their attendant obligations to the state (like reoccurring military service) from his father. The eldest son seems to have frequently inherited a larger share than younger brothers and have been given control over the family home. He was tasked with performing regular rituals to honor dead ancestors, who were usually buried underneath the home. From the written documents, we also get glimpses into other aspects of Sumerian life, like marriage and divorce.

Sumerians viewed marriage as a contract between two families and, as a result, the male heads of the two families arranged a couple's marriage. Documents show that both families contributed resources to seal the union or complete the marriage contract. The man's family gave gifts or money and hosted a feast, while the woman's family amassed a dowry. Although a woman did not automatically receive an inheritance upon the death of her father, she could expect (and use the court system to make sure she got) to receive a dowry, even if it came from her father's estate after his death. Divorce was possible but sometimes led to social ostracism or even punishment if there were accusations of misconduct, such consequences being especially the case for the woman. Records indicate that polygamy was not common, but wealthier men did keep slave-girls as concubines. Overall, Sumerians considered marriage an essential institution in that it brought families together and ensured the continuation of the family lineage.

Legends, myths, poems, and literary texts tell us about Sumerians, too. For example, we can explore their values and views of the afterlife through reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* relates the adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary king, who may have lived around 2700 BCE. The epic has multiple versions and was told orally before it was first written down in cuneiform in about 2000 BCE. The epic follows the heroic exploits of Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu, to emphasize the importance of values such as loyalty and humility. In one section, the epic describes a very gloomy afterlife where "people see no light, they sit in darkness,"[3] reflecting Mesopotamian beliefs that the afterlife was miserable for all, even those who had lived virtuously.

Additionally, it portrays the environment as potentially violent and hostile as in its flood story, which in some ways resembles the account of Noah and the flood found in Genesis. Ultimately, Gilgamesh fails at his quest to find eternal life but learns to work for the glory of the gods and for worthwhile human achievements.



Figure 17.2.6.4: The Queen's Lyre | The Queen's Lyre is a reconstructed musical instrument modeled after a lyre found by archaeologist Leonard Wooley in one of the graves at the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The original instrument has been dated to c. 2500 BCE. The reconstructed instrument is held at the British Museum in London. (Public Domain; User "Fae" via Wikimedia Commons)

Other archaeological finds and the written documents also give some hint of the wider popular culture and artistic conventions in ancient Mesopotamia. For example, cuneiform tablets with pictures of dancers and singers, as well as instruments found in graves, suggest that Sumerians placed importance on music, using it for entertainment and ritual purposes. Trying to learn more about Sumerian music, scholars and other enthusiasts have replicated these instruments and presented their best estimation of Sumerian scales and tuning. The documentary evidence suggests that hymns from the ancient Sumerian city-states were shared with later Mesopotamian empires and even spread into the Mediterranean world.

1 J.N. Postgate, Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History, (London: Routledge, 1994): 28.

2 Ibid.

3 Excerpt from: The Epic of Gilgamesh, trans. Nancy Sandars (New York: Penguin Books, 1960), http://web.archive.org/web/20010217041824/www.humanities.ccny.cuny.edu/...r/gilgames.htm

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17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires

In the second half of the third millennium BCE, Sumerian city-states fought each other, and dynasties rose and fell. Kings consolidated power over multiple city-states in the region. Then, King Sargon of Akkad enlarged the scale by conquering the Sumerian city-states and parts of Syria, Anatolia, and Elam. In doing so, he created one of the world's first empires in approximately 2334 BCE. For generations, Mesopotamian literature celebrated the Akkadian Empire (c. 2334 – 2100 BCE) that King Sargon founded. Like the Akkadian Empire, three subsequent empires, the Babylonian Empire (c. 1792 – 1595 BCE), the Assyrian Empire (c. 900 – 612 BCE), and the Neo-Babylonian Empire (c. 605 – 539 BCE), also ruled large parts of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent.

17.2.7.1: The Akkadian Empire (c. 2334 – 2100 BCE)

Sargon of Akkad founded the first empire in Mesopotamia. Legends about Sargon of Akkad stress that he rose from obscurity to become a famous, powerful king. While the legends all tend to describe him as coming from humble origins and rising to the top using his own wits, there are many variations. One much later Babylonian tablet, from the seventh century BCE, describes his background as descendent of a high priestess and an anonymous father. His mother hid her pregnancy and the birth of Sargon, secreting him away in a wicker basket on a river, where he was rescued and then raised by Aqqi, a water-drawer. This version of the legend links Sargon with a more elite family through his birth-mother, a high priestess, but also shows how he had to advance himself up to king after being adopted by the rather more humble figure of a water-drawer.



Map **17.2.7.1**: The Akkadian Empire, c. 2300 BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Nareklm" via Wikipedia)

From his allegedly humble origins, Sargon of Akkad conquered Sumerian city-states one by one, creating an **empire**, or a large territory, encompassing numerous states, ruled by a single authority. It's quite possible that Sargon of Akkad's predecessor, who claimed to rule over the large region stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, began the process of building the empire, but Sargon is remembered for accomplishing the task. One of the reasons we attribute the empire to him is his use of public monuments. He had statues, stellae (tall, upright pillars), and other monuments built throughout his realm to celebrate his military victories and to build a sense of unity within his empire. Archaeologists have not found the empire's capital city, Akkad. However, from the available information, archaeologists have estimated its location, placing it to the north of the early Mesopotamian city-states, including Ur and Sumer. It is clear that Sargon of Akkad turned the empire's capital at Akkad into one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities in the world. According to documentary sources, the city's splendor stood as another symbol of Sargon's greatness. The city grew into a cosmopolitan center especially because of its role in trade. Akkadian rulers seized and taxed trade goods, with trade routes extending as far as India. Sargon ruled the empire for over fifty years. His sons, grandson, and great grandson attempted to hold the empire together. After about 200 years, attacks from neighboring peoples caused the empire to fall. After the fall of the Akkadian Empire, Hammurabi founded the next empire in the region in 1792 BCE.

17.2.7.2: The Babylonian Empire (1792 – 1595 BCE)

Hammurabi, who aspired to follow Sargon's example, created the next empire in the region, the Babylonian Empire. With well-disciplined foot soldiers armed with copper and bronze weapons, he conquered Mesopotamian city-states, including Akkad and Sumer, to create an empire with its capital at Babylon. Although he had other achievements, Hammurabi is most famous for the law code etched into a stele that bears his name, the Stele of Hammurabi.



Figure **17.2.7.1**: The Stele of Hammurabi (CC BY 3.0; User “Mbzt” via Wikimedia Commons)

The Stele of Hammurabi records a comprehensive set of laws. Codes of law existed prior to Hammurabi’s famous stele, but **Hammurabi’s Code** gets a lot of attention because it is still intact and has proven very influential. As seen in Figure **17.2.7.1**, the upper part of the stele depicts Hammurabi standing in front of the Babylonian god of justice, from whom Hammurabi derives his power and legitimacy. The lower portion of the stele contains the collection of 282 laws. One particularly influential principle in the code is the law of retaliation, which demands “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” The code listed offenses and their punishments, which often varied by social class. While symbolizing the power of the King Hammurabi and associating him with justice, the code of law also attempted to unify people within the empire and establish common standards for acceptable behavior. An excerpt of Hammurabi’s Code appears below:

> 6. If anyone steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death.
>
> 8. If any one steal cattle or sheep, or an ass, or a pig or a goat, if it belong to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold therefore; if they belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death.
>
> 15. If any one receive into his house a runaway male or female slave of the court, or of a freedman, and does not bring it out at the public proclamation of the major domus, the master of the house shall be put to death.
>
> 53. If any one be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam break and all the fields be flooded, then shall he in whose dam the break occurred be sold for money, and the money shall replace the corn which he has caused to be ruined.
>
> 108. If a tavern-keeper (feminine) does not accept corn according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water.
>
> 110. If a “sister of god” open a tavern, or enter a tavern to drink, then shall this woman be burned to death.
>
> 127. If any one “point the finger” (slander) at a sister of a god or the wife of any one, and can not prove it, this man shall be taken before the judges and his brow shall be marked. (by cutting the skin or perhaps hair)
>
> 129. If a man’s wife be surprised (in flagrante delicto) with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.
>
> 137. If a man wish to separate from a woman who has borne him children, or from his wife who has borne him children: then he shall give that wife her dowry, and a part of the usufruct of field, garden, and property, so that she can rear her children. When she has brought up her children, a portion of all that is given to the children, equal as that of one son, shall be given to her. She may then marry the man of her heart.
>
> 195. If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.
>
> 196. If a man put out the eye of another man his eye shall be put out. (An eye for an eye)

197. If he break another man's bone, his bone shall be broken.

198. If he put out the eye of a freed man, or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold mina.

199. If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

203. If a free-born man strike the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

205. If the slave of a freed man strike the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off.[4]

Hammurabi also improved infrastructure, promoted trade, employed effective administrative practices, and supported productive agriculture. For example, he sponsored the building of roads and the creation of a postal service. He also maintained irrigation canals and facilitated trade all along the Persian Gulf. After Hammurabi's death, his successors lost territory. The empire declined, shrinking in size. The Hittites, from Anatolia, eventually sacked the city of Babylon in 1595 BCE, bringing about the official end of the Babylonian Empire.

17.2.7.3: The Assyrian Empire (c. 900 – 612 BCE)

The **Assyrian Empire**, which saw its height of power at the end of the first millennium to the seventh century BCE, was larger than any empire that preceded it.

Dominating the region, its well-equipped soldiers used their stronger iron weapons to extend the empire's control through Mesopotamia, Syria, parts of Anatolia, Palestine, and up the Nile into Egypt. They used siege warfare, along with battering rams, tunnels, and moveable towers, to get past the defenses of cities. The Assyrians had a large army (with perhaps as many as 150,000 soldiers) that utilized a core of infantry, a cavalry, as well as chariots. As part of their military strategy, the Assyrians purposefully tried to inspire fear in their enemies; they decapitated conquered kings, burnt cities to the ground, destroyed crops, and dismembered defeated enemy soldiers. One Assyrian soldier claimed:

> In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword…I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some of their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.[5]

The Assyrians expected these methods to deter potential rebellions and used their spoils of war, like precious metals and livestock, to finance further military campaigns. After conquering an area, they conscripted men into their army, and employed resettlement and deportation as techniques to get laborers where they wanted them and deal with communities who opposed their regime. They also collected annual tributes that were apparently high enough to, at least occasionally, spur rebellions despite the Assyrians' reputation for violent retribution.



Map 17.2.7.2: The Assyrian Empire at its height. (Public Domain; User "Ningyou" via Wikimedia Commons)

In addition to its military strength, the Assyrian empire also stands out for the size of its cities and its administrative developments. The empire's biggest cities, such as Nineveh and Assur, each had several million people living within them. Administratively, kings ruled Assyria, appointing governors to oversee provinces and delegates to keep tabs on the leaders of allied states. There were

between 100 and 150 governors, delegates, and top officials entrusted by the king with ruling in his place and helping him maintain the empire. In the later centuries of the Assyrian Empire, kings chose these officials on the basis of merit and loyalty. Kings met with large groups of officials for rituals, festivals, and military campaigns. Evidence of such meetings has led some scholars to propose the possibility that the king and his officials might have worked together in something resembling a parliamentary system, though there is no scholarly consensus on the point. Ultimately, the Assyrian Empire became too large to control; rebellions occurred with more frequency and were difficult for its overextended military to quell. The empire fell after the conquest of Nineveh in 612 BCE.

17.2.7.4: The New Babylonian Empire (c. 626 – 539 BCE)

With the weakening of the Assyrian Empire, the New Babylonian Empire began to dominate Mesopotamia. Lasting for less than 100 years, the New Babylonian Empire is best known for its ruler, Nebuchadnezzar II, and its great architectural projects. As described in the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Old Testament), **Nebuchadnezzar II,** who ruled from 605 – 562 BCE, was a ruthless leader. He gained notoriety for destroying the city of Jerusalem and deporting many of the city's Jews to Babylon. The captive Jews suffered in exile, as they were not allowed to return to their homeland. Nebuchadnezzar II also rebuilt Babylon with fortresses, temples, and enormous palaces. He associated the New Babylonian Empire with the glory of ancient Babylonia by reviving elements of Sumerian and Akkadian culture. For example, he had artists restore ancient artwork and celebrated the kings of old, like Hammurabi. Nebuchadnezzar is often also credited with rebuilding the city's ziggurat, *Etemanaki*, or the "Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth." When completed, the ziggurat rose several stories above the city and seemed to reach to the heavens. Some scholars claim that the Babylonian ziggurat was the famous Tower of Babel described in the Old Testament. Another one of Nebuchadnezzar's purported projects, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, was considered by the later Greek historian Herodotus to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. According to legend, Nebuchadnezzar had the hanging gardens built for his wife. He made the desert bloom to remind her of her distant homeland; the elaborate gardens planted on rooftops and terraces were designed so that the plants' leaves would spill down high walls. Since definitive archaeological evidence of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon has not been found, scholars continue to debate its most likely location and even its very existence. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar II, outside military pressures as well as internal conflict weakened the empire until the much larger Persian Empire conquered the New Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE.

17.2.7.5: Endnotes

4 "The Code of Hammurabi, c. 1780 BCE." Ancient History Sourcebook. Fordham University. https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/hamcode.asp#text

5 Quoted in Erika Belibtreau, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan_Spanier/Teaching/documents/CP6.0AssyrianTorture.pdf

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17.2.8: The Significance of Mesopotamia for World History

Mesopotamia saw the emergence of some of the first cities and the world's first empires. The city-states of the region flourished from about 3000 to 2300 BCE. Then, Sargon of Akkad and subsequent rulers built empires, expanding their control and influence over even larger territories.

There were cultural links and commonalities found in the Sumerian city-states of the third millennium BCE. With agricultural production dependent on access to water, cities initially grew in Southern Mesopotamia near rivers, namely the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and their tributaries. Sumerians tried to control their environment using irrigation, drainage ditches, water reserves, and other methods. With unpredictable floods and other environmental challenges, the Sumerians viewed nature as hostile and their expectations of the afterlife tended to be pessimistic. Their understanding of nature as unpredictable also spurred engineering innovations as Sumerians prepared for floods, water shortages, and other natural events. While farming was the mainstay of their economies, city-states were also involved in robust long-distance trade networks, which allowed them to garner the many resources not available in their region. These city-states alternately allied with, competed against, and waged war on one another, with kingship emerging as rulers dominated multiple citystates. As evidenced by the centrality of temples and the belief that kingship came from heaven, religion was of fundamental importance to these societies. Archaeologists have also uncovered ample evidence of social stratification and labor specialization in these ancient city-states. Archeologists have been able to recognize Sumerian developments, in part, because the Sumerians left behind a wealth of information documented in cuneiform, one of the world's first written scripts. Scholars have begun to describe life in ancient Sumerian societies and appreciate the many Sumerian achievements, like those in math, where they introduced a computation system based on 60 (which we still use to divide time and in geometry as a circle has 360°). Overall, Sumerians were innovators, with some of the first cities, one of the first systems of writing, notable achievements in engineering and architecture, the creation of larger political entities, and more.

Starting with the Akkadian Empire, four empires controlled vast territories in Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. Over a period of almost 1800 years, these empires brought together diverse communities, often by military conquest and force. The empires facilitated trade, and spread ideas and culture. Their rulers developed administrative, military, and other techniques to try to ensure compliance and recognition of their authority. As intended, the rulers and the cities they built live on in legends, even though their empires eventually withered and fell.

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17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel

The Israelites, “or children of Israel,” were Semetic-speakers who lived in Canaan and traced their descent back to Abraham through his grandson Israel. Hebrew tradition begins their history with Abraham’s departure from Ur in southern Mesopotamia (see Map 2.5.1). Therefore, Abraham is important in Jewish tradition, as he has been recognized as the first Jew, the patriarch from whom all Jews trace their descent, and a role model. As described in the Hebrew Scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament, Abraham also made a covenant with God, which blessed his descendants. Jews, Christians, and Muslims of today all recognize Abraham as a significant figure, though these major monotheistic religions view him a little differently. Respect for Abraham by believers in all three of these religions is just one indication that the world’s three major monotheistic religions are connected. Examining these connections reveals the extraordinary contributions that the Israelites made to World History. The Israelites were highly influential in developing the idea of **monotheism**, or belief in one god. Furthermore, they recorded their history orally at first, until their tradition was written down in the Hebrew Scriptures (alternatively referred to as the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament of the Christian Bible). The Hebrew Scriptures has been one of the most important texts ever written.

Eventually, by the end of the second millennium BCE (likely between 1200 and 1000 BCE), the Israelites established small kingdoms in the **Levant**. The Levant refers to areas adjacent to the eastern Mediterranean; in the ancient world, it comprised roughly the area from southern Anatolia through coastal areas of the eastern Mediterranean south and westward to the Egyptian delta. The Israelite kingdoms were concentrated along the Mediterranean coast in what are today Israel and the contested territory of the West Bank/Palestine.

Much debate exists amongst scholars about the sources used to reconstruct the history of the Israelites with much of the debate revolving around the use and interpretation of religious texts, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures. Right now, scholars rely fairly heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures to discuss periods before about 1200 BCE because other sources just do not exist. Some main points of contention have centered on dates, the purpose of religious texts, the reality that the Hebrew Scriptures were written centuries after the events they described, and the relationship between the scriptures and historical fact. Additionally, there has been back and forth discussion about whether archaeological finds confirm or disprove the narrative in the religious texts. These heated debates have led some scholars to question whether it is even possible to write a history of the ancient Israelites. For our purposes, this section will give an overview of Hebrew tradition and, using archaeological and collaborating evidence when possible, describe the development of the Israelite civilization.

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17.2.10: Early Israelites

By leading people out of Ur, his homeland in Southern Mesopotamia, to eventually settle in Canaan, later called Palestine, Abraham began the traditional history of the Israelites. According to Hebrew tradition, even before leaving Ur, Abraham taught his followers about the existence of a single, creator god and rejected the idol-worship and sin of Ur. The narrative continues to explain how when Abraham agreed to God's directive to leave his homeland, God blessed him and all of his descendants. God entered into a **covenant** with Abraham, saying, "…And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great…and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."[6] Jews recognize this covenant as indicating their special relationship with God, and it remains one of the most important aspects of the Jewish faith.

Tradition recounts how several generations later Abraham's grandson, Israel (also called Jacob), had twelve sons, who became the ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. One of these twelve sons, Joseph, led followers from Canaan during a famine to settle in Egypt. As the biblical text describes, the Israelites were prosperous at first and were becoming powerful, leading the Egyptian pharaoh to fear their influence. To try to stem the Israelite influence, the pharaoh put restrictions on births and forced them into slave labor. Then, Moses, whose mother had secreted him away in a waterproof basket on the Nile River, played an important role in delivering his people from subjugation. According to Hebrew tradition, God tasked Moses with leading his people out of Egypt, a flight to freedom called **Exodus**. Moses led "the children of Israel" into Sinai, where they entered into the Sinai Covenant. This covenant bound all Israelites into a pact with God. Israelites agreed to worship God alone and obey his law, while God confirmed the place of the Israelites as his "Chosen People," whom he would protect. As part of the covenant, Israelites agreed to follow the Ten Commandments. According to Hebrew tradition, God gave the **Ten Commandments** to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, instructing the Israelites to worship only him, keep the Sabbath, and honor their parents. The Ten Commandments also prohibit idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty, and coveting.

These written traditions established important elements of the Jewish faith. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures trace Jewish descent from the Hebrew patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Israel (alternatively known as Jacob), and the twelve sons of Israel. They also describe the transition to monotheism and the covenant relationship between God and "the children of Israel." Israelites believed in one god, Yahweh, who created and ruled over everything in the universe, and overall, they perceived Yahweh as being just and merciful. The ideas that there is a single, universal god and that his laws apply to everyone have been defining tenets of other monotheistic religions. Subsequent written and oral traditions, like the Talmud, reflect further development of Jewish beliefs, ethics, laws, and practice.

17.2.10.1: Endnotes

6 As quoted in "Abraham and the Covenant," Israel and Judaism Studies. www.ijs.org.au/Abraham-and-th...t/default.aspx

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17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel

After Exodus, the Israelites resettled in Canaan and in time began to unify. They formed kingdoms in the Levant just prior to 1000 BCE. King Saul (c. 1030 – 1009 BCE), a member of one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, established the first Israelite monarchy, but ruled over a fairly limited territory and died in battle with the Philistines. He was crowned king and began the process of unification, but did not completely defeat his enemies and finish unification before he died. His son, King David, (d. 969 BCE), is often portrayed as Israel's greatest ruler or a model king. He established the United Kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Jerusalem. King David's successor, his son Solomon, further shaped the kingdom.

In popular memory, King David is probably most remembered for defeating Goliath. Historical traditions also celebrate him for expanding the borders of a newly unified Israel, contributing to the Book of Psalms, and, in Christian tradition, for being a forbear of Jesus. David was a "warrior king," who defeated both internal and external enemies to unite Israel. He maintained a large standing army that helped extend his influence and create neighboring tributary states. With control of trade routes and tribute coming in from neighboring territories, Israel became a wealthy state under David. With this wealth, David began to build Jerusalem into the capital city of the Israelites, with further plans to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant (which according to Hebrew tradition held the Ten Commandments). David died before building this temple, but tradition credits him with other achievements, including composing many of the hymns and prayers in the Book of Psalms. Like Abraham, David is considered an important figure by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

King Solomon, David's son, ruled a mostly peaceful realm. He accomplished his father's goal of building the first Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The temple exemplified monumental architecture and became a focal point for the Jews of Jerusalem. Its ruins, known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall, are still a site of Jewish prayer and pilgrimage. Solomon also directed the building of a royal palace, a defensive wall around the city of Jerusalem, and fortresses along the kingdom's frontier. Administratively, Solomon set up twelve districts, overseen by purveyors, who collected tribute in kind (usually as crops or foodstuffs). Each of the twelve districts was charged with supplying the king and the court for one month a year. Finally, Solomon used treaties and reciprocal trade agreements to maintain relatively peaceful relationships with Israel's neighbors. He also forged diplomatic relations through marriage; according to scripture, he had 700 wives! After Solomon's death, what had been the United Kingdom of Israel split into two pieces: Israel and Judah. Over the long term, some of Solomon's policies, including forced labor and tributary payments, likely contributed to the divide.



Map **17.2.11.3**: The United Kingdom of Israel | The map shows the unified state in blue, as well as the surrounding territories that paid tribute to the United Kingdom of Israel. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Regno di Davide via Wikimedia Commons)

After the decline of the United Kingdom of Israel, Hebrew tradition describes the significance of great **prophets** or teachers, who spoke on behalf of god and set moral and ethical standards for the whole community. Yahweh sent these prophets to warn the Israelites that they were not abiding by their covenant. The prophets during this later period, especially Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, cultivated a new conceptualization of the covenant, which was much more personal as it was a relationship between Yahweh and each individual.

The Assyrians and later the Greeks and then the Romans brought parts of the former United Kingdom of Israel under their rule. These conquests and persecution forced members of the Jewish population into exile. This conceptualization of being members of a **diaspora**, that is, a scattered people who desire to return to their homeland, has played an important part in the formation of a Jewish identity. Also, in part, due to this history, preservation of cultural and religious heritage has become an enduring objective of Jews.

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17.2.12: The Importance of the Israelites and Ancient Israel

The Israelites left an extraordinary religious and ethical legacy. They were some of the first monotheists, worshipping a single god, whom they referred to as Yahweh. Their religious texts from the ancient world, including the Hebrew Scriptures, served as the foundational texts of Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures were also the basis of the Christian Old Testament, and Islam recognizes parts of the scriptures as divine revelations. There were other, widespread religious influences as well. For example, Christians and Muslims consider many of the figures, including Abraham, Moses, and David, and teachings, like the Ten Commandments, from the Hebrew Scriptures to be very important. Furthermore, the Hebrew Scriptures contained the idea that everyone, regardless of status, was bound to obey the law.

The United Kingdom of Israel was a “golden age,” associated with the creation of a unified, wealthy state with its new capital in Jerusalem. This civilization had well-developed religious traditions, political power vested in a king, monumental architecture, and administrative innovations. It also maintained a strong military, multiple tributary states, long-distance trade networks, and well-established diplomatic relationships with foreign states.

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17.2.13: Ancient Egypt

In our study of World History, ancient Egypt serves as an excellent example of a complex society with cross-cultural connections, adaption to and control over changing environments, and sophisticated political and religious developments. All of these themes are evident in an examination of the origins of Egypt. Egyptian leaders unified Upper and Lower Egypt around 3100 BCE, creating a powerful ancient state. Developments in the millennia preceding unification, including the sharing of innovations and responses to environmental change, set the stage for the emergence of the Egyptian civilization.

Cross-cultural connections introduced the people of Northeast Africa to domesticated wheat and barley, two of the crops that they grew and whose surpluses supported the process of social differentiation and eventually the pharaonic, elite, and skilled classes of ancient Egypt. People in Northeast Africa had likely been gathering wild barley since before 10,000 BCE. However, sharing in the knowledge spreading from the Fertile Crescent around 7,000 BCE, they began cultivating wheat and barley and also keeping domesticated animals, including sheep and goats. At that time, agricultural production and herding were possible in areas that are today part of the Sahara Desert. The period was much wetter than now. People in the region settled into small communities, and archaeological evidence of hearths, grinding stones, and storage silos show the growth of settlements in areas that today are not well watered enough for agricultural production. The presence of crocodile bones, along with similar pottery styles, also suggest a history of contact between communities emerging along the Nile River and these settlements farther west. However, environmental change was leading to the **desiccation** or drying out of areas not adjacent to the Nile River, and by about 5,000 BCE, it was no longer possible to farm much beyond the floodplain of the Nile River. Many people adapted by moving towards the Nile River, and the Nile River became increasingly important to Egypt's populations.

The **Nile River** flows south to north, fed by two main river systems: the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The White Nile flows steadily throughout the year and has its origins in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. The Blue Nile originates in the Ethiopian highlands, and brings floodwaters up past the first **cataract** in the summers. (The first cataract lies roughly at Aswan on the map in Map **17.2.13.1**.) Cataracts are generally considered impassable by boat due to their shallows, rocks, and rapids. Comparatively, the flood plain of the Nile River is narrow, leading, especially with the desiccation of the surrounding areas, to high population densities close to the river. The winds also blow north to south, in the opposite direction of the river flow, thus facilitating trade and contact between Upper Egypt (to the south) and Lower Egypt (to the north). Upper and Lower Egypt lie north of the first cataract, usually allowing river traffic to proceed uninterrupted throughout the territory. Egyptian views of the Nile generally recognized the river's centrality to life as demonstrated in the "Hymn to the Nile," dated to approximately 2100 BCE. The praise-filled ode to the Nile River begins, "Hail to thee, O Nile! Who manifests thyself over this land, and comes to give life to Egypt."[7] The course of the Nile River definitely impacted settlement patterns, while the river also allowed for trade and the development of larger agricultural communities.



Map **17.2.13.1**: The Path of the Nile | The White Nile originates near Lake Victoria, in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. The Blue Nile flows from the Ethiopian Highlands. Both rivers merge at Khartoum, in present day Sudan, and flow northward to empty into the Mediterranean Sea. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Hel-hama" via Wikimedia Commons)

At the tail end of that era of desiccation, from about 3600 to 3300 BCE, complex societies formed in areas adjacent to the Nile River. These communities exerted increased influence over their environments, exhibited social differentiation, and showed evidence of labor specialization. For example, people in the settlements of Naganda and Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt cleared trees and built dykes, canals, and early irrigation systems. By about 3500 BCE, they used these methods to quadruple the amount of cleared, arable land and could support population densities of up to one thousand people per square mile. Just as one example, recent archaeological finds at Hierakonpolis also show evidence of both social differential and specialization with separate burials for the settlement's elite, the oldest known painted tomb, and the remnants of a large-scale brewery, capable of producing up to 300 gallons of beer a day. It is believed that early leaders in Naganda, Hierakonpolis, and similar communities cemented their roles by claiming control over the environment as rainmakers or commanders of the floods. Over time, some of these leaders created **divine kingships**, asserting their right to even more power and access to resources, power that they legitimized by claiming special relationships with, or even descent from, gods. Once Egypt was unified, pharaohs ruled as divine kings, as the personification of the gods. They promised order in the universe. When things went well, the pharaohs were credited with agricultural productivity and the success of the state. There was no separation between religion and the state in ancient Egypt.

The **Palette of Narmer** (see Figure **17.2.13.1** and Figure **17.2.13.2**), which is used to date the unification of Egypt, shows signs that King Narmer legitimized his rule, in part, by claiming a special relationship with the gods. King Narmer, who is referred to in some text as Menes, is commonly recognized as the first unifier of Upper (to the south) and Lower (to the north) Egypt in approximately 3100 BCE (see Map **17.2.13.2**). Unification brought together Egypt from the first cataract at Aswan to the Nile Delta. The Palette of Narmer, which was found in Hierakonpolis, shows King Narmer's conquest of both regions. The right side in Figure **17.2.13.1** shows him slaying an enemy of Upper Egypt. The largest figure, Narmer is wearing the crown of Upper Egypt and beheading a rival king, while standing atop conquered enemies. The left side also shows him as a conqueror, wearing the crown of Lower Egypt and directing flag bearers to mark his victory. Religious imagery appears in the inclusion of the goddess Hathor at the top of the palette as well as the falcon, a reference to Horus, the patron god of Hierakonpolis, who later in dynastic Egypt became the god of sun and kingship.



Figure 17.2.13.1: Both Sides of the Palette of Narmer (CC0 1.0; User “Jean88” via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17.2.13.2: Detail of Palette of Narmer | Closeup of the left side of the Palette of Narmer. Note the larger figure of King Narmer, with celebratory flag bearers preceding him. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “NebMaatRa” via Wikimedia Commons)

Both sides of the Palette of Narmer also have some of the earliest known hieroglyphs. **Hieroglyphics** emerged as written text, combining pictograms (a pictorial symbol for a word or phrase) and phonograms (a symbol representing a sound), during the period of unification. Tax assessment and collection likely necessitated the initial development of Hieroglyphics. Ancient Egyptians eventually used three different scripts: Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, and Demotic. Hieroglyphics remained the script of choice for ritual texts. Students of Egyptian history are most familiar with hieroglyphics as they were usually what artists used to record the history of Egypt’s elite. For example, skilled artisans used hieroglyphs to chronicle glorified accounts of their patrons’ lives on the sides of their tombs. The Egyptians developed Hieratic and Demotic, the two other scripts, slightly later and used them for administrative, commercial, and many other purposes. The Egyptian administration tended to use ink and papyrus to maintain its official records. On the other hand, literate people used ostraca, pieces of broken pottery and chips of limestone, for less formal notes and communications. Over the past decades, archaeologists have uncovered a treasure trove of ostraca that start to tell us about the lives of the literate elite and skilled craftsmen. Just like Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt had one of the oldest written scripts found anywhere in the world.

In addition to one of the earliest writing systems and Egyptian paper (papyrus), archaeologists have credited ancient Egyptians with a number of other innovations. For construction purposes, ancient Egyptians invented the ramp and lever. They also developed a 12-month calendar with 365 days, glassmaking skills, arithmetic (including one of the earliest decimal systems) and geometry, and medical procedures to heal broken bones and relieve fevers. Finally, Egyptians used stone-carving techniques and other crafting skills and tools that were shared throughout the Mediterranean.

7 “Hymn to the Nile, c. 2100 BCE.” Ancient History Sourcebook Fordham University. legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ ancient/hymn-nile.asp

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17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt

Scholars break the 1500 years following unification, a time known as dynastic Egypt, into three main periods: the Old Kingdom (c. 2660–2160 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040 – 1640 BCE), and the New Kingdom (c. 1530–1070 BCE). There is some disagreement about the exact dates of the periods, but, in general, these spans denote more centralized control over a unified Egypt. During dynastic Egypt, pharaohs ruled a united Upper and Lower Egypt. In between these periods of centralized control were intermediate periods, during which the Egyptian pharaohs had less authority. The intermediate periods were characterized by political upheaval and military violence, the latter often at least partially resulting from foreign invasions.

Striking continuities existed in Egypt throughout the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. Egypt had stable population numbers, consistent social stratification, pharaohs—who exercised significant power—and a unifying religious ideology, which linked the pharaohs to the gods. As Egypt transitioned from the period of unification under King Narmer to the Old Kingdom, the pharaohs and the elite became increasingly wealthy and powerful. They further developed earlier systems of tax collection, expanded the religious doctrine, and built a huge state bureaucracy.

Social distinctions and hierarchies remained fairly consistent through all of dynastic Egypt. Most people were rural peasant farmers. They lived in small mud huts just above the flood plain and turned over surplus agricultural produce to the state as taxes. When they weren't farming, they were expected to perform rotating service for the state, by, for example, working on a pharaoh's tomb, reinforcing dykes, and helping in the construction of temples. The labor of the majority of the population supported the more elite and skilled classes, from the pharaoh down through the governing bureaucrats, priests, nobles, soldiers, and skilled craftspeople, especially those who worked on pyramids and tombs.

Another continuity in dynastic Egypt was the relative equality of women to men. At least compared to women in other ancient societies, women in ancient Egypt had considerable legal rights and freedoms. Men and women did generally have different roles; Egyptian society charged men with providing for the family and women with managing the home and children. Society's ascribed gender roles meant that women were usually defined primarily by their husbands and children, while men were defined by their occupations. This difference could leave women more economically vulnerable than men. For example, in the village of craftspeople who worked on the pharaoh's tomb at Deir el Medina, houses were allocated to the men who were actively employed. This system of assigning housing meant that women whose husbands had died would be kicked out of their homes as replacement workers were brought in. Despite some vulnerability, Egyptian law was pretty equal between the sexes when it came to many other issues. Egyptian women could own property, and tax records show that they did. Egyptian women could also take cases to court, enter into legally binding agreements, and serve actively as priestesses. There were also female pharaohs, most famously Hatshepsut who ruled for twenty years in the fifteenth century BCE. One last, perhaps surprising, legal entitlement of ancient Egyptian women was their right to one-third of the property that a couple accumulated over the course of their marriage. Married women had some financial independence, which gave them options to dispose of their own property or divorce. Therefore, while women did face constraints in terms of their expected roles and had their status tied to the men in their families, they nevertheless enjoyed economic freedoms and legal rights not commonly seen in the ancient world.



Figure **17.2.14.1**: Female figurines from ancient Egypt | These figurines show some of the everyday tasks carried out by women. They made bread, brewed beer, and prepared for family meals. (Public Domain; Andreas Praefcke via Wikimedia Commons)

While scholars working over the past several decades have used artwork, archeology, and the surviving legal documents to draw conclusions about women's roles in ancient Egypt, there is much ongoing debate about the prevalence of slavery within this society. Part of the disagreement stems from how various scholars define slavery. There is also great uncertainty about the number of slaves within the Egyptian population. The emerging consensus suggests that Egyptians increasingly used slaves from the Middle Kingdom onward. The majority of the slaves in these later dynasties were either prisoners of war or slaves brought from Asia. Slaves performed many tasks. For example, they labored in agricultural fields, served in the army, worked in construction, helped their merchant owners in shops, and were domestic servants for the Egyptian elite. Slaves were branded and, if possible, would be captured and returned to their masters if they tried to escape. Some masters undoubtedly abused their slaves, though the image of thousands of slaves sacrificed to be buried with pharaohs incorrectly depicts dynastic Egypt. Manumission (freeing a slave) was seemingly not very common, but if they were freed, former slaves were not stigmatized; instead, they were considered part of the general free population. These new scholarly conclusions about the relatively small numbers of slaves in Egypt, especially during the Old Kingdom, have impacted our understanding of how pyramids, tombs, and temples were constructed during dynastic Egypt.

The Old Kingdom saw pharaohs harness their influence to build pyramids to emphasize their relationship to the divine and facilitate their ascent to the gods after their earthly deaths. Pyramids, with their distinctive shape, which you can see in Figure **17.2.14.2**, contained tombs for the pharaohs and their wives. They were marvels of engineering, built on a massive scale to honor the pharaohs and usher them into the afterlife. Pharaohs were mummified to preserve their bodies and were buried with everything considered necessary for the afterlife, including furniture, jewelry, makeup, pottery, food, wine, clothing, and sometimes even pets. The most recognizable pyramids from the Old Kingdom are the three pyramids at the Giza complex, which were built for a father (Egyptian pharaoh Khufu), and his son and grandson, who all ruled during the fourth dynasty.

The Great Pyramid of Giza, built for Pharaoh Khufu, is the largest of the three pyramids. Still largely intact today, it was the largest building in the world until the twentieth century. Over 500 feet high, it covered an area of 200 square yards, and was built with over 600 tons of limestone. Recent studies on the construction of the pyramids have put much more emphasis on the roles of skilled craftsmen—who might work at multiple pyramid sites over the course of their lifetimes—and rotating groups of unskilled workers than on slaves. These studies suggest that skilled craftsmen and local labor forces of Egyptians were the primary builders of the pyramids, including the Great Pyramid of Giza. The Great Pyramid of Giza took an estimated 20 years to construct and employed skilled stonemasons, architects, artists, and craftsmen, in addition to the thousands of unskilled laborers who did the heavy moving and lifting. The construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza was an enormous, expensive feat. The pyramid stands as testimony to the increased social differentiation, the great power and wealth of the Egyptian pharaohs, and the significance of beliefs in the afterlife during the Old Kingdom.



Figure **17.2.14.2**: The Great Pyramid at Giza (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Jeancaffou" via Wikimedia Commons)

n addition to the construction of pyramids, the Old Kingdom saw increased trade and remained a relatively peaceful period. The pharaoh's government controlled trade, with Egypt exporting grain and gold (the latter from Nubia to the south) and importing timber, spices, ivory, and other luxury goods. During the Old Kingdom, Egypt did not have a standing army and faced few foreign military threats. Lasting almost 400 years, the Old Kingdom saw the extension of the pharaoh's power, especially through the government's ability to harness labor and control trade.

However, the power of the pharaohs began to wane in the fifth dynasty of the Old Kingdom. Continuing environmental change that led to droughts and famine, coupled with the huge expense of building pyramids likely impoverished pharaohs in the last centuries of the Old Kingdom. Additionally, the governors known as *nomes*, who administered Egypt's 42 provinces from the fifth dynasty onward, became more independent and took over functions that had been overseen by the state. As an added blow, the pharaohs lost control of trade. While dynastic leaders still referred to themselves as pharaohs, they lacked central authority over a unified Egypt by 2180 BCE.

Following the decentralized First Intermediate Period of roughly 150 years, Pharaoh Mentohotep II reunified Egypt to found the **Middle Kingdom**. The Middle Kingdom saw the reorganization of the state's bureaucratic apparatus to control the *nomes*. To further strengthen their authority, the pharaohs also moved their capital from the Old Kingdom capital of Thebes south to Lisht, halfway between Upper and Lower Egypt. With military expeditions, they extended the boundaries of the state north to Lebanon and south to the second cataract of the Nile into a region known as Nubia. With this extension of territory, Egypt had access to more trade goods, and the organization of trade shifted so that professional merchants took a leading role in developing new trade routes. These professional merchants paid taxes to the state, supporting further consolidation of power by the pharaohs and also infrastructural improvements like irrigation. During the Middle Kingdom, the pharaohs focused less on the building of massive pyramids and more on administrative reorganization, military expeditions, and the state's infrastructural repair.

Disputes over succession and ineffectual rulers led into the Second Intermediate Period. Most notably, Egypt was invaded from both the north and the south during this period. The Hyksos invaded from the north in 1670 BCE. They brought bronze and horse-drawn chariots, which allowed them to conquer parts of Lower Egypt and establish their own kingdom, one lasting about 100 years in the Nile Delta region. From the south, the Kingdom of Kush, based in Nubia, invaded and temporarily established control over Upper Egypt to Aswan. Thus, foreign rulers dominated much of Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period.

The **New Kingdom** of reunified Egypt that began in 1530 BCE saw an era of Egyptian imperialism, changes in the burial practices of pharaohs, and the emergence of a brief period of state-sponsored monotheism under the Pharaoh Akhenaten. In 1530 BCE, the pharaoh who became known as Ahmose the Liberator (Ahmose I) defeated the Hyksos and continued sweeping up along the Eastern Mediterranean. By 1500 BCE, the Egyptian army had also pushed into Nubia, taking Kush southward to the fourth cataract of the Nile River (see Map **17.2.14.1**). As pharaohs following Ahmose I continued Egypt's expansion, the Imperial Egyptian army ran successful campaigns in Palestine and Syria, along the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, by expanding into Kush, Egypt controlled trade routes into Sub-Saharan Africa. Adopting the Hyksos' chariot military and metal technologies contributed to the Egyptian ability to strengthen its military. Egypt maintained a large standing army and built an expansive empire during the New Kingdom.



Map **17.2.14.1**: Egypt during its Imperialistic New Kingdom, c. 1400 BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; Jeff Dahl via Wikimedia Commons)

Egypt saw many other developments during the New Kingdom, especially when it came to burial practices and religion. During the New Kingdom, pharaohs and Egyptian elites used the Valley of Kings, located across the Nile River from Thebes, as their preferred burial site. They desired tombs that were hidden away and safe from tomb robbers. Therefore, instead of pyramids, they favored huge stone tombs built into the mountains of the Valley of the Kings. Nearly all of the tombs in the Valley of Kings were raided, so the fears of the pharaohs were well founded. Tomb raiding was even common during dynastic Egypt. King Tutankhamen's tomb has become one familiar exception. His tomb fared unusually well over the millennia, and King Tutankhamen's image is well known to us because his tomb was found mostly intact in 1922.

Throughout dynastic Egypt, much continuity existed in religious beliefs, causing scholars to characterize Egyptian society as conservative, meaning that Egyptians shied away from change. In general, Egyptian religious beliefs emphasized unity and harmony. Throughout the dynastic period, Egyptians thought that the soul contained distinct parts. They believed that one part, the *ka*, was a person's lifeforce and that it separated from the body after death. The Egyptians carried out their elaborate preservation of mummies and made small tomb statues to house their *ka* after death. The *ba*, another part of the soul,was the unique character of the individual, which could move between the worlds of the living and the dead. They believed that after death, if rituals were carried out correctly, their *ka* and *ba* would reunite to reanimate their *akh*, or spirit. If they observed the proper rituals and successfully passed through Final Judgment (where they recited the 42 "Negative Confessions" and the god Osiris weighed their hearts against a feather), Egyptians believed that their resurrected spirit, their *akh*, would enter the afterlife. In contrast to Mesopotamian society, Egyptians conceptualized the afterlife as pleasant. In the afterlife, they expected to find a place with blue skies, agreeable weather, and familiar objects and people. They also expected to complete many of the everyday tasks, such as farming, and enjoy many of the same recognizable pastimes. Throughout the centuries, the Egyptians conceptualized the afterlife as a comfortable mirror image of life.



Figure **17.2.14.3**: Tombs at the Valley of the Kings (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Karmosin” via Wikimedia Commons)

One change that occurred over time was the “democratization of the afterlife.” As time progressed through the Middle Kingdom and into the New Kingdom, more and more people aspired to an afterlife. No longer was an afterlife seen as possible for only the pharaoh and the elite of society. Instead, just about all sectors of society expected access, as evident in the increased use of funeral texts, like the Book of the Dead. People of varying means would slip papyrus with spells or prayers from the Book of the Dead (or a similar text) into coffins and burial chambers. They intended these spells to help their deceased loved ones make it safely through the underworld into the pleasant afterlife. Conceptualizations of the afterlife consistently emphasized its familiarity and beauty, while more people looked forward to this continued existence after their earthly deaths.



Figure **17.2.14.4**: Golden Mask of Tutankhamun | Because his tomb was found mostly intact in 1922, King Tutankhamen (or King Tut) has become one of our most familiar images from dynastic Egypt. (CC BY 2.0; Carsten Frenzl via Wikimedia Commons)

As they developed religious doctrine and came into contact with new deities, Egyptians integrated new gods and goddesses into their religious beliefs. Like ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians were polytheistic. Some of the roles and back-stories of the deities did change over time; nevertheless, over the millennia they remained quite consistent. For example, Re, Osiris, Horus, and Isis, just to name a few deities in the Egyptian pantheon, stayed significant throughout dynastic Egypt. Re was the sun god, Osiris was the god of the afterworld, who also controlled nature’s cycles (like the all important flooding of the Nile), Horus became a god of war and protection, and Isis was a goddess associated with healing and motherhood. During the Middle Kingdom, Amun, initially a patron saint of the city of Thebes and later recognized as the father of the pharaoh, was combined with Re, the sun god, to become

Amun-Re the supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon. Amun-Re retained this place at the top of the Egyptian pantheon through most of the New Kingdom. One major exception occurred during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten.

Pharaoh Akhenaten started what is known as the **Amarna Period**. The Amarna Period, which lasted from approximately 1350 to 1325 BCE, stands out for its state-sponsored monotheism. Akhenaten introduced radical changes to Egyptian society, moving the capital to Tell el Amarna, a new settlement in the middle of the desert that was devoted to the worship of Aten and the recognition of the pharaoh's superiority over everyone else. **Aten**, who had been one of many deities worshipped during the Middle Kingdom, was elevated to the creator god associated with sunlight, the foundation of all life. The "Great Hymn to Aten" explains the god Aten's association with the sun as, like the sun, his "rays embraced the lands" of Egypt.[8] Akhenaten had the Great Temple of Aten built in the middle of the new capital, and, unlike previous temples, this one had no roof and was open to sunlight. Akhenaten further modified Egyptian religious doctrine to identify himself as the son of Aten. According to the new religious ideology, Akhenaten alone was able to ensure access to the afterlife and communicate with Aten, the sole god. To reinforce Aten's singularity, Akhenaten withdrew financial support from temples dedicated to other deities and defaced the temples dedicated to Amun, who had previously been the most dominant Egyptian deity. The prominence of Aten and Akhenaten's exclusive access to him define the Amarna Period.

Why did Akhenaten introduce these radical changes? At least in part, Akhenaten wanted to break with the priests in Thebes who controlled the temples dedicated to Amun because he believed that these priests had become too powerful. Additionally, by taking on the role of the son of Aten and regulating entry into the afterlife, Akhenaten certainly attempted to reformulate beliefs to emphasize his own importance.

Akhenaten's radical changes were likely troubling for most of the Egyptian population. They had previously found comfort in their access to deities and their regular religious rituals. The worship of Aten as the only Egyptian god did not last more than a couple of decades, floundering after the death of Akhenaten. Pharaohs who ruled from 1323 BCE onward tried not only to erase the religious legacies of the Amarna Period, but also to destroy the capital at Tell el Amarna and remove Akhenaten from the historical record. Archaeologists have not found Akhenaten's tomb or burial place. Scholars continue a long-standing debate about how this brief period of Egyptian monotheism relates (if at all) to the monotheism of the Israelites. Despite such uncertainties, study of the Amarna period does indicate that Egyptians in the fourteenth century BCE saw the fleeting appearance of religious ideology that identified Aten as the singular god.

Some of the strongest rulers of the New Kingdom, including Ramses I and Ramses II, came to power after the Amarna Period. These pharaohs expanded Egypt's centralized administration and its control over foreign territories. However, by the twelfth century BCE, weaker rulers, foreign invasions, and the loss of territory in Nubia and Palestine indicated the imminent collapse of the New Kingdom. In the Late Period that followed (c. 1040 to 332 BCE), the Kingdom of Kush, based in Nubia, invaded and briefly ruled Egypt until the Assyrians conquered Thebes, establishing their own rule over Lower Egypt. Egyptian internal revolts and the conquest by Nubia and the Assyrian Empire left Egypt susceptible to invasion by the Persians and then eventually the 332 BCE invasion of Alexander the Great.



Figure **17.2.14.5**: Panel with adoration Scene of Aten | Pharaoh Akhenaten with his wife and children making offerings to Aten, the divine incarnation of the sun during the monotheistic Amarna Period. (CC BY 2.0; Jean-Pierre Dalbéra via Wikimedia Commons)

The ancient Egyptians made numerous contributions to World History. We remember them for mummification, their pharaohs, and the pyramids. Certainly, in this era, Egypt stands out for its ability to produce agricultural surpluses that supported the elites, priests, and skilled craftspeople. While we tend to focus on the bureaucratic, religious, and artistic contributions of these classes, all Egyptians played crucial roles in creating and maintaining this sophisticated civilization. Additionally, the innovations of Egyptians, such as their stone-carving techniques, hieroglyphics, the use of papyrus, their knowledge of the length of a solar year, and their construction methods, influenced the ancient world and still inspire awe. Overall, the ancient Egyptians created a vibrant civilization, while they also found comfort in the familiar and traditional.

8 “The Great Hymn to Aten.” web.archive.org/web/199902210...eo/simkins/tx/ Aten.html

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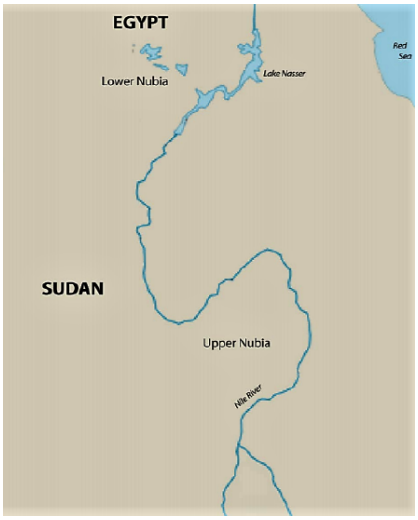
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17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush

The region south of Aswan, at the first cataract of the Nile River, is commonly called **Nubia**. Nubia is notable for its long-term, dynamic relationship with ancient Egypt. Just as importantly, Nubia was also the site of an early civilization. The kingdoms of Kerma (c. 2400 BCE to 1500 BCE) and Kush (c. 1000 BCE to 300 CE) emerged along the Nile River. These kingdoms prospered especially due to their productive agriculture and the region's copious natural resources. At certain points, both Kerma and Kush were strong enough to successfully invade Egypt. These kingdoms in Nubia also developed their own religious and cultural traditions, including a written script, Meroitic. While the people of this region, known collectively as Nubians, borrowed heavily from the Egyptians, Nubians also had distinctive practices that set their civilization apart from that of their northern neighbors.

Scholars generally link the origins of ancient Kerma (in present-day Sudan) back to the desiccation of the Sahara Desert and the rise of dynastic Egypt. Similarly to ancient Egypt, the drying out of the region encouraged people to move closer to the Nile River in the years between 5,000 and 4,000 BCE. Rock paintings, showing cattle in areas that have been desert for thousands of years, attest to the environmental changes in Nubia and also the development of a cattle culture that dates back to at least the fourth millennium BCE. Just as in Egypt, the desiccation of the Sahara desert drew together people from all directions. As people settled closer to the Nile River in Nubia, they brought their cattle, their agricultural traditions, and their languages, building settlements with higher population densities.



Map **17.2.15.1**: A map of ancient Nubia (CC BY 2.5; Mark Dingemanse and Corey Parson via Wikimedia Commons)

Additionally, Egyptian elites desired ivory, animal skins, incense, and other luxury goods prompting trade between Nubia and Egypt that pre-dated the unification of Egypt. With increased demand for luxury goods as social stratification grew, the Egyptians even ran military forays into Nubia. After unification, the Egyptians continued to invade Nubia to trade and raid for slaves and cattle. Likely, Nubian desires to control trade and protect themselves from Egyptian raids further compelled state formation in Nubia. Without Nubian records from the third millennium BCE, it is difficult to identify additional reasons why the state arose. However, archeological evidence does clearly indicate that by about 2400 BCE, Nubians had formed the Kingdom of Kerma between the third and fourth cataracts of the Nile River.

17.2.15.1: Kerma (c. 2400 BCE to c. 1500 BCE)

Kerma endured in Upper Nubia for almost a thousand years. The kingdom is named after its capital city at Kerma at the third cataract, but excavations at other sites (where similar pottery styles and burial sites have been found) suggest that at its height Kerma's reach may have extended more than 200 miles southward past the fifth cataract of the Nile River. So far, archaeological evidence indicates that, with the exception of the capital and perhaps one or two other cities, most of the people in Kerma lived in smaller villages. They grew crops like barley, and kept goats, sheep, and cattle, sending tribute to their capital. The people of Kerma also developed industries, especially in mining, metalworking, and pottery. Kerma was linked interregionally through trade to its tributary villages, to dynastic Egypt, and to sub-Saharan Africa. Egyptian pharaohs and elites wanted the gold, copper, slaves, ivory, exotic animals, and more that they obtained from Kerma.

The people of Kerma also made use of their location on the Nile and proximity to Egypt as they imported textiles, jewelry, and other manufactured goods. Presumably, one reason that Nubian leaders built their ancient capital at Kerma was to oversee river trade. At the impassable cataract, boat owners unloaded their cargo and took it overland past the shallows and rocks before again proceeding on the water. This location at the cataract gave the leaders at Kerma the chance to tax, divert, and register goods being transported between Kerma and Egypt.

Agricultural surpluses and other tributary payments supported the rulers and elites of the capital. Archaeologists have shown that the capital had defenses, including ditches, ramparts, and massive walls with towers. There were also palaces within the city and on its outskirts. However, the most famous structure is the **Western Deffufa** (Figure 17.2.15.1) made of mud-bricks, which likely served as a temple. Two other deffufa, large mud-brick structures with spaces for rituals on top, have been at least partially excavated within the vicinity of Kerma. Another notable archaeological find is the Eastern Cemetery, which lies a couple of miles to the east of the city. It served as the burial site for Kerma's rulers for almost a thousand years and contains over 30,000 tombs. Some of the tombs were covered with large mounds. Demonstrating the cattle culture of the region, dozens of cattle skulls encircle a number of the tombs. Tombs also contain the remains of human sacrifices and other symbols of wealth and status, like jewelry made of gold and silver. The largest tomb found to date is 300 feet in diameter and covered with black granite, white quartz pebbles, and a marble top. Its interior burial suite contains semi-precious stones, bronze weapons, and lavish furniture. In the corridor leading into the underground burial site, archaeologists unearthed the remains of horses, dogs, and about 400 human sacrificial victims. The cattle skulls, mounds, and the remains of human sacrifices have led scholars to suggest that the Kerma elite had their own styles for monumental structures like the Western Deffufa and their tombs, even though they sometimes employed Egyptian artisans to complete the construction of these grand projects.



Figure 17.2.15.1: The Western Deffufa at Kerma (CC BY 2.0; Walter Callens via Wikimedia Commons)

It appears that Kerma was strongest when neighboring Egypt was weak. As a case in point, during Egypt's Second Intermediate Period, Kerma, at the height of its power, successfully invaded parts of Upper Egypt and established diplomatic relations with the occupying Hyksos. Once reunified during the New Kingdom, Egypt retaliated by conquering Kerma to the fourth cataract. Then, Egypt occupied Kerma for the next 500 years. During the Egyptian occupation, the elite classes of Kerma adopted many elements of Egyptian culture, including Egyptian gods, styles of dress, Hieroglyphics, and the Egyptian language. However, scholars believe that the Nubian masses retained their own distinctive identity with their local language and customs.

17.2.15.2: The Kingdom of Kush

As Egypt entered its Third Intermediate Period, Nubians gradually established their independence, eventually creating a new state, the Kingdom of Kush in the eighth century BCE. The initial capital of the Kingdom of **Kush** was Napata (c. 750 BCE to 593 BCE). From Napata, the Nubians took control of Upper Egypt, establishing the "Ethiopian Dynasty," which ruled for 60 years from Thebes. Assyrian invasions destabilized the Nubian rulers in Thebes, causing the last pharaoh of the Ethiopian Dynasty to flee to Napata. Then, once strengthened, the Egyptians pushed back. The Egyptian army sacked Napata in 593 BCE and, in response, the Nubian rulers moved their capital farther south to Meroe. (See Map 17.2.15.1.) At this southern location, they further developed their civilization, which lasted until the fourth century CE.

With the new capital at **Meroe**, a location with well-watered farmland and some distance between it and Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush flourished. Meroe got more rainfall than Napata and was not as dependent on the Nile floods. Nubians were able to extend

the areas under cultivation and grow a wider variety of crops, like cotton, sorghum, and millet. They were also able to easily graze their livestock and, as a result, during this period cattle became even more important as a symbol of their culture and wealth.

After moving the capital to Meroe, the culture of Kush showed more independence from Egypt as well. Particularly as Egypt's power declined, the people of Kush put more emphasis on their own deities and pushed Egyptian gods to the background. For example, temples devoted to a Nubian war god, Apedamak, "the Lion of the South," received more support and even used live lions for rituals. Gold had long been mined in the region and remained important while the people of Kush continued to develop additional industries. The area was rich in iron ore and the hardwoods used to make charcoal, which encouraged the growth of a booming iron industry. They made iron weapons and tools that they used for defense and to increase their crop yields. They were able to trade their agricultural surpluses, iron, cattle, and exotic things like elephants from sub-Saharan Africa, with Egypt, Greece, Rome, and India, bringing great wealth and prestige to Meroe. Also, the rulers of Meroe commissioned pyramids but had them built in a local style. As evident in Figure 2.14, their pyramids were smaller and had a unique shape. Kush burial practices were different than those used in dynastic Egypt, as corpses were not always mummified and were buried in the fetal position. Finally, a new locally-created written script, **Meroitic**, replaced the use of Egyptian Hieroglyphics by 300 BCE. Modern scholars have not yet translated Meroitic, and students of their culture will surely learn even more about the Kingdom of Kush once scholars have done so. As for now, we know that very productive agriculture, local rituals and burial practices, the growth of industries, social stratification facilitated by Meroe's wealth and extensive trade networks, and the written script Meroitic, were some of the distinctive elements of the civilization at Kush.



Figure **17.2.15.2**: Pyramids at Meroe (CC BY-SA 1.0; B. N. Chagny via Wikimedia Commons)

While the Greeks and Romans occasionally sent raiding parties into Nubia, for a while, Meroe's southern location helped isolate it from conquest. Legends also emphasize the strength of Meroe's army and the physical prowess of its soldiers. Environmental changes, internal rivalries, and the rise of Axum (a new state to the East) likely all contributed to the fairly abrupt collapse of Meroe in the fourth century CE.

Egyptian sources were generally very derogatory in their portrayal of Nubians and even a few early twentieth century archaeologists carelessly (and incorrectly) identified these Nubian kingdoms as slave colonies of the Egyptians. However, the kingdoms of Kerma and Kush were known in the ancient world for their wealth and industries. The wealth garnered through productive agriculture and trade supported a ruling class, great artists, and monumental architecture. Egyptian culture was influential, but Nubians adapted Egyptian practices to meet their own needs and sensibilities. Often entangled with Egypt and sometimes defending themselves from other invaders as well, these two kingdoms persisted for hundreds of years, creating an independent civilization along the southern stretches of the Nile River.

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17.2.16: Summary

Between about 4000 and 3000 BCE, civilizations emerged in the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia and Northeast Africa. These civilizations had common elements, including food surpluses, higher population densities, social stratification, systems of taxation, labor specialization, regular trade, and written scripts.

In areas adjacent to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Mesopotamians built city-states by 3500 BCE. While Sumerian traditions influenced developments throughout the region, other cities emerged and refined their own institutions and beliefs. Archaeological finds and records in the *cuneiform* script show the significance of the temple complex and religious leaders throughout Mesopotamia. Kingship, with hereditary rulers who claimed control over multiple city-states and special relationships with the gods, was just one significant political innovation in the region. History credits Sargon of Akkad with founding the first empire in Mesopotamia. Thereafter, a succession of empires rose and fell, demonstrating the dynamic nature of Mesopotamian societies.

According to Hebrew Tradition, Abraham led his followers from the city of Ur in Mesopotamia and they eventually settled in the Levant. Several generations later, according to Hebrew Tradition, the Israelites went to Egypt where they suffered persecution and enslavement, until Moses liberated them. Upon their return to Canaan, the Israelites built kingdoms just prior to 1000 BCE. Their kingdoms formed complex administrations and were unified by powerful kings, such as the wellknown King Solomon. Historians also recognize countless other contributions made by the Israelites, especially as regards monotheistic religious traditions and western understandings of justice.

The unification of Egypt in approximately 3100 BCE evidenced the emergence of one civilization in Northeast Africa. In Nubia to the south of Egypt, Africans built another civilization with the kingdoms of Kerma and Kush. The people in each of these civilizations made good use of the agriculturally productive floodplains of the Nile River. Egypt and the kingdoms in Nubia influenced one another; they traded and intermittently claimed control over each other's territory. While we may be more familiar with the pharaohs, pyramids, and religious beliefs of ancient Egypt, Nubians made their own contributions, like the Merotic script and unique architectural styles, to World History.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.3: Ancient and Medieval India

17.3.1: Chronology of Ancient and Medieval India

17.3.2: Introduction - A Political Overview

17.3.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.3.4: Key Terms

17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)

17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)

17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)

17.3.8: The Mauryan Empire (321-184 BCE)

17.3.9: Regional States, Trade, and Devotional Religion- India 200 BCE-300 CE

17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)

17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300

17.3.12: Conclusion

17.3.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.3.14: Links to Primary Sources

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17.3.1: Chronology of Ancient and Medieval India

2600 – 1700 BCE Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization

1700 – 600 BCE Vedic Age

1700 – 1000 BCE Early Vedic Age

1000 – 600 BCE Later Vedic Age

321 – 184 BCE Mauryan Empire

c. 2nd century BCE to 3rd century CE Kushan Kingdom

c. 320 – 550 CE Gupta Empire

600 – 1300 CE Early Medieval India

1206 – 1526 CE Delhi Sultanate

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17.3.2: Introduction - A Political Overview

Our knowledge of the ancient world has been radically altered by impressive archaeological discoveries over the last two centuries. Prior to the twentieth century, for instance, historians believed that India's history began in the second millennium BCE, when a people known as Indo-Aryans migrated into the Indian subcontinent and created a new civilization. Yet, even during the nineteenth century British explorers and officials were curious about brick mounds dotting the landscape of northwest India, where Pakistan is today. A large one was located in a village named Harappa (see Figure **17.3.2.1**). A British army engineer, Sir Alexander Cunningham, sensed its importance because he also found other artifacts among the bricks, such as a seal with an inscription. He was, therefore, quite dismayed that railway contractors were pilfering these bricks for ballast. When he became the director of Great Britain's Archaeological Survey in 1872, he ordered protection for these ruins. But the excavation of Harappa did not begin until 1920, and neither the Archaeological Survey nor Indian archaeologists understood their significance until this time. Harappa, it turned out, was an ancient city dating back to the third millennium BCE, and only one part of a much larger civilization sprawling over northwest India. With the discovery of this lost civilization, the timeline for India's history was pushed back over one thousand years.



Figure **17.3.2.1**: Archaeological Site for Harappa | Excavation of this ancient city began in 1920. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Hassan Nasir via Wikimedia Commons)

The Indus Valley civilization (2600 – 1700 BCE) now stands at the beginning of India's long history. Much like the states of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, the foundations for that history were established by Paleolithic foragers who migrated to and populated the region, and then Neolithic agriculturalists who settled into villages. During the third millennium BCE, building on these foundations, urban centers emerged along the Indus River, along with other elements that contribute to making a civilization.

This civilization, however, faded away by 1700 BCE, and was followed by a new stage in India's history. While it declined, India saw waves of migration from the mountainous northwest, by a people who referred to themselves as Aryans. The Aryans brought a distinctive language and way of life to the northern half of India and, after first migrating into the Punjab and Indus Valley, pushed east along the Ganges River and settled down into a life of farming and pastoralism. As they interacted with indigenous peoples, a new period in India's history took shape. That period is known as the Vedic Age (1700 – 600 BCE).

During the long course of the Vedic Age, states formed in northern India. The surplus from farming and pastoralism allowed people to engage in a multitude of other occupations and made for a lively trade. Villages thus grew in number and some became towns. Consequently, there was a need for greater leadership, something that was provided by chieftains of the many Aryan clans. Over time, higher levels of political organization developed, and these chieftains became kings or the leaders of clan assemblies. By the end of the Vedic Age, northern India was divided up by sixteen major kingdoms and oligarchies.

The ensuing three centuries (c. 600 – 321 BCE) were a time of transition. These states fought with each other over territory. The most successful state was the one that could most effectively administer its land, mobilize its resources and, by so doing, field the largest armies. That state was the kingdom of Magadha which, by the fourth century BCE, had gained control of much of northern India along the Ganges River.

In 321 BCE, the last king of Magadha was overthrown by one of his subjects, Chandragupta Maurya, and a new period in India's history began. Through war and diplomacy, he and his two successors established control over most of India, forging the first major empire in the history of South Asia: the Mauryan Empire (321 – 184 BCE). Chandragupta's grandson, King Ashoka, ended the military conquests and sought to rule his land through Buddhist principles of non-violence and tolerance. But after his time, the empire rapidly declined, and India entered a new stage in its history.

After the Mauryan Empire fell, no one major power held control over a substantial part of India for five hundred years. Rather, from c. 200 BCE to 300 CE, India saw a fairly rapid turnover of numerous, regional kingdoms. Some of these were located in northern India, along the Ganges River, but others grew up in the south—the Indian Peninsula—for the first time. Also, some kingdoms emerged through foreign conquest. Outsiders in Central Asia and the Middle East saw India as a place of much wealth, and sought to plunder or rule it. Thus, throughout its history, India was repeatedly invaded by conquerors coming through mountain passes in the northwest. Many of these, like King Kanishka of the Kushan Empire (c. 100 CE), established notable kingdoms that extended from India into these neighboring regions from which they came.

Even after 300 CE and up to the fifteenth century, India was never again unified for any length of time by one large empire. For that reason, historians highlight those kingdoms that became substantial regional powers and contributed in other important ways to India's civilization. The period 300 – 600 CE, for instance, is often referred to as the Gupta Period and Classical Age. The Guptas (c. 320 – 550) were rulers who forged an impressive empire in northern India. As their empire flourished, Indian intellectuals were also setting standards for excellence in the fields of art, architecture, literature, and science, in part because of Gupta patronage. But important kingdoms also developed in south India.

The last period covered in this chapter is early medieval India (c. 600 – 1300 CE). After the Gupta Empire, and during the following seven centuries, the pattern of fragmentation intensified, as numerous regional kingdoms large and small frequently turned over. Confronting such an unstable and fluid political scene, medieval kings granted land to loyal subordinate rulers and high officers of their courts. The resulting political and economic pattern is referred to as Indian feudalism. Also, kings put their greatness on display by waging war and building magnificent Hindu temples in their capital cities. And, during the medieval period, a new political and religious force entered the Indian scene, when Muslim Arab and Turkic traders and conquerors arrived on the subcontinent.

This overview briefly summarizes major periods in India's political history. But the history of a civilization consists of more than just rulers and states, which is why historians also pay close attention to social, cultural, and economic life every step of the way. This attention is especially important for India. Although the Asian subcontinent sees a long succession of kingdoms and empires and was usually divided up by several at any particular point in its history, peoples over time came to share some things in common. Socially, the peoples of India were largely organized by the caste system. Culturally, the peoples of India shared in the development of Hinduism and Buddhism, two major religious traditions that shaped people's understanding of the world and their place in it. Finally, throughout the ancient and medieval periods, India flourished as a civilization because of its dynamic economy. The peoples of India shared in that too, and that meant they were linked in networks of trade and exchange not only with other parts of South Asia but also with neighboring regions of the Afro-Eurasian world.

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17.3.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. How did the geography of South Asia (India) impact its history?

2. What are the limits of our knowledge of Harappan Civilization?

3. How did kingdoms form during the Vedic Age?

4. Describe the *varna* and caste systems.

5. Explain the early historical origins and basic beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism. How do these religious traditions change over time?

6. How was the Mauryan Empire governed?

7. How was India impacted by other regions of Afro-Eurasia, and how did it impact them?

8. Why is the Gupta period sometimes described as a classical age?

9. What are the characteristics of early medieval India?

10. Explain the history of the formation of Muslim states in India.

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17.3.4: Key Terms

- *Arthashastra*
- Aryabhata
- Ashoka (Mauryan Empire)
- *Atman*
- Ayurveda
- Bay of Bengal
- *Bhagavad-Gita*
- *Brahman*
- Brahmanism
- Caste and *Varna*
- Chandragupta I (Gupta Empire)
- Chandragupta Maurya
- Chola Kingdom
- Coromandel Coast
- Deccan Plateau
- Delhi Sultanate
- Dharma (Buddhist and Hindu)
- Dharma Scriptures
- Four Noble Truths
- Ganges River
- Guilds
- Gupta Empire
- Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization
- Hindu Kush
- India
- Indian Feudalism
- Indo-Europeans
- Indus River
- Indo-Gangetic Plain
- Kalidasa
- Kanishka
- Karma
- Kushan Kingdom
- Magadha
- Mahayana Buddhism
- Malabar Coast
- Mahmud of Ghazna
- Mehrgarh
- Mohenjo-Daro
- Pataliputra
- Punjab
- Ramayana
- Samudragupta
- Satavahana Kingdom
- Seals (Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization)
- Siddhartha Gautama/Buddha
- Sindh
- South Asia

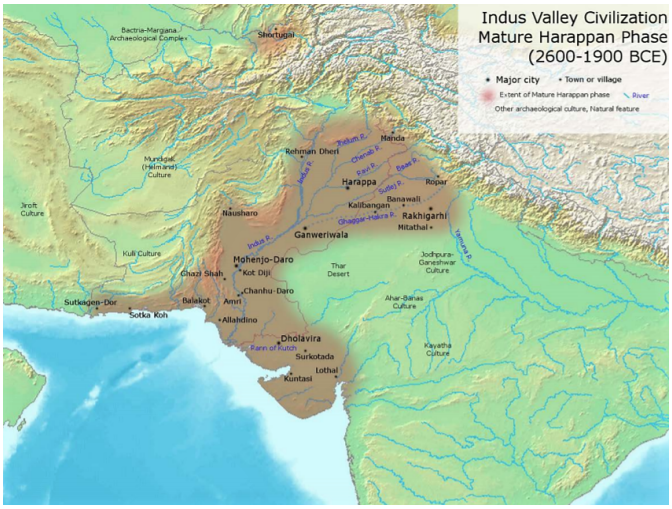
- Sri Lanka
- Theravada Buddhism
- Transmigration
- Tributary Overlordship
- Upanishads
- Vedic Age

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17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)

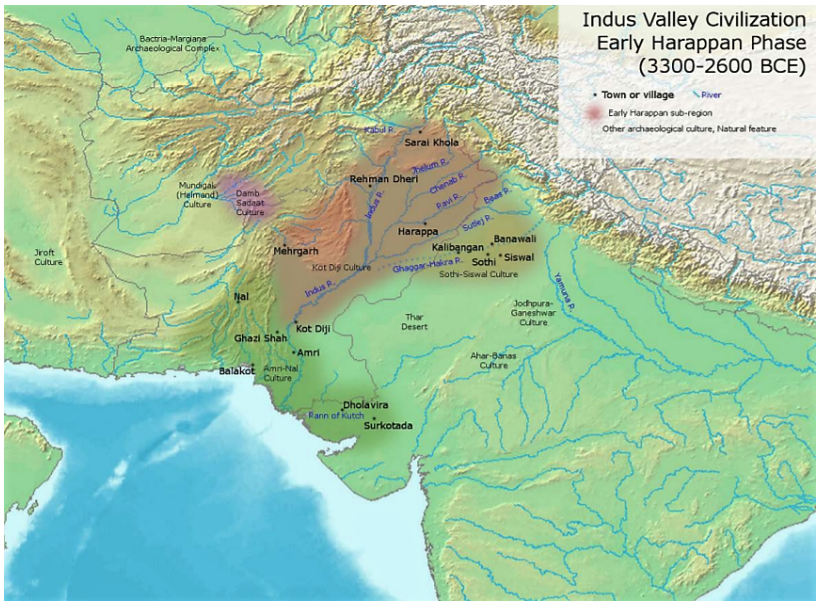
A century of archaeological work in India that began in 1920 not only revealed a lost civilization but also a massive one, surpassing in size other major early riverine civilizations of Afro-Eurasia, such as ancient Egypt and the Mesopotamian states. In an area spanning roughly a half million square miles, archaeologists have excavated thousands of settlements (see Map **17.3.5.1**). These can be envisioned in a hierarchy based on size and sophistication. The top consists of five major cities of roughly 250 acres each. One of those is Harappa, and because it was excavated first the entire civilization was named **Harappan Civilization**. The bottom of the hierarchy consists of fifteen thousand smaller agricultural and craft villages of about 2.5 acres each, while between the top and bottom lie two tiers with several dozen towns ranging in size from 15 to 150 acres. Because the majority of these settlements were situated near the Indus River in the northwestern region of the subcontinent, this civilization is also called the Indus Valley Civilization.



Map **17.3.5.1**: Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilization | Map of important Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilization cities and towns during its most developed period. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Avantiputra7” via Wikimedia Commons)

As with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, archaeologists have been able to sketch out how this civilization evolved out of the simpler agricultural villages of the Neolithic period. On the subcontinent, farming and the domestication of animals began c. 7000 BCE, about two thousand years after they did in the Fertile Crescent. To the west of the Indus River, along the foothills of Baluchistan, the remains of numerous small villages have been found that date back to this time (see Map **17.3.5.2**). One of these is **Mehrgarh**. Here, villagers lived in simple mud-brick structures, grew barley and wheat, and raised cattle, sheep, and goats.

Over the course of the next three thousand years, similar Neolithic communities sprang up not only in northwest India but also in many other locations on the subcontinent. But it was to the west of the Indus River and then throughout neighboring fertile plains and valleys of the Punjab and Sindh that we see the transition to a more complex, urban-based civilization. Excavations throughout this region show a pattern of development whereby settlements start looking more like towns than villages: ground plans become larger, include the foundations of houses and streets, and are conveniently located by the most fertile land or places for trade. Similar artifacts spread over larger areas show that the local communities building these towns were becoming linked together in trade networks. Archaeologists date this transitional period when India was on the verge of its first civilization from 5000 to 2600 BCE. The mature phase, with its full-blown cities, begins from 2600 BCE, roughly four centuries after the Sumerian city-states blossomed and Egypt was unified under one kingdom.



Map **17.3.5.2**: Archaeological sites dating to northwest India's Neolithic period and the Indus Valley Civilization | Agricultural village societies first emerged to the west of the Indus and then spread to the Indus River and its many tributaries, as well as the Ghaggar-Hakra River (running parallel to and east of the Indus), which has since dried up. These provided the foundation for the emergence of towns and cities. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Avantiputra7" via Wikimedia Commons)

The ruins of **Mohenjo-Daro** and other Indus cities dating to this mature phase suggest a vibrant society thriving in competently planned and managed urban areas. Some of the principal purposes of these urban settlements included coordinating the distribution of local surplus resources, obtaining desired goods from more distant places, and turning raw materials into commodities for trade. Mohenjo-Daro, for instance, was located along the lower reaches of the Indus (see Figure **17.3.5.1**). That meant it was conveniently built amidst an abundance of resources: fertile flood plains for agriculture, pasture for grazing domesticated animals, and waters for fishing and fowling. The city itself consisted of several mounds—elevated areas upon which structures and roads were built. A larger mound served as a core, fortified area where public functions likely took place. It contained a wall and large buildings, including what archaeologists call a Great Bath and Great Hall. Other mounds were the location of the residential and commercial sectors of the city. Major avenues laid out on a grid created city blocks. Within a block, multistory dwellings opening up to interior courtyards were constructed out of mudbricks or bricks baked in kilns. Particular attention was paid to public sanitation. Residences not only had private wells and baths, but also toilets drained by earthenware pipes that ushered the sewage into covered drains located under the streets.



Figure **17.3.5.1**: Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro | View of the Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro, an Indus Valley city located along the lower reaches of the Indus River. This section was part of the largest mound at the site. The higher structure in the rear is a Buddhist stupa dating to a later period in India's history. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Saqib Qayyum via Wikimedia Commons)

Artifacts tell of city life. Farmers and pastoralists brought their grain and stock to the city for trade or to place it in warehouses managed by the authorities. Laborers dug the wells and collected trash from rectangular bins sitting beneath rubbish chutes. Craftsmen worked copper and tin into bronze tools, fired ceramics, and manufactured jewelry and beads out of gold, copper, semi-precious stones, and ivory. Merchants travelling near and far carried raw materials and finished goods by bullock carts or boats to the dozens of towns and cities throughout the region.



Figure 17.3.5.2: Indus Priest/King Statue | 17.5 cm tall sculpture found at MohenjoDaro. The dignified appearance and headband and cloak of this man suggest that he was an important political or religious leader in the city. (CC BY-SA 1.0; Mamoon Mengal via Wikimedia Commons)

Some goods also went to foreign lands. Harappan cities located along the coast of the Arabian Sea engaged in coastal shipping that brought goods as far as the Persian Gulf and the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In Mesopotamian city-states, Harappan seals and beads have been found, and Mesopotamian sources speak of a certain place called "Meluhha," a land with ivory, gold, and lapis lazuli. That was the Indus Valley Civilization. Cities like Mohenjo-Daro were linked in networks of exchange extending in every direction.

But unlike ancient Egypt and Sumer, this civilization has not yet provided sources we can read, and this poses major problems of interpretation. True, over four thousand inscribed objects with at least four hundred different signs recurring in various frequencies have been found on clay, copper tablets, and small, square seals excavated primarily at the major cities (see Figure 17.3.5.1). But the heroic efforts of philologists to decipher the language have failed to yield results. Thus, some historians call this civilization proto-historic, distinguishing it from both prehistoric cultures that have no writing and historic ones with written sources that we can read.



Figure 17.3.5.3: Unicorn Seal | Mold from a "unicorn seal" from Mohenjo-Daro depicting a mythical animal standing over an altar or trough, with writing above. (CC0 1.0; User "Ismoon" via Wikimedia Commons)

This proto-historical state of the evidence leaves many questions concerning Harappan people's political organization and beliefs unanswered. On the one hand, much uniformity in the archaeological record across the region suggests coordination in planning—cities and towns were similarly designed, fired bricks had the same dimensions, and weights were standardized. On the other hand, the ruins lack structures that can be clearly identified as palaces, temples, or large tombs. In other words, there is little evidence for either a central political authority ruling over an empire or for independent city-states. One intriguing artifact found in Mohenjo-Daro is a small sculpture of a bearded man made of soapstone (see Figure 17.3.5.2). The dignified appearance suggests he may have been a priest or king, or even both. Perhaps he and other priests purified themselves in the Great Bath for ritual purposes. Yet, this

is purely speculation, as the sculpture is unique. He may also have been a powerful landowner or wealthy merchant who met with others of a similar status in assemblies convened in the Great Hall of the citadel. Perhaps local assemblies of just such elites governed each city.

Religious beliefs are also difficult to determine. Again, some of the principal evidence consists of small artifacts such as figurines and the square seals. The seals were carved out of a soft stone called steatite and then fired so they would harden. They contain images of animals and humans, typically with writing above. Mostly, they were used to imprint the identity of a merchant or authorities on goods. However, some of the images may have had religious significance. For example, hundreds of “unicorn seals” display images of a mythical animal that resembles a species of cattle (see Figure **17.3.5.3**). These cattle are usually placed over an object variously interpreted as a trough or altar. Perhaps these were symbols of deities or animals used for sacrificial rituals. Equally as interesting are the numerous female clay figurines. These may have been used for fertility rituals or to pay homage to a goddess (see Figure **17.3.5.4**).



Figure **17.3.5.4**: Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-daro (CC BY-SA 3.0; Joe Ravi via Wikimedia Commons)

The decline of Harappan civilization set in from 1900 BCE and was complete two hundred years later. Stated simply, the towns and cities and their lively trade networks faded away, and the region reverted to rural conditions. Likely causes include geologic, climatic, and environmental factors. Movement by tectonic plates may have led to earthquakes, flooding, and shifts in the course of the Indus. Less rainfall and deforestation may have degraded the environment’s suitability for farming. All of these factors would have impacted the food supply. Consequently, urban areas and the civilization they supported were slowly starved out of existence.

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17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)

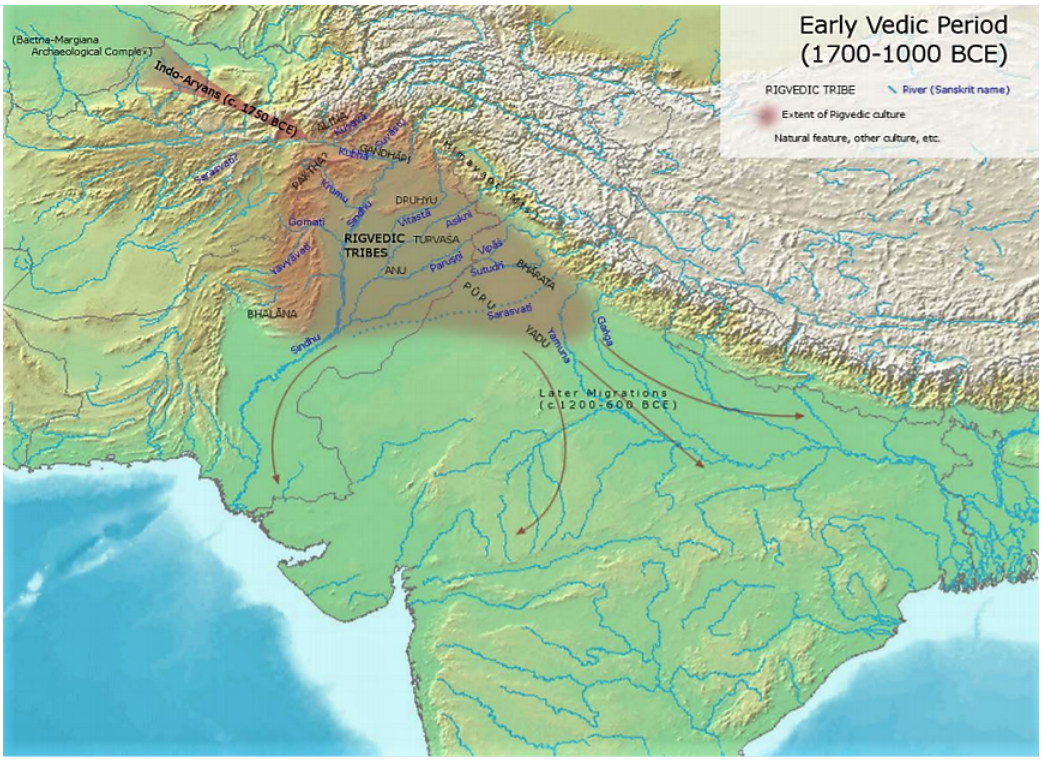
By 1700 BCE, Harappan Civilization had collapsed. In northwest India, scattered village communities engaging in agriculture and pastoralism replaced the dense and more highly populated network of cities, towns, and villages of the third millennium. The rest of northern India too (including the Ganges River), as well as the entire subcontinent, were similarly dotted with Neolithic communities of farmers and herders. That is what the archaeological record demonstrates.

The next stage in India's history is the **Vedic Age** (1700 – 600 BCE). This period is named after a set of religious texts composed during these centuries called the Vedas. The people who composed them are known as the Vedic peoples and **Indo-Aryans**. They were not originally from India, and rather came as migrants travelling to the subcontinent via mountain passes located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Aryans first settled in the Punjab, but then they pushed east along the Ganges, eventually impressing their way of life, language, and religious beliefs upon much of northern India. The course of India's history was completely changed during this period. By the end of the Vedic Age, numerous states had emerged and **Hinduism** and the **varna social system** were beginning to take shape.

17.3.6.1: The Early Aryan Settlement of Northern India (1700 – 1000 BCE)

The early history of the Vedic Age offers the historian little primary source material. For example, for the first half of the Vedic Age (1700 – 1000 BCE), we are largely limited to archaeological sites and one major text called the ***Rig Veda***. This is the first of four *Vedas*. It consists of 1028 hymns addressed to the Vedic peoples' pantheon of gods. But it wasn't actually written down until after 500 BCE. Rather, from as early as the beginning of the second millennium BCE, these hymns were orally composed and transmitted by Aryan poet-seers, eventually becoming the preserve of a few priestly clans who utilized them for the specific religious function of pleasing higher powers. Thus, these hymns only offer certain kinds of information. Yet, despite these limits, historians have been able to sketch out the Aryan's way of life in these early centuries, as well as to make solid arguments about how they came to India.

The Indo-Aryans were pastoralists who migrated to India in waves beginning c. 1700 BCE (see Map **17.3.6.1**). They referred to themselves as Aryans, a term meaning "noble" or "respectable." They spoke **Sanskrit**, and used it to transmit their sacred hymns. At first, in search of land, they settled along the hills and plains of the upper reaches of the Indus River and its tributaries, bringing with them their pastoral and farming way of life. In their hymns, the Aryans beseech the gods to bless them with cattle, bounteous harvests, rain, friends, wealth, fame, and sons. From these, it is clear that herding was the principal occupation and cows were especially prized. But the Aryans also farmed, as apparent in hymns that speak of plough teams and the cutting and threshing of grain.



Map **17.3.6.1**: Early Vedic Culture (1700-1000 BCE) | The early Vedic Age, showing the Aryan's migration routes and the areas where they first resided in the Punjab. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Avantiputra7" via Wikimedia Commons)

During these early centuries, led by their pastoral chiefs, some Aryans retained a seminomadic way of life, living in temporary dwellings and then moving about with their herds or migrating further. Others settled down in villages. In both cases, kinship was especially valued. At the simplest level, society consisted of extended families of three generations. Fathers were expected to lead the family as patriarchal heads, while sons were expected to care for the herds, bring honor through success in battle, and sacrifice for the well-being of their fathers' souls after death. They also inherited the property and family name. This suggests that, as is so often the case for ancient societies, men were dominant and women were subordinate. Yet, women's roles weren't as rigidly defined as they would be in later times, and they had some choice in marriage and could remarry.

Several extended families, in turn, made up clans, and the members of a clan shared land and herds. Groups of larger clans also constituted tribes. The Vedas speak of rajas who, at this point, are best understood as clan or tribal chieftains. These men protected their people and led in times of battle, for the clans and tribes fought with each other and with the indigenous villagers living in the northwest prior to the Aryan migrations. In times of war, these chiefs would rely on priests who ensured the support of the gods by reciting hymns and sacrificing to them. At assemblies of kinsmen and other wealthy and worthy men from the clan, the rajas distributed war booty. Sudas, for example, was the chief of the Bharata clan. After settling in the Punjab, the Bharatas were attacked by neighboring clan confederacies, but drawing on his skills in chariot warfare and the support of priests, Sudas successfully fought them off.

More than anything else, the *Rig Veda* reveals the Aryan's religious ideas. For them, the universe was composed of the sky, earth, and netherworld. These realms were populated by a host of divinities and demons responsible for the good and evil and order and disorder blessing and afflicting the human world. Although one Vedic hymn gives a total of thirty-three gods, many more are mentioned. That means early Vedic religion was polytheistic. These human-like powers lying behind all those natural phenomena so close to a people living out on the plains were associated with the forces of light, good, and order. By chanting hymns to them and sacrificing in the correct way, the Aryan priests might secure blessings for the people or prevent the demons and spirits on earth from causing sickness and death. They might also ensure that the souls of the dead would successfully reach the netherworld, where the spirits of righteous Fathers feasted with King Yama, the first man to die.

Approaching the gods required neither temples nor images. Rather, a fire was lit in a specially prepared sacrificial altar. This might take place in a home when the family patriarch was hoping for a son or on an open plot of land when the clan chieftain wished to secure the welfare of his people. Priests were called in to perform the ceremony. They would imbibe a hallucinogenic beverage

squeezed from a plant of uncertain identity and chant hymns while oblations of butter, fruit, and meat were placed in the fire. The gods, it was believed, would descend onto grass strewn about for them and could partake of the offerings once they were transmuted by the fire.

Indra was among the most beloved of the Vedic gods. As a god of war and the storm, and as king of the gods, Indra exemplified traits men sought to embody in their lives. He is a great warrior who smites demons and enemies but who also provides generously for the weak. Agni, another favorite, was god of fire and the household hearth. Agni summons the gods to the sacrifice and, as intermediary between gods and humans, brings the sacrificial offering to them.

17.3.6.2: The Origins of the Aryan People and the Indo-European Hypothesis

Because the Aryans came to India as migrating pastoralists from mountainous regions to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, historians have sought to understand their origins. Sanskrit has provided important clues because it contains features similar to languages spoken at some point in Europe, Iran, and Central Asia. For example, although they are vastly different languages, Latin, Persian, and Sanskrit share similar sounds, vocabulary, and grammar.

On the basis of these shared traits, linguists have constructed a kind of family tree that shows the historical relationship between these languages (see Figure **17.3.6.1**). Sanskrit belongs to a group of languages used in northern India called Indo-Aryan. These languages are closely related to languages used throughout history in neighboring Iran. Together, all of these are called the Indo-Iranian language group. This language group is in turn one of nine branches of related language groups comprising the **Indo-European language family**.

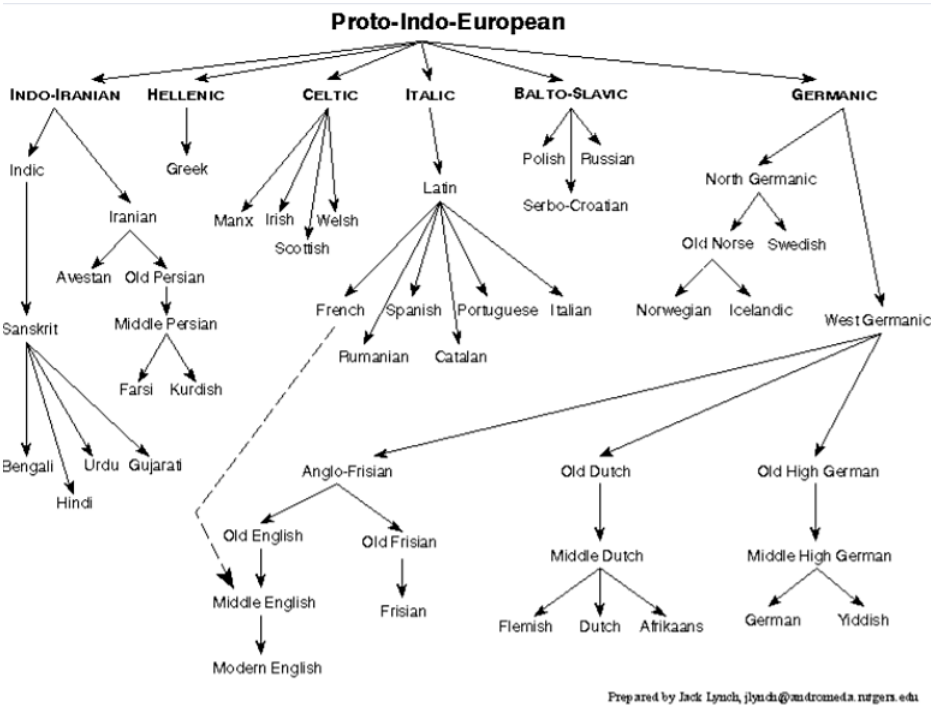
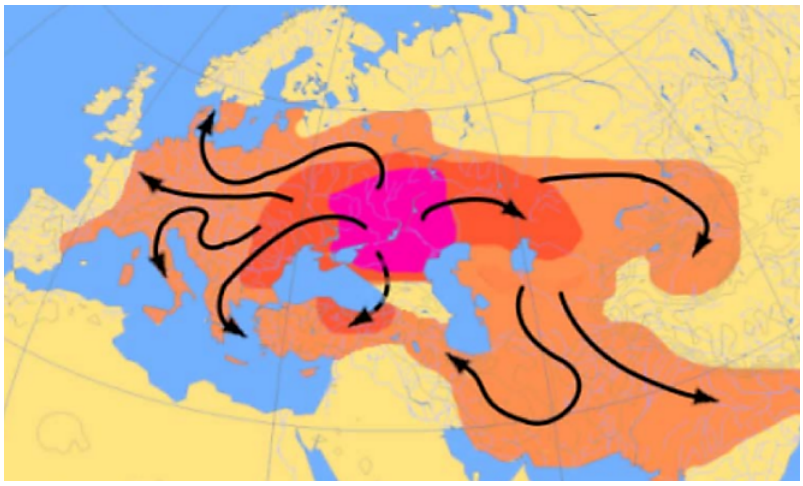


Figure **17.3.6.1**: Proto-Indo-European Family | Chart showing the relationship between some languages in the Indo-European Family. Note the location of Sanskrit. (© Jack Lynch. Used with permission.; Jack Lynch via Rutgers)

Linguists assume these distantly-related languages share a common ancestor. They label that ancestral language proto-Indo-European and the people who spoke it Indo-Europeans. They posit a scenario whereby, in stages and over time, groups of these peoples migrated from their homeland to neighboring areas and settled down. Since this process happened over the course of many centuries and involved much interaction with other peoples along the way, the ancestral language evolved into many different ones while retaining some of the original features.

One question, then, is the location of this homeland and the history of the peoples who spoke these languages as they changed. Many places have been proposed, but at present the most widely accepted scenario puts this homeland in the steppe lands of southern Russia, just to the north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea (see Map **17.3.6.2**).



Map **17.3.6.2**: Indo-European Migrations | The area highlighted in pink, lying between the Black and Caspian Seas, is the suggested homeland for Indo-Europeans in the third millennium BCE. Arrows show the movement of speakers of Indo-European languages in the second millennium. The arrow showing movement to the southeast into India designates the Indo-Aryans, who began entering the IndoGangetic Plains from c. 1700 BCE.

Evidence from archaeological sites suggests that during the third millennium an Indo-European people lived in this region as semi-nomadic pastoralists. They were likely the first to domesticate the horse and also improved the chariot by adding lighter, spoked wheels. They lived in tribes made up of extended families and worshipped numerous sky gods by offering sacrifices in fire altars.

At some point during this millennium and over the course of several centuries, groups of these peoples left their homeland and migrated south to the Iranian Plateau. By 2000 BCE, Indo-Iranian speaking pastoralists were living on the Iranian Plateau and in Afghanistan. Some among these evolved into the Indo-Aryan speakers living to the northwest of the Indus. It is these peoples that began to arrive in the Punjab from c. 1700 BCE, with their Vedic religion, kinship-based social order, and pastoral and farming way of life.

17.3.6.3: The Later Vedic Age (1000 – 600 BCE)

During the early centuries of the Vedic Age, the world of the Aryan tribes was the rural setting of the Punjab. Some settlers, however, migrated east to the upper reaches of the Ganges River, setting the stage for the next period in India's history, the later Vedic Age. The later Vedic Age differs from the early Vedic Age in that during these centuries lands along the Ganges River were colonized by the Aryans and their political, economic, social, and religious life became more complex.

Over the course of these four centuries, Aryan tribes, with horses harnessed to chariots and wagons drawn by oxen, drove their herds east, migrating along and colonizing the plains surrounding the Ganges. Historians debate whether this happened through conquest and warfare or intermittent migration led by traders and people seeking land and opportunity. Regardless, by 600 BCE the Aryans had reached the lower reaches of the Ganges and as far south as the Vindhya Range and the Deccan Plateau. Most of northern India would therefore be shaped by the Aryan way of life. But in addition, as they moved into these areas, the Aryans encountered indigenous peoples and interacted with them, eventually imposing their way of life on them but also adopting many elements of their languages and customs.

During this time, agriculture became more important and occupations more diverse. As the lands were cleared, village communities formed. Two new resources made farming more productive: iron tools and rice. Implements such as iron axes and ploughs made clearing wilderness and sowing fields easier, and rice paddy agriculture produced more calories per unit of land. Consequently, population began to grow and people could more easily engage in other occupations. By the end of this period, the earliest towns had started to form.

Political changes accompanied economic developments. Looking ahead at sixth-century northern India, the landscape was dominated by kingdoms and oligarchies. That raises the question of the origins of these two different kinds of states, where different types of central authority formally governed a defined territory. Clearly, these states began to emerge during the later Vedic Age, especially after the eighth century.

Prior to this state formation, chiefs (rajas) and their assemblies, with the assistance of priests, saw to the well-being of their clans. This clan-based method of governing persisted and evolved into oligarchies. As the Aryans colonized new territory, clans or confederacies of clan would claim it as their possession, and name it after the ruling family. The heads of clan families or chiefs of each clan in a confederacy then jointly governed the territory by convening periodically in assembly halls. A smaller group of leaders managed the deliberations and voting, and carried out the tasks of day-to-day governing. These kinds of states have been called oligarchies because the heads of the most powerful families governed. They have also been called republics because these elites governed by assembly.

But in other territories clan chiefs became kings. These kings elevated themselves over kinsmen and the assemblies and served as the pivot of an embryonic administrative system. Their chief priests conducted grand rituals that demonstrated the king's special relation with the gods, putting the people in awe of him and giving them the sense that they would be protected. Treasurers managed the obligatory gifts kings expected in return. Most importantly, kingship became hereditary, and dynasties started to rule (see Map **17.3.6.3**).



Map **17.3.6.3**: The Late Vedic Age (1000-600 BCE) | The area highlighted in pink, lying between the Black and Caspian Seas, is the suggested homeland for Indo-Europeans in the third millennium BCE. Arrows show the movement of speakers of Indo-European languages in the second millennium. The arrow showing movement to the southeast into India designates the Indo-Aryans, who began entering the Indo-Gangetic Plains from c. 1700 BCE. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Avantiputra7" via Wikimedia Commons)

Society changed too. In earlier times, Aryan society was organized as a fluid three-class social structure consisting of priests, warriors, and commoners. But during the later Vedic Age, this social structure became more hierarchical and rigid. A system for classifying people based on broad occupational categories was developed by the religious and political leaders in society. These categories are known as ***varnas***, and there were four of them: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The Brahmins were the priests, whose duty was to memorize and orally transmit the *Vedas* and perform sacrifices so as to maintain good relations with the gods. The Kshatriya were the chiefs and warriors, whose duty was to govern well and fight. The Vaishya were commoners who traded and farmed. They were responsible for society's material prosperity. The Shudras were servants who labored for others, usually as artisans or by performing menial tasks.

Varnas became hereditary social classes. That means a person was born into one of these and usually remained there for life, pursuing an occupation included in and marrying someone belonging to that *varna*. *Varna* has also been translated as ritual status. Your *varna* determined how pure or polluted you were, and thus what level of participation in rituals you would be allowed and also who you could associate with. *Varna* thus defined a social hierarchy. The Brahmins were the purest and most honored. Warriors were respected for their leadership and supported the Brahmins, who affirmed their authority by carrying out royal ceremonies. Together, they dominated society. The Shudras (servants) were the most polluted and could not participate in any

sacrifice or speak freely to members of other *varnas*. Over time, this way of organizing society came to be viewed as normal and natural.

During the later Vedic Age, the religion of the Aryans also developed in new directions. As one of the world's major religious traditions, **Hinduism** is multi-faceted and contains many layers of historical development. The earliest layer is called **Brahmanism**. Brahmanism begins with the *Rig Veda*, which presents a universe controlled by a host of divinities. During the early Vedic Age, the Aryans explained the world through myths about these higher powers, and their priests sought to influence them through sacrificial ceremonies. These priests become the Brahmin *varna*.

This early layer persisted and became even more elaborate. Three new *Vedas* were added to the *Rig Veda*, as well as two sets of texts called *Brahmanas* and ***Upanishads***. Combined, this literature, which was composed in Sanskrit, constituted the full Vedic corpus, and became the preserve of the Brahmins.

The Brahmins weren't content with the 1028 hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Later Vedas set the hymns to music, added prose formulas that were to be uttered in the course of sacrificing to the divinities, and offered spells and incantations for achieving such goals as warding off disease and winning a battle. The Brahmanas were primarily handbooks of ritual for the *Brahmins*. They explained the meaning of the sacrifices and how to carry them out. Clearly, the Brahmins were becoming ever more conscious of their role in keeping the universe in good working order by pleasing and assisting the gods and consecrating kings. Their sacrificial observances became all the more elaborate, and an essential component of good kingship.

The *Upanishads*, however, added an entirely new set of ideas. The title means "sitting near" and points to a setting where sages conveyed spiritual insights to students through dialogue, stories, and analogies. The *Upanishads* are records of what was taught and discussed, the earliest dating to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. These sages were likely hermits and wanderers who felt spiritually dissatisfied with the mythological and ritualistic approach of Brahmanism. Rather, they sought deeper insight into the nature of reality, the origins of the universe, and the human condition. The concepts that appear throughout these records of the outcome of their search are ***brahman*** (not to be confused with Brahmins), ***atman***, **transmigration**, and **karma**.

According to these sages, human beings face a predicament. The universe they live in is created and destroyed repeatedly over the course of immense cycles of time, and humans wander through it in an endless succession of deaths and rebirths. This wandering is known as transmigration, a process that isn't random, but rather determined by the law of karma. According to this law, good acts bring a better rebirth, and bad acts a worse one. It may not happen in this lifetime, but one day virtue will be rewarded and evil punished.

Ultimately, however, the goal is to be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth. According to Hindu traditions, the *Upanishads* reflect spiritual knowledge that was revealed to sages who undertook an inward journey through withdrawal from the world and meditation. What they discovered is that one divine reality underlies the universe. They called this ultimate reality *brahman*. They also discovered that deep within the heart of each person lies the eternal soul. They called this soul atman. Through quieting the mind and inquiry, the individual can discover *atman* and its identity with *brahman*: the soul is the divine reality. That is how a person is liberated from the illusion of endless wandering.

In conclusion, by the end of the Vedic Age, northern India had undergone immense changes. An Aryan civilization emerged and spread across the Indo-Gangetic Plains. This civilization was characterized by the Brahmin's religion (Brahmanism), the use of Sanskrit, and the *varna* social system. The simpler rural life of the clans of earlier times was giving way to the formation of states, and new religious ideas were being added to the evolving tradition known today as Hinduism.

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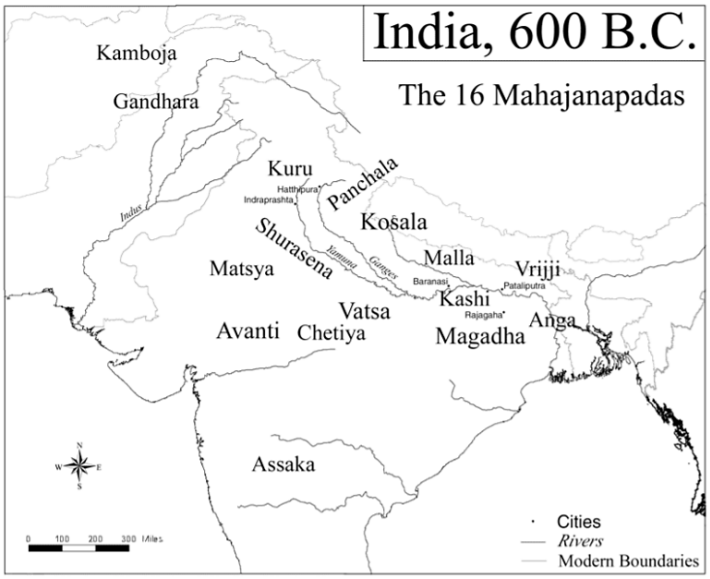
17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)

The sixth century begins a transitional period in India's history marked by important developments. Some of these bring to fruition processes that gained momentum during the late Vedic Age. Out of the hazy formative stage of state development, sixteen powerful kingdoms and oligarchies emerged. By the end of this period, one will dominate. Accompanying their emergence, India entered a second stage of urbanization, as towns and cities become a prominent feature of northern India. Other developments were newer. The caste system took shape as an institution, giving Indian society one of its most distinctive traits. Lastly, new religious ideas were put forward that challenged the dominance of Brahmanism.

17.3.7.1: States and Cities

The kingdom of **Magadha** became the most powerful among the sixteen states that dominated this transitional period, but only over time. At the outset, it was just one of eleven located up and down the Ganges River (see Map **17.3.7.1**). The rest were established in the older northwest or central India. In general, larger kingdoms dominated the Ganges basin while smaller clan-based states thrived on the periphery. They all fought with each other over land and resources, making this a time of war and shifting alliances.

The victors were the states that could field the largest armies. To do so, rulers had to mobilize the resources of their realms. The Magadhan kings did this most effectively. Expansion began in 545 BCE under King Bimbisara. His kingdom was small, but its location to the south of the lower reaches of the Ganges River gave it access to fertile plains, iron ore, timber, and elephants. Governing from his inland fortress at **Rajagriha**, Bimbisara built an administration to extract these resources and used them to form a powerful military. After concluding marriage alliances with states to the north and west, he attacked and defeated the kingdom of Anga to the east. His son Ajatashatru, after killing his father, broke those alliances and waged war on the Kosala Kingdom and the Vrijji Confederacy. Succeeding kings of this and two more Magadhan dynasties continued to conquer neighboring states down to 321 BCE, thus forging an empire. But its reach was largely limited to the middle and lower reaches of the Ganges River.



Map **17.3.7.1**: The most powerful states of the sixth century BCE | Mahajanapadas refers to the great kingdoms and oligarchies stretching along the Indo-Gangetic plains. The two capitals of Magadha–Rajagriha and Pataliputra–are also indicated. (CC BY 2.5; User "Kmusser" via Wikimedia Commons)

To the northwest, external powers gained control. As we have seen, the mountain ranges defining that boundary contain passes permitting the movement of peoples. This made the northwest a crossroads, and, at times, the peoples crossing through were the armies of rulers who sought to control the riches of India. Outside powers located in Afghanistan, Iran, or beyond might extend political control into the subcontinent, making part of it a component in a larger empire.

One example is the Persian Empire (see Chapter 5). During the sixth century, two kings, Cyrus the Great and Darius I, made this empire the largest in its time. From their capitals on the Iranian Plateau, they extended control as far as the Indus River, incorporating parts of northwest India as provinces of the Persian Empire (see Map **17.3.7.2**). Another example is Alexander the Great (also see Chapter 5). Alexander was the king of Macedon, a Greek state. After compelling other Greeks to follow him, he attacked the Persian Empire, defeating it in 331 BCE. That campaign took his forces all the way to mountain ranges bordering India. Desiring to find the end of the known world and informed of the riches of India, Alexander took his army through the Khyber Pass and overran a number of small states and cities located in the Punjab. But to Alexander's dismay, his soldiers refused to go any further, forcing him to turn back. They were exhausted from years of campaigning far from home and discouraged by news of powerful Indian states to the east. One of those was the kingdom of Magadha (see Map **17.3.7.3**).



Map **17.3.7.2**: Afro-Eurasia in 500 BCE | Note how India is divided up among numerous polities, and how a large Persian Empire is reaching from the Middle East into northwest India. (© Thomas Lessman. Used with permission.; Thomas Lessman via Talessman's Atlas of World History)



Map **17.3.7.3**: Afro-Eurasia in 323 BCE | By this time, Alexander the Great had defeated the Persian Empire and entered northwest India. The Nanda Dynasty (located along the Ganges River) was the last to rule Magadha. (© Thomas Lessman. Used with permission.; Thomas Lessman via Talessman's Atlas of World History)

Magadha's first capital—Rajagriha—is one of many cities and towns with ruins dating back to this transitional period. Urban centers were sparse during the Vedic Age but now blossomed, much like they did during the mature phase of the Harappan Civilization. Similar processes were at work. As more forests were cleared and marshes drained, the agricultural economy of the Ganges basin produced ever more surplus food. Population grew, enabling more people to move into towns and engage in other occupations as craftsmen, artisans, and traders. Kings encouraged this economic growth as its revenue enriched their treasuries. Caravans of ox-drawn carts or boats laden with goods travelling from state to state could expect to encounter the king's customs officials and pay tolls. So important were rivers to accessing these trade networks that the Magadhan kings moved their capital to **Pataliputra**, a port town located on the Ganges (see Map **17.3.7.1**). Thus, it developed as a hub of both political power and economic exchange. Most towns and cities began as one or the other, or as places of pilgrimage.

17.3.7.2: The Caste System

As the population of northern India rose and the landscape was dotted with more villages, towns, and cities, society became more complex. The social life of a Brahmin priest who served the king differed from that of a blacksmith who belonged to a town guild, a rich businessman residing in style in a city, a wealthy property owner, or a poor agricultural laborer living in a village. Thus, the social identity of each member of society differed.

In ancient India, one measure of identity and the way people imagined their social life and how they fit together with others was the *varna* system of four social classes. Another was **caste**. Like the *varnas*, castes were hereditary social classifications; unlike them, they were far more distinct social groups. The four-fold *varna* system was more theoretical and important for establishing clearly who the powerful spiritual and political elites in society were: the Brahmins and Kshatriya. But others were more conscious of their caste. There were thousands of these, and each was defined by occupation, residence, marriage, customs, and language. In other words, because "I" was born into such-and-such a caste, my role in society is to perform this kind of work. "I" will be largely confined to interacting with and marrying members of this same group. Our caste members reside in this area, speak this language, hold these beliefs, and are governed by this assembly of elders. "I" will also be well aware of who belongs to other castes, and whether or not "I" am of a higher or lower status in relation to them, or more or less pure. On that basis, "I" may or may not be able, for instance, to dine with them. That is how caste defined an individual's life.

The lowest castes were the untouchables. These were peoples who engaged in occupations considered highly impure, usually because they were associated with taking life; such occupations include corpse removers, cremators, and sweepers. So those who

practiced such occupations were despised and pushed to the margins of society. Because members of higher castes believed touching or seeing them was polluting, untouchables were forced to live outside villages and towns, in separate settlements.

17.3.7.3: The Challenge to Brahmanism: Buddhism

During this time of transition, some individuals became dissatisfied with life and chose to leave the everyday world behind. Much like the sages of the *Upanishads*, these renunciants, as they were known, were people who chose to renounce social life and material things in order that they might gain deeper insight into the meaning of life. Some of them altogether rejected Brahmanism and established their own belief systems. The most renowned example is **Siddhartha Gautama** (c. 563 – 480 BCE), who is otherwise known as the **Buddha**.

Buddha means "Enlightened One" or "Awakened One," implying that the Buddha was at one time spiritually asleep but at some point woke up and attained insight into the truth regarding the human condition. His life story is therefore very important to Buddhists, people who follow the teachings of the Buddha.

Siddhartha was born a prince, son to the chieftain of Shakya, a clan-based state located at the foothills of the Himalaya in northern India. His father wished for him to be a ruler like himself, but Siddhartha went in a different direction. At twenty-nine, after marrying and having a son, he left home. Legends attribute this departure to his having encountered an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering renunciant while out on an excursion. Aging, sickness, and death posed the question of suffering for Siddhartha, leading him to pursue spiritual insight. For years, he sought instruction from other wanderers and experimented with their techniques for liberating the self from suffering through meditation and asceticism. But he failed to obtain the answers he sought.

Then, one day, while seated beneath a tree meditating for an extended period of time, a deepening calm descended upon Siddhartha, and he experienced nirvana. He also obtained insight into the reasons for human suffering and what was needful to end it. This insight was at the heart of his teachings for the remaining forty-five years of his life. During that time, he travelled around northern India teaching his dharma—his religious ideas and practices—and gained a following of students.

The principal teaching of the Buddha, presented at his first sermon, is called the Four Noble Truths. The first is the noble truth of suffering. Based on his own experiences, the Buddha concluded that life is characterized by suffering not only in an obvious physical and mental sense, but also because everything that promises pleasure and happiness is ultimately unsatisfactory and impermanent. The second noble truth states that the origin of suffering is an unquenchable thirst. People are always thirsting for something more, making for a life of restlessness with no end in sight. The third noble truth is that there is a cure for this thirst and the suffering it brings: nirvana. Nirvana means "blowing out," implying extinction of the thirst and the end of suffering. No longer striving to quell the restlessness with temporary enjoyments, people can awaken to "the city of nirvana, the place of highest happiness, peaceful, lovely, without suffering, without fear, without sickness, free from old age and death."[1] The fourth noble truth is the Eight-Fold Path, a set of practices that leads the individual to this liberating knowledge. The Buddha taught that through a program of study of Buddhist teachings (right understanding, right attitude), moral conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood), and meditation (right effort, right concentration, right mindfulness), anyone could become a Buddha. Everyone has the potential to awaken, but each must rely on his or her own determination.

After the Buddha died c. 480 BCE, his students established monastic communities known as the Buddhist *sangha*. Regardless of their *varna* or caste, both men and women could choose to leave home and enter a monastery as a monk or nun. They would shave their heads, wear ochre-colored robes, and vow to take refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and *sangha*. Doing so meant following the example of the Buddha and his teachings on morality and meditation, as well as living a simple life with like-minded others in pursuit of *nirvana* and an end to suffering.

17.3.7.4: Endnotes

1 Rupert Gethin, The Foundations of Buddhism (Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

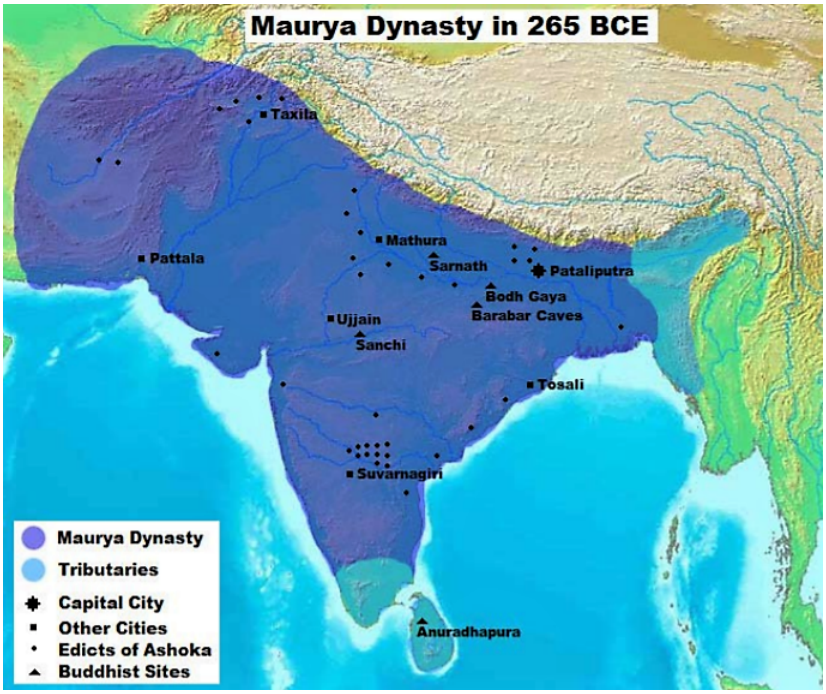
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17.3.8: The Mauryan Empire (321-184 BCE)

The kingdom of Magadha was the most powerful state in India when the Nanda Dynasty came to power in 364 BCE. Nine Nanda kings made it even greater, by improving methods of tax collection and administration, funding irrigation projects and canal building, and maintaining an impressive army of infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots.

But Nanda aspirations were cut short when they were overthrown by **Chandragupta Maurya** (r. 321 – 297 BCE), who began a new period in India's history. He and his son Bindusara (r. 287 – 273 BCE) and grandson **Ashoka** (r. 268 – 232 BCE) were destined to forge the first large empire in India's history, one that would inspire the imagination of later empire builders in South Asia. The **Mauryan Empire** included most of the subcontinent and lasted for 140 years (see Map 17.3.8.1)

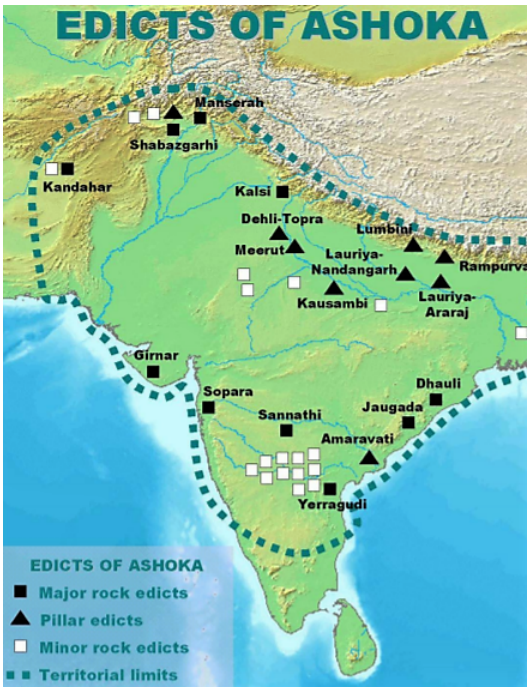


Map 17.3.8.1

Conflicting accounts make it difficult to say anything definitive about the first two kings. Chandragupta may have come from a Kshatriya (warrior) clan, or a Vaishya (commoner) clan of peacock-tamers. In his youth, he spent time in the northwest, where he encountered Alexander the Great. With the assistance of Kautilya, a disloyal Brahmin of the Nanda court, Chandragupta formed alliances with Nanda enemies, overthrowing them in 321 BCE. Thereafter, through diplomacy and war, he secured control over central and northern India.

Kautilya, whose advice may have been critical to Chandragupta's success, is viewed as the author of the ***Arthashastra***, a treatise on statecraft. This handbook for kings covered in detail the arts of governing, diplomacy, and warfare. To help ensure centralization of power in the ruler's hands, it provided a blueprint of rules and regulations necessary to maintain an efficient bureaucracy, a detailed penal code, and advice on how to deploy spies and informants.

Chandragupta's campaigns ended when he concluded a treaty with Seleucus Nicator in 301 BCE. After Alexander the Great retreated from India and then died, a struggle for his empire broke out among his generals. Seleucus was one of them. He gained control of the eastern half and sought to reclaim northwest India. But he was confronted by Chandragupta, defeated, and forced to surrender the Indus Basin and much of Afghanistan, giving the Mauryan Empire control over trade routes to West Asia. The treaty, however, established friendly relations between the two rulers, for in exchange for hundreds of elephants, Seleucus gave Chandragupta a daughter in marriage and dispatched an envoy to his court. Hellenistic kings (see Chapter 5) maintained commercial and diplomatic ties with India.



Map **17.3.8.2**: Location of the rock edicts and pillars of King Ashoka (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "PHGCOM" via Wikimedia Commons)

Military expansion continued under Bindusara and Ashoka until all but the tip of the subcontinent came under the empire's control. With King Ashoka, however, warfare came to an end. We know far more about him because he left behind a fascinating record telling much about his ideas on governing. He had edicts inscribed on rocks throughout the realm and on sandstone pillars erected in the Ganges heartland (see Map **17.3.8.1**). He then placed them in populous areas where people usually gathered, so that his officials could read them to his largely illiterate subjects.

One rock edict speaks to why King Ashoka decided to renounce violence. While waging war against a small state located along the east coast, he was deeply disturbed by the amount of suffering and dislocation the war heaped upon innocent people's lives. This realization caused him to redouble his faith in the Buddha. Ashoka, it turns out, was a lay follower of Buddhism.

In his edicts, he proclaimed to his subjects that the sound of the drum would be replaced by the sound of the **dharma**. In ancient India, dharma meant universal law. For the Brahmin priests, for example, dharma meant a society and religious order founded on Vedic principles and the caste system. For Buddhists, dharma consisted of the truths taught by the Buddha. For kings, dharma was enlightened governing and just rule. Thus, Ashoka was proclaiming that he would now rule by virtue, not force.

Ashoka's kingly dharma was shaped by his personal practice of Buddhism. This dharma consisted of laws of ethical behavior and right conduct fashioned from Indian traditions of kingship and his understanding of Buddhist principles. To gain his subject's willing obedience, he sought to inspire a sense of gratitude by presenting himself in the role of a father looking out for his children. He told his subjects that he was appointing officers to tour his realm and attend to the welfare and happiness of all. Justice was to be impartially administered and medical treatment provided for animals and humans. A principle of non-injury to all beings was to be observed. Following this principle meant not only renouncing state violence, but also forbidding slaughtering certain animals for sacrifices or for cooking in the royal kitchen. Ashoka also proclaimed that he would replace his pleasure and hunting tours with dharma tours. During these, he promised to give gifts to Brahmins and the aged and to visit people in the countryside.

In return, Ashoka asked his subjects to observe certain principles. He knew his empire was pluralistic, consisting of many peoples with different cultures and beliefs. He believed that if he instilled certain values in these peoples, then his realm might be knit together in peace and harmony. Thus, in addition to non-injury, Ashoka taught forbearance. He exhorted his subjects to respect parents, show courtesy to servants, and, more generally, be liberal, compassionate, and truthful in their treatment of others. These values were also to be embraced by religious communities, since Ashoka did not want people fighting over matters of faith.

The king's writ shaped the government because kings were the heart of it. They were advised by a council of ministers and served by high officials who oversaw the major functions of the state. The Mauryans were particularly concerned with efficient revenue

collection and uniform administration of justice. To that end, they divided the empire into a hierarchy of provinces and districts and appointed officials to manage matters at each level. But given such an immense empire spread over a geographically and ethnically diverse territory, the level of Mauryan control varied. Historians recognize three broad zones. The first was the metropolitan region —with its capital Pataliputra— located on the Ganges Plain. This heartland was tightly governed. The second zone consisted of conquered regions of strategic and economic importance. These provinces were placed under the control of members of the royal family and senior officials, but state formation was slower. That is, the tentacles of bureaucracy did not reach as deeply into local communities. Lastly, the third zone consisted of hinterlands sparsely populated by tribes of foragers and nomads. Here, state control was minimal, amounting to little more than establishing workable relations with chieftains.

After King Ashoka's reign, the Mauryan Empire declined. The precise reasons for this decline are unknown. Kings enjoyed only brief reigns during the final fifty years of the empire's existence, so they may have been weak. Since loyalty to the ruler was one element of the glue that held the centralized bureaucracy together, weak kings may explain why the political leaders of provinces pulled away and the empire fragmented into smaller states. Furthermore, the Mauryan court's demand for revenue sufficient to sustain the government and a large standing army may have contributed to discontent. In 184 BCE, the last king was assassinated by his own Brahmin military commander, and India's first major imperial power came to an end.

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17.3.9: Regional States, Trade, and Devotional Religion- India 200 BCE-300 CE

After the Mauryan Empire fell, no one major power held control over a substantial part of India until the rise of the Gupta Empire in the fourth century CE. Thus, for five hundred years, from c. 200 BCE to 300 CE, India saw a fairly rapid turnover of numerous, competing regional monarchies. Most of these were small, while the larger ones were only loosely integrated. Some developed along the Ganges. Others were of Central Asian origins, the product of invasions from the northwest. Also, for the first time, states formed in southern India. Yet, in spite of the political instability, India was economically dynamic, as trade within and without the subcontinent flourished, and India was increasingly linked to other parts of the world in networks of exchange. And new trends appeared in India's major religious traditions. A popular, devotional form of worship was added to Buddhism and also became a defining element of Hinduism.



Map **17.3.9.1**: The Kushan Empire during the reign of King Kanishka (© Thomas Lessman. Used with permission.; Thomas Lessman via Talessman's Atlas of World History)

17.3.9.1: Regional States

The general who brought the Mauryan Empire to a close by a military coup established the Shunga Dynasty (c. 185 – 73 BCE). Like its predecessor, this kingdom was centered on the middle Ganges, the heartland of India's history since the late Vedic Age. But unlike it, the Shunga Kingdom rapidly dwindled in size. Shunga rulers were constantly warring with neighboring kingdoms, and the last fell to an internal coup in 73 CE. Subsequently, during the ensuing half millennium, other regions of India played equally prominent roles.

The northwest remained a source of dynamism, as different peoples living beyond the Hindu Kush invaded India and established one kingdom after another. Most of this movement was caused by instability on the steppe lands of Central Asia, where competing confederations of nomadic pastoralists fought for control over territory.

The most powerful among this succession of states was the Kushan Kingdom, whose origins take us far away to the north of China. There, in the second century CE, nomadic groups struggling with scarcity moved west, displacing another group and forcing them into northern Afghanistan. Those peoples are known as the Yuezhi (yew-eh-jer), and they were made up of several tribes. In the first century CE, a warrior chieftain from one Yuezhi tribe, the Kushans, united them, invaded northwest India, and assumed exalted titles befitting a king. His successor, ruling from Afghanistan, gained control over the Punjab and reached into the plains of the upper Ganges River.



Figure 17.3.9.1: Statue of King Kanishka | Statue of King Kanishka, second century CE. The head is missing. (CC BY 3.0; Biswarup Ganguly via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17.3.9.2: Gold coins dating to the reign of King Kanishka | Each coin contains an image of Kanishka on one side, an image of a deity on the obverse, and inscriptions giving the names of both. Kanishka is depicted wearing a crown, beard, long tunic, trousers, and boots. He is holding a scepter or trident in the left hand and standing over an altar. Inscriptions recognize him as "King of kings." Flames arise from his shoulders. On the obverse side, the first coin displays the Buddha raising his right hand, symbolizing reassurance. Other Kushan coins display Greek, Indian, and Iranian deities. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "World Imaging" via Wikimedia Commons)

The greatest Kushan ruler, **King Kanishka**, furthered what these first two kings began, forging an empire extending from Central Asia across the mountain ranges of Afghanistan into much of northern India (see Map 17.3.9.1). Ruling the many peoples of such a sprawling territory required more than the periodic plundering campaigns of nomad chieftains. One sculpture of King Kanishka puts these Central Asian roots on display (see Figure 17.3.9.1). In it, he is wearing a belted tunic, coat, and felt boots, and carrying a sword and mace. Kushan gold coins, however, cast him and his two predecessors in another light: as universal monarchs (see Figure 17.3.9.2). On one side, the crowned kings are displayed along with inscriptions bearing titles used by the most powerful Indian, Persian, Chinese, and Roman emperors of that time. The obverse side contains images of both Indian and foreign deities. The Kushan rulers, it appears, solved the problem of ruling an extensive, culturally diverse realm by patronizing the many different gods beloved by the peoples living within it. Buddhists, for instance, saw King Kanishka as a great Buddhist ruler, much like they did King Ashoka. In fact, Kanishka supported Buddhist scholarship and encouraged missionaries to take this faith from India to Central Asia and China. But his coins also depict Greek, Persian, and Hindu deities, suggesting that he was open-minded, and perhaps strategic, in matters of religion.



Map 17.3.9.2: **India in the second and first century CE** | This map shows the location of the Shunga (Sunga), Satavahana, and Kushan Empires, demonstrating clearly that India was constituted by several greater and lesser regional powers during these centuries. (Public Domain; User "PHG" via Wikimedia Commons)

After Kanishka's reign, from the mid-second century CE onwards, the empire declined. Like the other, larger Indian states during this time, only a core area was ruled directly by the king's servants. The other areas were governed indirectly by establishing tributary relations with local rulers. As Kushan power waned, numerous smaller polities emerged, turning northern and central India into a mosaic of states.

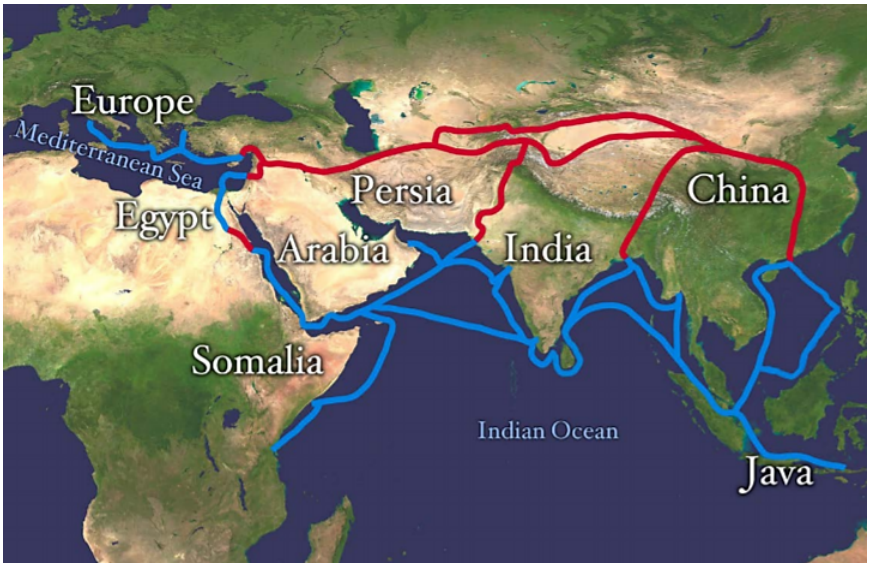
The Indian peninsula—the territory south of the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Vindhya Mountain Range—also features more prominently after the fall of the Mauryan Empire. In the south, kingdoms emerged for the first time. The largest was the **Satavahana Kingdom**, which included most of the Deccan Plateau and lasted about three centuries. The first rulers were former Mauryan officials who capitalized on its dissolution, established their own state, and expanded to the north (see Map 17.3.9.2). To establish their legitimacy, Satavahana kings embraced Aryan civilization by allowing Brahmins to perform sacrifices at the court and by upholding the varna social order. They also prospered from a rich agricultural base and trade. However, like so many of the larger states during these centuries, this kingdom was only loosely integrated, consisting of small provinces governed by civil and military officers and allied, subordinate chieftains and kings.

17.3.9.2: Economic Growth and Flourishing Trade Networks

Gold coins discovered in Kushan territory provide much information about the rulers who issued them. The Satavahanas also minted coins. Additionally, Roman gold coins have been found at over 130 sites in south India. These were issued by Roman emperors at the turn of the Christian era, during the first century CE. These coins serve as a sign of the times. Indian monarchs issued coins because trade was growing and intensifying all around them and they wished to support and profit from it. Expanding the money supply facilitated trade and was one way to achieve that goal. Both Indian kingdoms were also geographically well positioned to take advantage of emerging global trade networks linking the subcontinent to other regions of Afro-Eurasia. This advantage provides one reason why they flourished.

The expansion of trade both within and without India is a major theme of these five centuries. Put simply, South Asia was a crossroads with much to offer. In market towns and cities across the subcontinent, artisans and merchants organized to produce and

distribute a wide variety of goods. **Guilds** were their principal method of organization. A guild was a professional association made up of members with a particular trade. Artisan guilds—such as weavers and goldsmiths—set the prices and ensured the quality of goods. Operating like and sometimes overlapping with castes, guilds also set rules for members and policed their behavior. They acted collectively as proud participants of urban communities, displaying their banners in festive processions and donating money to religious institutions. Merchant guilds then saw to it that their artisan products were transported along routes traversing the subcontinent or leading beyond to foreign lands.



Map 17.3.9.3: Trade Routes | Some of the major Indian Ocean and Silk Road trade routes that linked India to the rest of Afro-Eurasia (Public Domain; User "Splette" via Wikimedia Commons)

The lands and peoples surrounding India, and the many empires they lived under, are the topic of later chapters, but we can take a snapshot of the scene here (see Map **17.3.9.3**). In the first century CE, India sat amidst trade networks connecting the Roman Empire, Persian Empire (Parthian), Chinese Empire, and a host of smaller kingdoms and states in Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. The major trade networks were the Silk Roads and the Indian Ocean maritime trade routes. Thus, for example, GrecoRoman traders plied the waters of the Arabian Sea, bringing ships filled with amphorae and gold coins to ports located along the west coast of India, and returning with spices, textiles, and gems. Indian traders sailed the waters of the Bay of Bengal, bringing cloth and beads from the Coromandel Coast to Southeast Asia and returning with cinnamon cloves and sandalwood. In the northwest, a similar trade in a variety of goods took place along the Silk Roads. Indian traders, for instance, took advantage of the excellent position of the Kushan Empire to bring silk from Central Asia to the ports of northwest India, from where it could then be sent on to Rome. In sum, this vibrant international trade constituted an early stage of globalization. Combined with regional trade across the subcontinent, India saw an increase in travel in all directions, even as it remained divided among many regional kingdoms.

17.3.9.3: Religious Transformations: Buddhism and Hinduism into the Common Era

Aside from expanding trade, another theme during these centuries of political division is transformations in two of India's major religions traditions: Buddhism and Hinduism. In both cases, new religious ideas and practices were added that emphasized the importance of devotion and appealed to broader groups of people.

Buddhism thrived after the Buddha died in c. 480 BCE, all the more so during this period of regional states and the early centuries of the Common Era, at the very moment Christianity was spreading through the Roman Empire. In fact, it would not be exaggeration to say that Buddhism was the dominant public religion. The communities of monks and nuns (*sangha*) that formed after Buddha's time lived in monasteries built along trade routes, near towns, or in caves. To build these and survive, the *sangha* needed much support, which often came in the form of royal patronage. Kings such as Ashoka and Kanishka, for example, offered lavish support for Buddhist institutions. But over time, the contributions of merchants, women, and people from lower *varnas* became just as important. Unlike Vedic Brahmanism, which privileges the Brahmin *varna*, Buddhism was more inclusive and less concerned with birth and social class. After all, in theory, anyone could become a Buddha.

Buddhism also emphasized the importance of attaining good karma for better rebirths and a future enlightenment; one didn't need to be a monk to work at this. Rather, any ordinary layperson, regardless of their religious beliefs, could also take Buddhist vows and practice Buddhist ways. That meant not only leading a moral life but also supporting the *sangha*. By so doing, the good karma of the monks and nuns would be transferred to the community and oneself. This practice served to not only make the world a better place and to ensure a better future, but also to allow opportunities for publicly displaying one's piety. That is why kings, rich merchants, and ordinary people donated to the *sangha* and gave monks food.

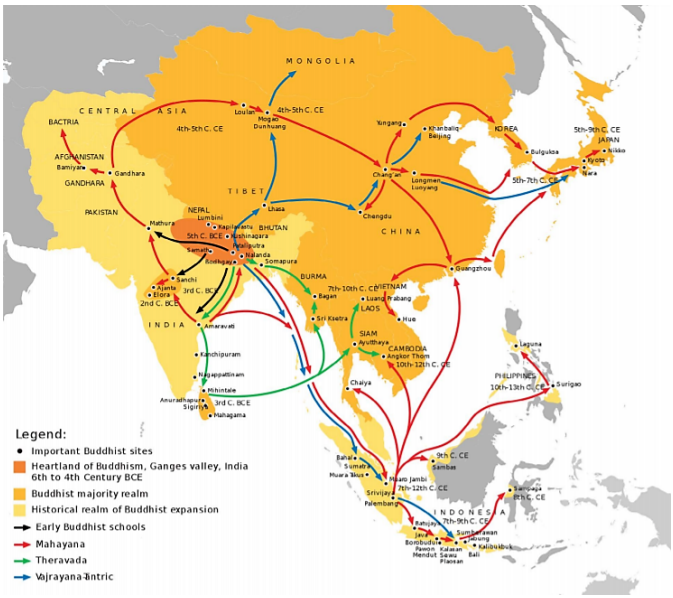
With so much support and participation, Buddhism also changed. Every major world religion has different branches. Christianity, for example, has three major ones: the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches. These branches share a common root but diverge in some matters of belief and practice. Buddhism has two major branches: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. **Theravada Buddhism** is early Buddhism, the Buddhism of the early *sangha*, and is based on the earliest records of the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths. A practitioner of this form of Buddhism sought to end suffering and attain *nirvana* by engaging the Eight-Fold Path, a program of study, moral conduct, and meditation. Ideally, the practitioner pursued this program as a monk or nun in a monastic setting, and eventually became an "arhat," that is, a perfected person who is nearly or fully enlightened.

Mahayana Buddhism came later, during the early centuries of the Common Era. Mahayana means "Great Vehicle," pointing to the fact that this form of Buddhism offers multiple paths to enlightenment for people from all walks of life. This branch has no single founder and consists of a set of ideas elaborated upon in new Buddhist scriptures dating to this time. In one of these new paths, the Buddha becomes a god who can be worshipped, and by anyone. A monk or lay follower is welcome to make an offering before an image of the Buddha placed in a shrine. By so doing, they demonstrate their desire to end suffering and seek salvation through faith in the Buddha.

Furthermore, with the "Great Vehicle," the universe becomes populated with numerous Buddhas. Practitioners developed the idea that if anyone can become a Buddha over the course of many lifetimes of practice, then other Buddhas must exist. Also, the belief arose that some individuals had tread the path to Buddhahood but chose to forego a final enlightenment where they would leave the world behind so that they could, out of great compassion for all suffering people, work for their deliverance. These holy beings are known as Bodhisattvas, that is, enlightened persons who seek *nirvana* solely out of their desire to benefit all humanity. Buddhists also believed that the universe consisted of multiple worlds with multiple heavenly realms. Some of these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas created their own heavenly realms and, from there, offer grace to those seeking salvation through them. Through veneration and worship, the follower hopes to be reborn in that heavenly realm, where they can then finish the path to liberation. Seeking to become a Bodhisattva through a path of devotion was one of the new paths outlined by Mahayana scriptures.

Buddhism traveled out of India and had an impact on other parts of the world, making it a major world religion. This expansion resulted from the efforts of Buddhist missionaries and merchants, as well as kings who supported its propagation. Theravada Buddhism was carried to Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia, where it remains a dominant religious tradition. Mahayana Buddhism spread to Central and East Asia, a process that was facilitated by the Silk Road and the support of kings like Kanishka of the Kushan Empire (see Map 17.3.9.4). However, Buddhism eventually declined in India, especially after the first millennium BCE. From that time, Hinduism and Islam increasingly won over the religious imagination of the peoples of India, with royal patronage and lay support following.

Hinduism also saw new developments during this period and throughout the first millennium CE. In fact, many scholars see these centuries as the time during which Hinduism first took shape and prefer using the term Vedic Brahmanism for the prior history of this religious tradition. Vedic Brahmanism was the sacrifice-centered religion of the Vedas where, in exchange for gifts, Brahmins performed rituals for kings and householders in order to ensure the favor of the gods. It also included the speculative world of the Upanishads, where renunciants went out in search of spiritual liberation.



Map **17.3.9.4**: The spread of Buddhism from India to other regions of Asia | Green arrows indicate the pathway for the spread of Theravada Buddhism, from India (including Sri Lanka) to Southeast Asia. The red arrows indicate the routes for the spread of Mahayana Buddhism to East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan). (CC BY-SA 3.0; Gunawan Kartapranata via Wikimedia Commons)

But something important happened during these later centuries. An additional religious literature was compiled and shrines and temples with images of deities were constructed, pointing to the emergence of new, popular forms of devotion and an effort to define a good life and society according to the idea of **dharma**. With this transition, we can speak more formally of Hinduism.

One important set of texts is the **Dharma Scriptures**, ethical and legal works whose authority derived from their attribution to ancient sages. Dharma means "duty" or proper human conduct and so, true to their title, these scriptures define the rules each person must follow in order to lead a righteous and devout life and contribute to a good society. Most importantly, these rules were determined by the role assigned to an individual by the *varna* system of social classes, the caste system, and gender. For example, for a male, dharma meant following the rules for their caste and *varna* while passing through four stages in life: student, householder, hermit, and renunciant. In his youth, a man must study to prepare for his occupation and, as a householder, he must support his family and contribute to society. Late in life, after achieving these goals, he should renounce material desires and withdraw from society, first living as a hermit on the margins of society and then as a wandering renunciant whose sole devotion is to god.



Figure **17.3.9.3**: An early Hindu temple in Deogarh, India | This temple was erected to worship Vishnu during the Gupta period, c. 500 CE. Ruins from earlier temples dating to the period 200 BCE-300 CE are not well preserved. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Byron Aihara via Wikimedia Commons)

A woman's roles, on the other hand, were defined as obedience to her father in youth and faithful service to her husband as an adult. For this reason, historians see a trend in ancient Indian history whereby women became increasingly subservient and

subordinate. Although women were to be honored and supported, the ideal society and family were defined in patriarchal terms. That meant men dominated public life, were the authority figures at home, and usually inherited the property. Also, women were increasingly expected to marry at a very young age—even prior to puberty—and to remain celibate as widows. In later centuries, some widows even observed the practice of burning themselves upon the funeral pyre of the deceased husband.

Famous Indian epics also illustrated the theme of duty. The ***Ramayana*** ("Rama's Journey") tells the story of Prince Rama and his wife Sita. Rama's parents—the king and queen—wished for him to take the throne, but a second queen plotted against him and forced him into exile for years. Sita accompanied him, but was abducted by a demon-king, leading to a battle in consequence. With the help of a loyal monkey god, Rama defeated the demon, recovered his wife, and returned with her to his father's kingdom, where they were crowned king and queen. In brief, throughout this long story, Rama exemplified the virtues of a king and Sita exemplified the virtues of a daughter and wife. They both followed their dharma.

A similar theme dominates the ***Bhagavad-Gita*** ("Song of the Lord"). This classic of Hindu scripture is included as a chapter in another Indian epic, the *Mahabharata* (The Great *Bharata*). It tells of wars between cousins who are fighting over the title to their kingdom's throne. As a battle was poised to commence, one of these cousins—Prince Arjuna—threw down his weapons and refused to fight because he did not wish to harm his kinsmen. But Krishna, his mentor and charioteer, delivered a speech on the nature of duty for a warrior like himself, one that illustrated the religious basis for observing dharma. Arjuna was thus moved to action.

Religious texts and temples also signal the rise of a powerful devotional Hinduism centered upon a few supreme deities. Stone temples were erected for the purpose of housing representations of a god or goddess (see Figure **17.3.9.3**). Peoples of all classes could go to the temple to view the deity, pray, and offer fruits and flowers. By so doing, they showed their love for this lord and their desire to be saved by his or her grace. The most popular deities were Shiva and Vishnu.



Figure **17.3.9.4**: Relief of Shiva and his wife Parvati in a rock-cut Hindu cave-temple (c. 800) | This relief also dates to a later age but well captures traditions of iconic representations of Hindu deities dating back to the early centuries CE. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "QuartierLatin1968" via Wikimedia Commons)

Growing up, devotees of these supreme deities would hear countless myths and legends about their origins, exploits, and powers from Brahmins at the temples or story-tellers in their hometown. Vishnu preserves the universe and watches over it; in times of unbridled evil, he assumes the form of an avatar to remove it and return the world to righteousness. King Rama of the *Ramayana* and Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita* are in fact two such incarnations of Vishnu. Shiva is both benevolent and protective but also destroys all things. Whereas Vishnu preserves the universe, Shiva destroys it at the end of a cycle. A third deity, Brahma, then recreates it. Combined, this Hindu trinity— Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer—represent different facets of the one divine reality behind the great cosmic cycles and also life and death. They each have female counterparts. Shiva's wife Parvati, for instance, is a goddess of love and devotion (see Figure **17.3.9.4**).

In sum, during this period and the first millennium CE, several elements come together to make up the religion outsiders later labeled Hinduism. These elements include the sacrificial religion of the Brahmins, the renunciants' spiritual pursuit of Self and divine reality (*atman* and *brahman*), a social order shaped by the *varna* and caste system, notions of law and duty embodied in each individual's dharma, and devotion to supreme deities and their avatars. Hinduism thus thoroughly shaped the social and spiritual life of the peoples of India and of Indian society. Therefore, the rulers of ancient India supported the Brahmins, built temples,

upheld the varna system, and assumed titles declaring their devotion to the supreme deities. Hinduism became part of the king's dharma, and fulfilling that dharma brought the approval of his subjects.

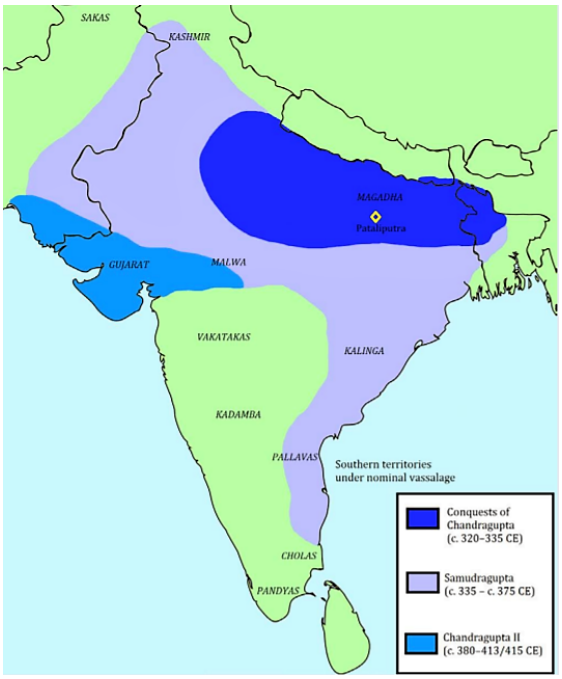
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17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)

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The pattern of regional states characteristic of post-Mauryan times and the early centuries of the Common Era will persist in India until the sixteenth century. At any one time, India had many kings. But on occasion, one king might forge a substantial regional power and assume grand titles that elevated him over others. The political scene, therefore, consisted of not only a mosaic of royal powers but also a political hierarchy. Some rulers held power over others, making for a pattern of paramountcy and subordination among kings and princes of many different dynasties across the land. These paramount powers could then take advantage of the stability they established and the wealth they accrued to patronize the arts and promote a cultural renaissance. The **Gupta** Empire is the pre-eminent example of such a power during the period 300 – 600 CE; indeed, some historians see the time during which they dominated northern India as a classical age.



Map **17.3.10.1**: The Gupta Empire in the third and fourth centuries CE | Most territorial expansion occurred during the reign of Samudragupta, although many local rulers were left in place as subordinate kings. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Javierfv1212" via Wikimedia Commons)

As is the case for so much of India's ancient political history, details concerning Gupta rulers have been reconstructed largely from coins, inscriptions, and seals. The dynasty begins in obscurity with two kings of a minor state located along the Ganges River, but then explodes on the scene with the next two kings: **Chandragupta I** (c. 320 – 335) and his son **Samudragupta** (c. 335 – 375). Through conquest and marital alliances, Chandragupta I forged a larger empire in the old Ganges heartland (Map **17.3.10.1**). A gold coin provides some of the evidence detailing the Gupta Empire. This coin displays Chandragupta standing next to a certain Queen Kumaradevi. He has taken the title "Great King of Kings," which signifies imperial power, while she is identified as the princess of a powerful neighboring kingdom (Figure **17.3.10.1**).

During his forty-year reign, Samudragupta made the empire great, a feat most forcefully evidenced by a royal eulogy inscribed on one of the old edict pillars of King Ashoka. This eulogy, which describes Samudragupta as "conqueror of the four corners of the earth," tells of how he subdued dozens of kings across the subcontinent. Closer to home, along the Ganges, many rulers were slain and their territory was annexed, while farther out across northern India and to the southeast, others were "captured and liberated." These captured and liberated kings were recognized as "servants," which meant they could continue to rule their own lands as subordinates, on the condition that they paid tribute and homage. Gupta rulers thus directly administered a core territory along the Ganges River while adopting a model of **tributary overlordship** for the rest. The Gupta imperial court in effect presided over a society of tributary rulers.



Figure **17.3.10.1**: Gupta period coin depicting Chandragupta I and Queen Kumaradevi | This coin evidences a marital alliance between the Guptas and a powerful neighboring state. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Uploadalt" via Wikimedia Commons)

After Samudragupta's time, two more Gupta rulers enjoyed long reigns of forty years, with the empire reaching a peak of power and prosperity. But in the sixth century, decline set in. A series of weaker rulers faced internal dissension at home and foreign invasion from abroad. A great nomadic power known as the Huns emerged out of Central Asia and invaded the northwest, destabilizing Gupta rule. Subordinate rulers then began to break away, and smaller kingdoms replaced the empire. After the sixth century, India entered a new stage in its history.



Figure **17.3.10.2**: Gupta Period Buddhist sculpture (fifth century) showing the seated Buddha giving a sermon (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Tevaprapas" via Wikimedia Commons)

But there is more to these centuries than high politics. Again, the Gupta era is often labeled as a classical age for India. A period in the history of a civilization's being labeled as classical generally means it was a time of artistic and intellectual excellence, with its having attained standard-setting achievements in a number of fields. Classical also suggests a certain level of maturation for a civilization. It should be noted, however, that some scholars question the use of this term because all ages produce great works, and sometimes choosing one period as classical simply represents the biased judgment of a later time.

Yet, during the Gupta era, India did produce important scientific discoveries and works of art and literature. The exquisite sculptures of the Buddha portraying his serene enlightenment and teaching were the epitome of the classical achievement in art (Figure **17.3.10.2**). India also saw an outpouring of literary masterpieces. **Kalidasa** is one of India's greatest Sanskrit poets and playwrights. His play *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, a world masterpiece, tells the story of a girl who lived in a hermitage in the countryside after being abandoned by her parents. One day, a king was out hunting and chanced upon her. They fell in love and

married. But then he hurried back to his palace and when she later came to him he no longer knew her because he had been cursed. The only solution for her dilemma was for her to present a ring he had left her. Unfortunately, it had slipped off her finger. The play tells of how this love story concluded, along with the involvement of many higher powers.

In the field of medicine, **Ayurveda** matured as more complete editions of ancient medical texts were compiled. Ayurveda (meaning "knowledge for longevity") is India's ancient medical science. It provides a systematic effort to explain the origins of diseases in dislocations of bodily humors (substances) and to prescribe cures for them. India also saw advancements in the fields of astronomy and mathematics. **Aryabhata** (476 – 550 CE), for instance, was the first astronomer to propose that the earth rotated on an axis and a scientific explanation for eclipses. He calculated pi to 3.1416 and the solar year to 364.3586805 days. His work demonstrates the contemporary use of a sophisticated system of decimal notation, which was also an ancient Indian discovery.

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17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300

The history of ancient India concludes with the decline of the Gupta Empire. The next major period, which lasts for roughly seven centuries (c. 600 – 1300), is the early medieval age. During these centuries, kingdoms in both the north and south proliferated and regularly turned over. Therefore, at any one time, India was fragmented by numerous regional kingdoms. As the rulers of these warred and formed alliances, they employed the system of paramountcy and subordination begun during the Gupta era, with some rulers being overlords and others vassals. Also, successful rulers demonstrated their power by granting land to officers, Brahmins, and temples. The outcome was a political pattern labeled **Indian feudalism**.

These rulers also demonstrated their power—and enhanced it—by patronizing Hindu institutions and developing local traditions in the regions where their courts resided. They adopted titles showing their devotion to the great Hindu deities, declared their intent to uphold dharma, built fabulous Hindu temples in urban centers, and charged Brahmins with attending to them and serving at their courts. One outstanding example of a feudal kingdom is the **Chola Kingdom** of southern India.

Lastly, at the end of this age, a new force appeared on the Indian scene. Muslim Arab and Turkic rulers of West and Central Asia made incursions into the subcontinent. Along with Arab traders arriving on India's west coast for trade, they brought a new religion and type of rule to the landscape of early medieval India and forged new connections between the subcontinent and the rest of Afro-Eurasia.

17.3.11.1: Indian Feudalism

Feudalism is a term historians first used to describe the political, social, and economic system of the European Middle Ages (see Chapter Twelve). That system was the world of lords, vassal knights, and serfs characteristic of Europe from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. In exchange for homage and military service, vassals received land from their lords. These lands became their manors, and serfs worked them. The lords and their vassals constituted a privileged nobility, while the serfs lived in a state of servitude.

Historians also use feudalism to describe India during the early medieval age. But the usefulness of this term is much debated, because conditions on the ground varied from place to place, not only in Europe but also in India. Therefore, historians now only use the term in a general sense while also describing specific variations. In general, feudalism designates a political and economic scene characterized by fragmented authority, a set of obligations between lords and vassals, and grants of land (including those who work it) by rulers in exchange for some kind of service.

Authority on the early medieval Indian subcontinent was indeed fragmented, not only by the many regional kingdoms that existed at any one time but also, more importantly, within kingdoms. Because kingdoms incessantly warred with one another, their boundaries were fluid. Rulers usually closely administered a core area near the capital with a civil administration, while granting feudatories on the periphery. Having defeated the ruling lineage of a powerful neighboring state—such as a king, prince, or chief, victorious kings might allow them to retain noble titles and their lands, on the condition that they demonstrate allegiance to him and even supply tribute and military service. The overlord could then wield the title "Great King of Kings," while the lesser rulers bore titles signifying their status as subordinate rulers who do obeisance.

Additionally, aside from granting these feudatories, medieval rulers also issued land grants to important persons and institutions in their realms, such as Brahmins, high officials, or temples. As opposed to receiving a cash salary, these recipients were permitted to retain revenue from villages on this land, as well as to exercise some level of judicial authority. Brahmins were so important to kings because they aided him in upholding the king's dharma. The king's duty was to protect the people, uphold the *varna* social order, sacrifice to the traditional Vedic deities, and show devotion to Shiva or Vishnu. As the religious leaders and intellectuals in the community, and the most prestigious *varna*, Brahmins could craft genealogies proving a king's illustrious origins in the heroic lineages of the epic stories of ancient times, perform the sacrifices, and maintain temples. So rulers often generously gifted land to them or to the magnificent temple complexes rulers built.

Medieval India, then, consisted of a multitude of kingdoms, each of which governed a part of their realms through feudal arrangements, by granting feudatories and issuing land grants to nobility or prestigious religious and political leaders, in exchange for allegiance and assisting the ruler in demonstrating his being worthy of his sacred role. In most instances, given that society was patriarchal, rulers were male, but in many cases queens inherited the throne. Rudramadevi, for instance, was chosen by her father to

accede to the throne of a kingdom in central India, likely because he had no sons or living brothers. Inscriptions refer to her as a king; indeed, she is said to have donned male attire while leading soldiers into battle. She is also portrayed seated on a lion, with a dagger and shield in hand. Thus, she was conformed to the expected role of a warrior, male king. Clearly, preserving the dynastic line was more important than biological sex.



Map **17.3.11.1**: The Chola Kingdom during the reign of Rajaraja I (r. 985-1012) | The Brihadeshwara Temple was located in Tanjavur, the capital. (CC BY-SA 3.0 ; User "Tevaprapas" via Wikimedia Commons)

17.3.11.2: The Chola Dynasty

The Chola Kingdom illustrates well the grandeur of powerful regional states during the early medieval period. South India first came to prominence with the rise of the Satavahana Kingdom in the Deccan Plateau (c. the second century BCE). But even at that time, in the fertile hinterlands and along the seaboard of the southern tip of the subcontinent, Tamil states were forming. Tamil refers to the regional language spoken and written by Indian peoples of the far south, as well as to their local customs and culture. Powerful Tamil lineages divided up Tamil land among chiefdoms, and, over time, some evolved into small but impressive kingdoms. These Tamil states also adopted elements of the Aryan culture of the north, including the use of Sanskrit, the *varna* social system, Vedic Brahmanism, and the Hindu cults of Shiva and Vishnu.

The **Cholas**, for instance, date back to Satavahana times, but they don't become significant for India's political history until the ninth century CE, when they show up as a feudatory of a neighboring Tamil kingdom. Beginning with King Aditya I (r. 871 – 907), the Cholas began a process of expansion that would eventually make it the most powerful kingdom of the south up until the thirteenth century (see Map **17.3.11.1**). Two of the most powerful Chola rulers were **Rajaraja I** (r. 985 – 1012) and his son Rajendra I (1012 – 1044). During their reigns, most of south India was conquered, including Sri Lanka, and a royal administration was built. Chola kings directly administered a core area of provinces and districts with royal officials, but also granted feudatories to allegiant chieftains and land grants to Brahmins. At the local level, these authorities worked with village assemblies and town associations, both of which were remarkable for the level of freedom they had to manage local affairs.



Figure **17.3.11.1**: Brihadeshwara Temple | The temple was located in the Chola capital and dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Nirinsanity" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Chola kings proved their greatness through not only the success of their imperial ambitions but also the temples they built. These temples, some of the most impressive structures in India, testify to the kings' piety. Eulogies to Chola kings describe them not only as great warriors and conquerors but also as protectors of the dharma, destroyers of evil, and generous givers of gifts. Because they were built in honor of the great Hindu deities, temples put those latter qualities on display. In 1010 CE, Rajaraja I completed the Brihadeshwara Temple in Tanjavur, the Chola capital and ceremonial center (see Figure **17.3.11.1**). Atop the main sanctuary stands a sixty-two meter tall tower carved out of a block of granite weighing eighty-one tons. Numerous representations portray the supreme lord Shiva in his various manifestations, including one located in the inner sanctuary. On the profusely ornamented tower, Shiva appears repeatedly in his form as destroyer of the cities of demons. Clearly, Rajaraja I wished to raise the cult of Shiva to a pre-eminent position in his kingdom, and built this temple to project Chola power.

Like other great regional powers with their unique histories and architectural traditions during the early medieval period, the Chola kingdom peaked for about two centuries and then declined. In the thirteenth century, neighboring kingdoms nibbled away at its power and it came to an end.

17.3.11.3: The Rise of Islamic States in North India

One of the most important developments during India's early medieval age is the arrival of Muslim Arab and Turkic traders and conquerors and the eventual establishment of Islamic states and communities in India. This story begins with the life of Muhammad (570 – 632 CE), the Prophet of Islam, whose revelations were recorded in the Quran (see Chapter 8). During his lifetime and after, an Arab community and state governed by the principles of Islam were founded in Arabia. Over the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, this Arab Islamic state grew into an empire that included much of West Asia and North Africa. This size meant that many different ethnic groups—Egyptians, Persians, and Turks, for instance—fell under its governing umbrella.

The ruler of this empire was the caliph, a man designated political successor to Muhammad, as the leader of the Islamic community. The caliph's government is called the caliphate. The first caliphs were friends and relatives of Muhammad, but eventually long-lasting dynasties formed that made the position hereditary. The first was the **Umayyad Dynasty** (661 – 750 CE) and the second the **Abbasid Dynasty** (750 – 1258 CE). It was during these caliphates that Islam and Islamic rule made their way into India.

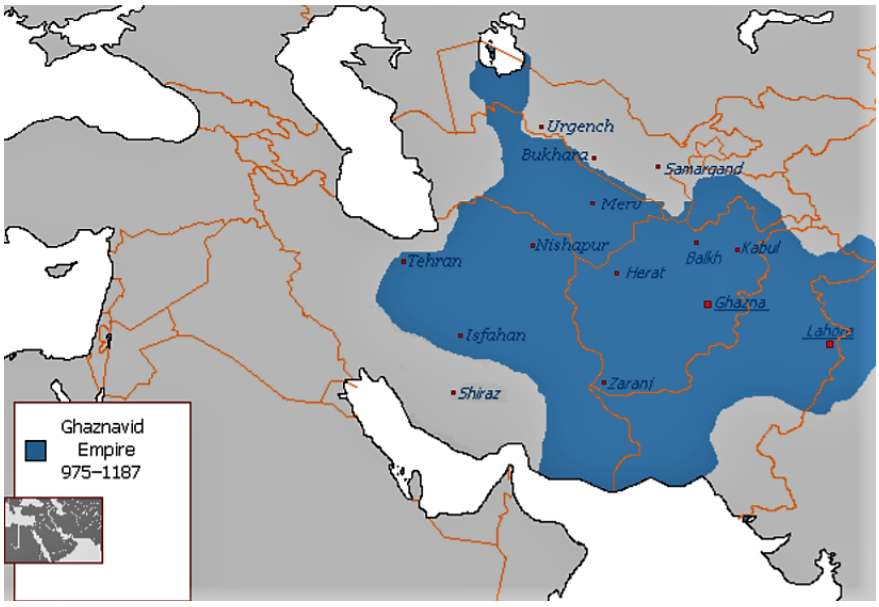


Map **17.3.11.2**: Islamic Expansion 630-750 (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

During the Umayyad Caliphate, systematic reconnaissance of the northwest coast of India was undertaken because conquests brought the empire just to the west of the Indian subcontinent. When pirates plundered an Arab vessel at the mouth of the Indus River, the caliph authorized punitive measures, and Umayyad rulers sent an invasion force. In 711, the Sindh (the lower Indus) was seized from a Hindu ruler and incorporated into the Islamic Empire. An Islamic community then began to set roots in this part of India.

The Umayyad Caliphate ruled from 661 – 750 CE. Note the inclusion of part of northwest India, near the Indus River. The next major event didn't transpire until the tenth century, at a time when Turkic peoples had become important to the history of Islamic states in India. By this time, the Abbasid Dynasty had replaced the Umayyad as the caliphs of the Islamic Empire. One method Abbasid rulers used to govern their large realm was to employ enslaved Turks as soldiers and administrators. Today, the word Turkic might normally be associated with the country of Turkey, but in fact, Turkic peoples and their language family—Turkish—originated in Central Asia. That is where the expanding Islamic empire first encountered and began incorporating Turks into their governing.

The significance of these Turkic slave soldiers for India is that the Abbasids employed them as governors of the eastern end of their empire. This end included parts of Afghanistan, the neighbor to northwest India. In the tenth century, however, the caliphate was falling apart, and Turkic military governors took advantage of this dissolution by establishing an independent state in Afghanistan. The family that did so was the Ghaznavids. Ruling from a fortress in Ghazna, the Ghaznavids forged an empire that included much of Iran and northwest India (see Map **17.3.11.3**).



Map **17.3.11.3**: The Ghaznavid Empire at its height | The capital was located in Afghanistan, at Ghazna. (Public Domain; Arab League via Wikimedia Commons)

The Ghaznavid ruler who first made forays into India was **Mahmud of Ghazna** (971 – 1030). In some historical writing, Mahmud has been portrayed as a brutal plunderer who descended on India seventeen times with hordes of Turkic cavalry, shocking wealthy cities of the north with the sword of Islam by destroying their Hindu temples and returning to his capital with their stolen wealth.

But the reality may have been otherwise. Recent work suggests that Mahmud was neither interested in spreading Islam nor caused massive destruction. Rather, northwestern India had always been closely linked to Central Asia, as well as being the location of both repeated invasions and kingdoms that crossed over into the mountains. Furthermore, by the tenth century, Muslim communities had already become a part of the Indian scene, along the west coast and in this region. Therefore, Mahmud's incursions were hardly something new. Nor were his motives. In medieval India, kings often waged war not only for revenue but also because such was their custom. Mahmud was likely no different. His empire was experiencing instability; he therefore sought to prove his mettle as a warrior ruler and to secure his legacy by using Indian wealth to build palaces and mosques in Ghazna.

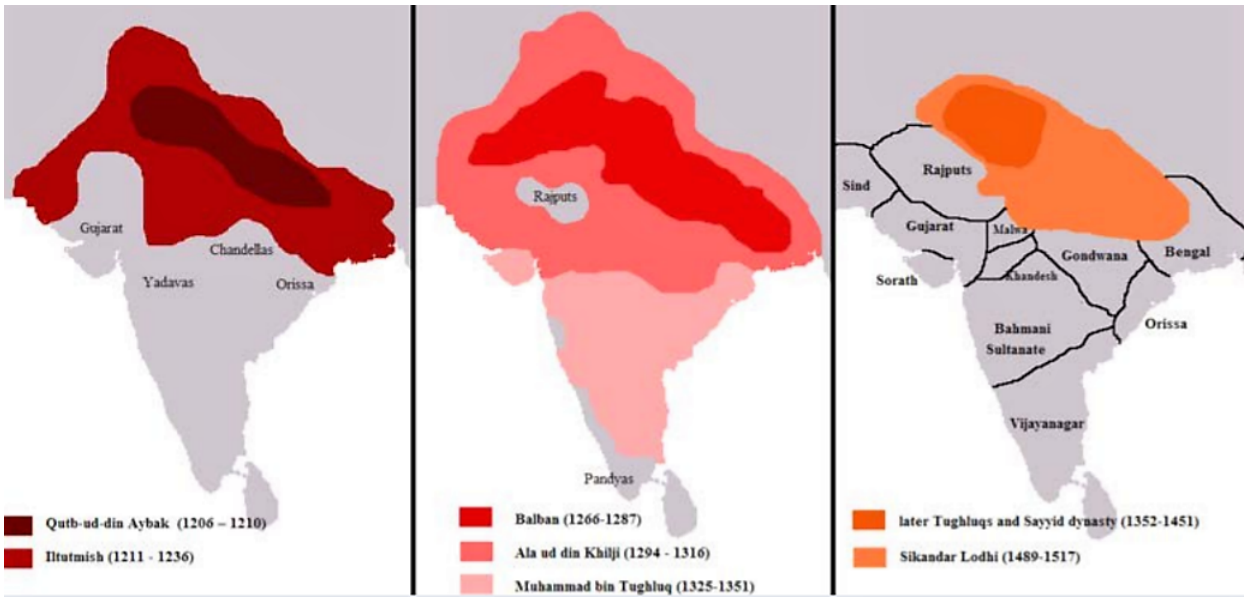
Ghaznavid control over India didn't extend much beyond the Punjab, lasting less than two centuries. In 1186, Muhammad of Ghur —chieftain of a minor hill state in Afghanistan that was subordinate to the Ghaznavids—overthrew his overlords in Ghazna and proceeded to forge his own empire. Desiring to extend it across northern India, he found that his greatest foes were the Rajputs. The Rajputs were clans located in northern and central India that claimed descent from renowned Kshatriya (warrior) lineages of ancient times. While Muhammad of Ghuri was planning his military expeditions, the Rajputs were governing several regional Hindu kingdoms from large fortresses they had built. In 1192, Muhammad's forces defeated a confederation of Rajput rulers at the Battle of Tarain. His slave general and commander-in-chief, Qutb-ud-din Aybak, then achieved a string of victories across northern India, making it a part of the Ghurid Empire.

Muhammad of Ghur returned to his Afghan homeland, leaving northern India to Aybak, who then proceeded to set up his headquarters in Delhi, one of the most important cities in South Asia, and also the capital of today's nation of India. When Muhammad died in 1206, Aybak took control of these Indian possessions and established a state of his own called the **Delhi Sultanate** (see map **17.3.11.4**). A sultanate is the government of a sultan, and a sultan is an Islamic ruler who governs a country largely independently of the caliphs, but without claiming their title. The Delhi sultans, then, were the sovereign rulers of the first major Muslim state in India, one that would last for three hundred years.

Looking ahead to our own time, the nation of India today is both culturally and religiously diverse. Approximately 80% of the population practices Hinduism while 15% practices Islam, making these the two largest religious traditions in India today. For this reason, relations between peoples adhering to these two different faiths have been an important issue in the history of South Asia. As we have seen, the history of Islam and Islamic communities in the subcontinent begins during the early medieval period.

Therefore, historians pay close attention to how Delhi sultans governed an overwhelmingly Hindu population, as well as how Islamic communities fit into it.

Ruling as they were over an ancient and vast agrarian civilization, the Turkic sultans worked out an accommodation with India, adapting to the pattern of Indian feudalism. Outside the highest levels of government, Hindu society and its traditional leaders were largely left in place, so long as tax revenue was submitted. With a long history of conquest behind them, Islamic rulers had learned the benefits of adopting a pragmatic approach to non-Muslims, and these sultans were no exception. They had little interest in forcibly converting people to the faith, and rather adopted a principle from the Quran whereby non-Muslim peoples with a scriptural tradition of their own can live amidst the Islamic community and state so long as they pay a higher tax. At the highest levels, however, sultans placed Turkic military nobility and educated Persians in charge, often compensating them with land grants. In fact, because Persians became so important to Sultanate administration, Persian was adopted as the language of government.



Map **17.3.11.4**: Map of the Delhi Sultanate | Map of the Delhi Sultanate, showing territorial changes over the course of three centuries and a series of ruling dynasties and their most important rulers. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Javierfv1212” via Wikimedia Commons)

This Muslim ruling elite attempted to retain their Turkic and Persian traditions, but also slowly adopted Indian customs in what was generally a tolerant atmosphere. At the lower levels of society, Muslim traders and artisans became an important presence in Indian towns and cities, as did Indian converts who saw an advantage to converting to this faith. Thus, Hindu and Muslim communities increasingly interacted with each other during the early medieval age, adopting elements of each other’s way of life. For that reason, historians speak of a fusion of Islamic and Indian culture.

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17.3.12: Conclusion

We have now passed through the long course of India's ancient and early medieval history. We began with the onset of India's Neolithic period in the seventh millennium BCE and saw how India's first civilization—the Harappan Civilization (2600 – 1700 BCE)—emerged from it in the northwestern region of the subcontinent during the third millennium BCE.

We then examined the long course of the Vedic Age (1700 – 600 BCE). As Harappan Civilization declined, Indo-Aryans migrated from Central Asia into northern India, bringing with them their Vedic religion, Sanskrit language, and pastoral and farming way of life. As they settled down on the Indo-Gangetic Plains and interacted with indigenous peoples, new political, social, and religious institutions formed. Over the course of several centuries, Aryan clan and tribal organization developed into kingdoms and oligarchies. Also, a simpler society composed of priests, warriors, and commoners evolved into a more complex society organized by *varnas*, the system of four hereditary social classes. Finally, the Vedic religion of the Brahmin priests evolved into Brahmanism, the earliest stage in the development of Hinduism.

Next, we surveyed a transitional period in India's history that began in the sixth century and lasted until 321 BCE. Sixteen major kingdoms and oligarchies with roots in the late Vedic Age fought for control over territory in northern India. The kingdom of Magadha dominated. Accompanying this time of warring states, India entered a second stage of urbanization, as towns and cities became a prominent feature of the north. Alongside the *varnas*, the caste system began to form, organizing Indian society into a much larger number of social groups based on occupation, residence, language, and religious beliefs. Lastly, new religious ideas were put forward by the Buddha (c. 563 – 480 BCE) to challenge the dominance of Brahmanism, and Buddhist monastic communities began to form.

This transitional period ended when Chandragupta Maurya overthrew the last Magadhan dynasty in 321 BCE and established the Mauryan Empire (321 – 184 BCE). He and his successors built the first Indian state that included most of the subcontinent. Chandragupta's grandson, King Ashoka (r. 268 – 232), is famed for having tried to rule this large realm according to Buddhist principles.

We then saw how, for five centuries after the fall of the Mauryan Empire (c. 200 BCE – 300 CE), no one major power ruled India. The entire subcontinent saw instead a fairly rapid turnover of regional monarchies. Some developed along the Ganges River, while others, such as the Kushan Kingdom, were of Central Asian origins. Also, states such as the Satavahana Kingdom formed in southern India. Yet, in spite of the political instability, India was economically dynamic, as trade within and without the subcontinent flourished, and India was increasingly linked to other parts of the world in such networks of exchange as the Silk Road and Indian Ocean maritime trade. Lastly, new trends appeared in Buddhism and Hinduism, most notably a popular, devotional form of worship.

Although India remained a mosaic of states during the period 300 – 600 BCE, historians recognize this time as distinct because the Gupta Empire (320 – 550 CE) included much of northern India and facets of Gupta period society and culture suggest that Indian civilization had matured and entered a classical age. One facet was individual achievements in literature, the arts, and sciences. But equally as important, the lives of all members of society were now being shaped and given meaning by a political pattern, social institutions, religious traditions, and a culture with a deep history. That political pattern included, for example, notions of kingship and the king's dharma, as well as political hierarchy. Social institutions included the patriarchal family, *varna* and caste, and commercial associations in cities and towns. As for religious traditions, we have focused on the development of Hinduism and Buddhism and how they shaped the religious landscape with their long literary and scriptural traditions, notions of dharma, and monastic and temple life.

We ended this chapter by introducing early medieval India (c. 600 – 1300 BCE). The political scene remained one of powerful regional states, each with their unique local histories and traditions. The methods by which kings established relations with neighboring rulers and within their own lands has been described as Indian feudalism. Some kings, like the Cholas, buttressed their power by claiming to rule according to Hindu notions of dharma, by, for instance, building large Hindu temples and patronizing the Brahmins. Finally, during these centuries, Islamic rule, communities, and religion entered the South Asian landscape, changing the course of India's history.

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17.3.14: Links to Primary Sources

Websites with Collections of Documents legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/in...indiasbook.asp http://www.sacred-texts.com/

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Bhagavad Gita http:www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#gita

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Samudragupta, stone pillar inscription eulogizing www.sdstate.edu/projectsoutha...Posthumous.pdf

Upanishads http:www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#upan http://vivekananda.net/PDFBooks/The_Upanishads.pdf

Vedas http:www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#vedas

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.4: China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty

East Asia can be defined in two different ways. Geographically speaking, it can be defined as the eastern region of the Asian continent and the countries located there, principally China, North and South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. But historians also define East Asia as a broader cultural realm, and include countries that both shared close historical relations with China and were impacted by China's political and legal institutions, and Confucian and Buddhist traditions. When defined in this way, Vietnam is also included. This chapter, however, as an introduction to the early history of East Asia, will focus on China, Korea, and Japan.

17.4.1: Chronology of China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty

17.4.2: Introduction to China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty

17.4.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.4.4: Key Terms

17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom

17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)

17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China

17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE

17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia

17.4.11: The Song Dynasty

17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty

17.4.13: Conclusion

17.4.14: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources

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17.4.1: Chronology of China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty

17.4.1.1: China

8000 – 2000 BCE Neolithic Cultures in China

5000 – 3000 BCE Yangshao Culture

3000 – 1900 BCE Longshan Culture

c. 1900 – 1600 BCE Xia Dynasty

c. 1600 – 1046 BCE Shang Dynasty

1045 – 256 BCE Zhou Dynasty

1045 – 771 BCE Western Zhou

770 – 256 BCE Eastern Zhou

551 – 479 BCE Confucius

475 – 221 BCE Warring States Period

221 – 210 BCE Qin Dynasty

221 – 210 BCE First Emperor of Qin

202 BCE – 220 CE Han Dynasty

141 – 87 BCE Emperor Wu

220 – 589 CE Period of Division

220 – 280 CE Three Kingdoms Period

155 – 220 CE Cao Cao

265 – 317 CE Western Jin

317 – 589 CE Northern and Southern Dynasties

581 – 618 CE Sui Dynasty

618 – 907 CE Tang Dynasty

960 – 1279 CE Song Dynasty

1271 – 1368 CE Yuan Dynasty

1215 – 1294 CE Kublai Khan

1368 – 1644 CE Ming Dynasty

17.4.1.2: Korea

c. 400 BCE – 313 CE Early Historical Period

313 – 668 CE Three Kingdoms

c. 37 BCE – 668 CE Goguryeo Dynasty

668 – 892 CE Silla Dynasty

17.4.1.3: Japan

11,000 – 500 BCE Jōmon Period

500 BCE – 250 CE Yayoi Period

250 – 600 CE Mounded Tomb Period

600 – 800 CE Asuka-Nara Period

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17.4.2: Introduction to China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty

In 1974, farmers digging a well in a field located in northwest China uncovered fragments of a clay figurine. Little did they know, they had chanced upon what has turned out to be one of the most fascinating archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. Subsequent excavation revealed that beneath the fragment lay a massive underground pit filled with over seven thousand terracotta figurines modeling archers, infantrymen, and charioteers. Another pit contained terracotta cavalry and infantry units that likely composed a military guard, while a third one contained high ranking officers and war chariots in what was perhaps a command post. These three pits are part of a much larger complex of underground vaults spread across twenty-two square miles. Most importantly, a large, forested burial mound towers over the neighboring fields containing these underground armies. This is where the First Emperor of Qin [cheen] was buried after he died in 210 BCE. Although it hasn't yet been excavated, experts believe the tomb is a microcosm of the emperor's palace, capital city, and empire. The pits, then, contained the army protecting his realm in the afterlife. With this discovery, our understanding of how China was unified under one empire after a long period of warfare was advanced immeasurably.



Figure 17.4.2.1: Terracotta Soldiers | Excavated underground pit of the First Emperor of Qin, showing assembled infantry and horses pulling chariots. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Aneta Ribarska via Wikimedia Commons)

East Asia can be defined in two different ways. Geographically speaking, it can be defined as the eastern region of the Asian continent and the countries located there, principally China, North and South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. But historians also define East Asia as a broader cultural realm, and include countries that both shared close historical relations with China and were impacted by China's political and legal institutions, and Confucian and Buddhist traditions. When defined in this way, Vietnam is also included. This chapter, however, as an introduction to the early history of East Asia, will focus on China, Korea, and Japan.

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17.4.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. During China's Neolithic Age, how did Longshan culture differ from Yangshao culture?

2. What kinds of evidence do we have to reconstruct the first dynasties in Chinese history–the Xia and Shang Dynasties? What can we learn from this evidence?

3. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, how did Zhou kings justify overthrowing the Shang Dynasty, and how did they govern newly-conquered lands?

4. During the Warring States Period, how did the nature of warfare change, and how did the demands of that changing warfare reshape Zhou feudal states?

5. Explain the major ideas of Confucius.

6. Explain the major ideas and practices of Daoism.

7. Why was the Qin Dynasty so important to the history of China? What did the First Emperor of Qin accomplish?

8. Describe prominent features of Han Dynasty society and governing.

9. How did Buddhism become a major religious tradition in China?

10. How was state development in Korea and Japan differently impacted by China?

11. What were the foundations of Tang Dynasty power in East Asia?

12. During the Song Dynasty, China was one of the most developed countries in the world. What features of that dynasty provide evidence supporting that judgment?

13. Describe the status of women during the Song Dynasty.

14. Explain the origins of the Yuan Dynasty and assess its impact on China.

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17.4.4: Key Terms

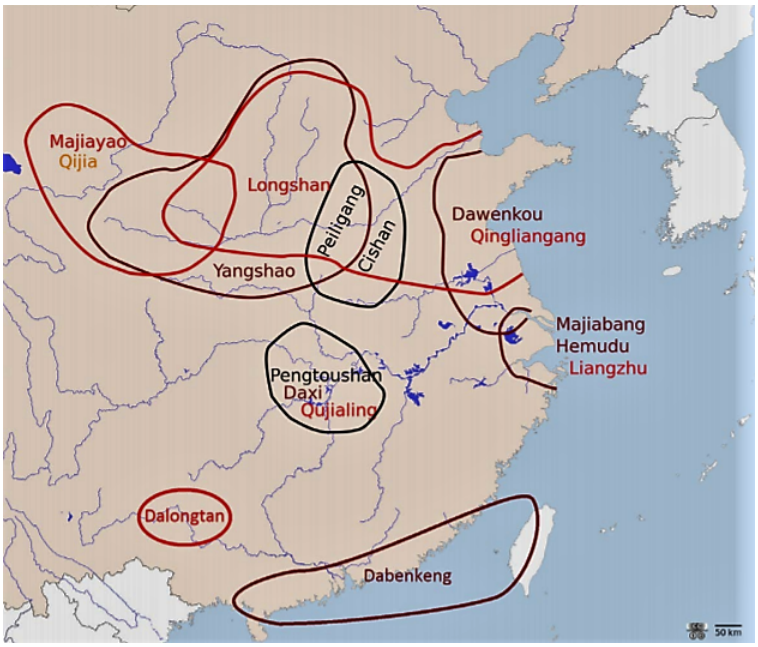
- Anyang
- Asuka-Nara Period
- Cao Cao
- China proper
- Civil service examinations
- Commercialization
- Confucius and Confucianism
- Daoism
- East Asia
- Emperor Wu (Han Dynasty)
- Empress Suiko
- Equal fields system
- Footbinding
- Goguryeo Kingdom
- Imperial Confucianism
- Kublai Khan
- King Wu (Zhou Dynasty)
- Korean Peninsula
- Legalism
- Liu Bang
- Longshan culture
- Mandate of Heaven
- Mounded Tomb Period
- Neo-Confucianism
- North China Plain
- Northern and Southern Dynasties
- Oracle Bones
- Prince Shōtoku
- Qin Dynasty
- Scholar-officials
- Secondary state formation
- Shang Dynasty
- Shang Yang
- Shinto
- Silk Roads
- Silla Dynasty
- Tang Law Code
- Three Kingdoms period
- Xia Dynasty
- Yangshao culture
- Yangzi River
- Yayoi Period
- Yellow River
- Yellow Turbans
- Yuan Dynasty
- Zhao Kuangyin (Song Emperor Taizu)
- Zhou Dynasty and Western Zhou Dynasty
- Zhu Xi

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17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom

Chapters Two and Three covered the development of the first major civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India. In each case, rivers were particularly important to that process because they offered a stable supply of water for agriculture. Similarly, in China, the first major states emerged along China's second longest river–the **Yellow River**. These states are the **Xia** [shee-ah] **Dynasty** (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE), **Shang** [shawng] **Dynasty** (1600 – 1046 BCE), and **Zhou** [joe] **Dynasty** (1045 – 256 BCE). Each of these kingdoms was ruled by a line of hereditary monarchs hailing from one lineage, which is why they are also referred to as dynasties.



Map **17.4.5.1**: Neolithic cultures in China c. 4000 BCE | Note the location of Yangshao culture along the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River, where nearly a thousand settlements have been identified by archaeologists. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Lamassu Design via Wikimedia Commons)

Because written sources don't become available until the Shang Dynasty, historians have relied heavily on the archaeological record to reconstruct the process by which these states arose. Looking back at the end of the Paleolithic era (c. 10,000 BCE), East Asia was sparsely populated by bands of foragers living in temporary settlements. During the eighth millennium BCE, in China, some of these hunter-gatherers turned to domesticated cereals for a stable food supply and settled into villages so they could cultivate them. Thus, the Neolithic Age (8000 – 2000 BCE) commenced.



Figure **17.4.5.1**: Neolithic cultures in China c. 4000 BCE | Note the location of Yangshao culture along the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River, where nearly a thousand settlements have been identified by archaeologists. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Lamassu Design via Wikimedia Commons)

Over the course of those six millennia leading up to the Xia Dynasty, Neolithic communities became more diverse and complex. For instance, for the period 5000 – 3000 BCE, archaeologists have identified at least eight major regional Neolithic cultures located

along rivers and coasts (see Map **17.4.5.1**). They did so by examining pottery styles and village settlement patterns. One example is **Yangshao culture**, which was concentrated along the middle reaches of the Yellow River. Over one thousand sites left behind by millet-farming village communities have been discovered. Jiangzhai (c. 4000 BCE), for instance, was a moated village settlement that occupied roughly thirteen acres (see Figure **17.4.5.1**). It was composed of related lineages and tribal in organization.

During the third millennium BCE, Yangshao culture was gradually supplanted by Longshan culture (c. 3000 – 1900 BCE), which emerged further to the east, along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. In 1928, when archaeologists excavated a site near the town after which Longshan was named, they found evidence for a culture that had laid the foundations for the kingdoms that emerged in the second millennium BCE, including the ruins of numerous walled towns with cemeteries outside (see Map **17.4.5.2**). Their rammed-earth walls protected urban areas with public buildings, roads, and drainage systems. The cemetery's arrangement suggests that people living in the towns were buried alongside clan members, but also that some members were wealthier and more powerful: while most graves had nothing but a skeleton, others contained numerous artifacts, such as pottery and jade.



Map **17.4.5.2**: Location of Yangshao culture (5000-3000 BCE) and Longshan culture (3000-1900 BCE) | Note that they overlapped, but also that Longshan culture came later and eventually supplanted Yangshao culture. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Lamassu Design via Wikimedia Commons)

Based on this evidence, archaeologists have concluded that, during the third millennium BCE, population grew and some of it shifted from villages to walled towns. These walled towns developed into political and economic centers exercising control over and serving as protection for surrounding communities. Individuals with more elaborate graves were likely political and religious leaders, and served as chieftains. Hence, numerous competing chiefdoms emerged, providing the foundation for more powerful kingdoms to follow.

Ancient Chinese histories identify the first major kingdom as the **Xia Dynasty** (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE). However, these were written many centuries after the kingdom about which they speak and, lacking written evidence from the dynasty itself, specialists have been unable to definitively establish its location. Nevertheless, most agree that the Xia capital was located along the Yellow River at Erlitou [are-lee-toe] (see Map **17.4.5.2**). At its peak of activity from 1900 – 1600 BCE, this town looks like something more complex than a chiefdom. Erlitou included a central, walled palace complex (see Figure **17.4.5.2**), workshops for the production of bronze and pottery, and elite burials containing bronze weapons and jade, suggesting a socially stratified, Bronze Age civilization and kingdom. That is why many historians identify it as the capital of the Xia Dynasty.



Figure 17.4.5.2: Bronze ritual vessel for heating and drinking wine found at Erlitou (CC BY-SA 2.5; User “Editor at Large” via Wikimedia Commons)

With the **Shang Dynasty** (1600 – 1046 BCE), we formally step into China’s historical period. In 1899, in an apothecary, a Chinese scholar came across mysterious bones that were being ground up for use as medicine. He immediately recognized that the Chinese characters inscribed on them were very ancient. Subsequently, the origin of these bones was traced to fields in **Anyang** [anneyawng], China where, beginning in 1928, excavations were carried out. Similar to the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, a lost civilization was revealed on the North China Plain, the one difference being that traditional histories of a later time had documented this one (see Map 17.4.5.3).



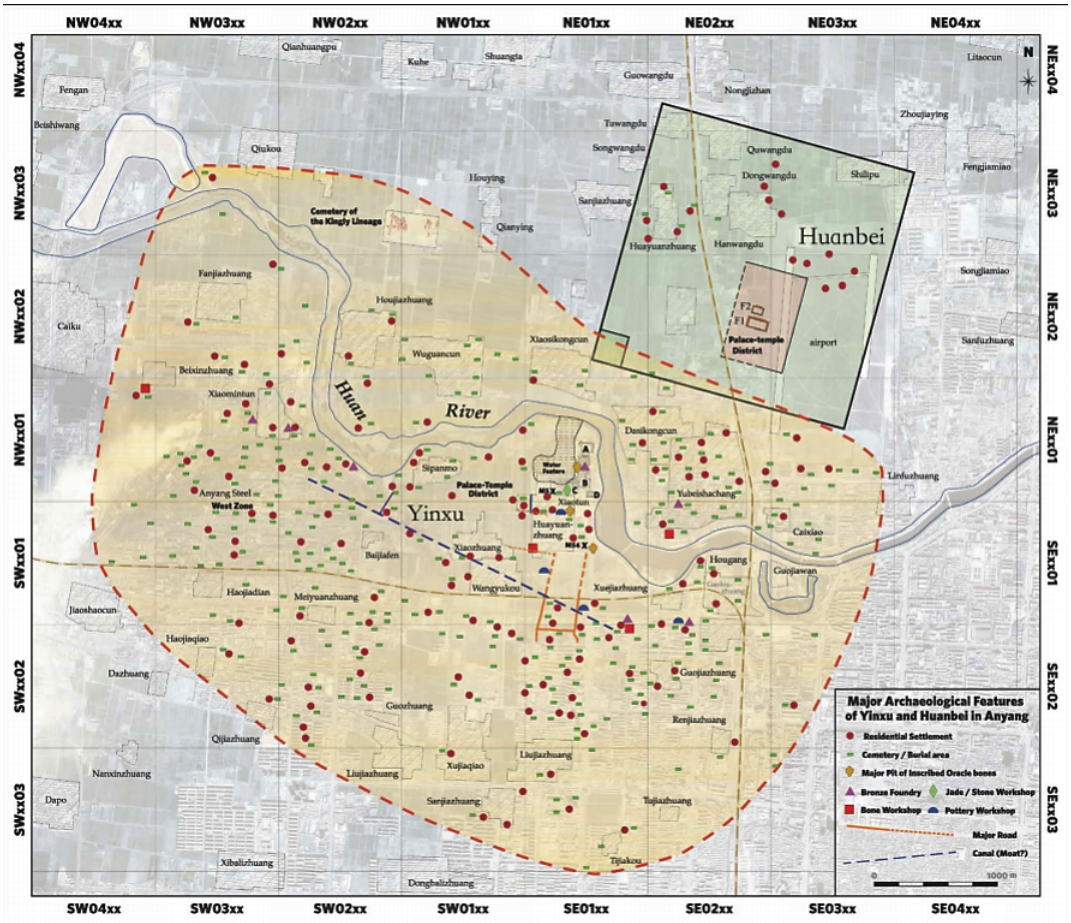
Map 17.4.5.3: Shang Dynasty | This map of the Shang Dynasty shows its capital (Anyang) and boundaries. The Shang centered in the North China Plain, along the lower reaches of the Yellow River. The other labels indicate names given by the Shang rulers to tribal peoples surrounding the kingdom (CC BY-SA 4.0; Corey Parson via Original Work)

The findings were substantial. A diverse array of settlements with a royal capital at the center covered nearly thirty square kilometers (see Map 17.4.5.4). Archaeologists have identified 53 pounded earth foundations as the floors of royal palace-temples and the ruins in their vicinity as residential areas for elites and commoners; sacrificial pits; and workshops for the production of bronze, pottery, and stone. Also, a royal cemetery with eight large tombs and dozens of smaller ones lies to the northwest. The larger graves were roughly half the size of a football field, each accessible through four ramps whose orientation to the cardinal directions gives them the appearance of crosses. Deep down at the bottom of each tomb’s central shaft, wooden chambers were built to house the dead bodies of Shang kings. Shockingly to us, dozens of human skeletons were placed above and below these, presumably as servants to accompany rulers in the afterlife (view reconstruction of a Xia Dynasty palace at Erlitou at the following link: http:// www.waa.ox.ac.uk/XDB/images/ world/tours/china-erlitou2.jpg).



Figure **17.4.5.3**: Royal Tomb of Lady Fu Hao | The royal tomb of Lady Fu Hao, principal consort to King Wu Ding. Shang royalty were buried with a rich assortment of personal belongings, bronzes, and servants. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Chris Gyford via Wikimedia Commons)

Anyang, we now know, served as the last capital of the Shang Dynasty, from 1200 to 1046 BCE. It was at the center of a loosely governed territorial state located on the North China Plain. Shang kings directly governed the capital and its vicinity, but likely controlled areas farther out by building confederations with locally powerful lineage chieftains, and regularly hunting, warring, and carrying out rituals with them. Some of those leaders were directly related to the Shang kings, and some were allies by marriage.



Map **17.4.5.4**: Shang Dynasty Site at Anyang | This map shows features of the Shang Dynasty site at Anyang, including the location of the palaces and temples of the last nine Shang kings. Yinxu is a Chinese term for Shang ruins. (© Anyang Work Station of the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Used with permission.; Zhichum Jing, Ph.D. via Original Work)

The bones are the most important source for understanding this kingdom. Most of the two hundred thousand fragments found so far are either turtle plastrons or scapula from cows. Interestingly, these were used for divination, which is why they are called **oracle bones** (see Figure **17.4.5.4**). When Shang kings or his diviners sought to know the future, they would proceed to a temple erected in honor of a Shang deity or the spirits of deceased ancestors in the royal line. Before a stone tablet, they would make a statement about what might happen (for example, “It will rain,” or “If we attack the Mafang [high god], Di will confer assistance on us”), and then apply heat to a hole bored into a bone until it cracked. The crack was viewed as the response from the god or spirit. The king would then determine whether or not it was auspicious, and a record would be inscribed on the bone, sometimes including the actual outcome (see Figure **17.4.5.5**). From these, we know that Shang elites believed that a high god Di, nature gods, and the spirits of deceased kings controlled the future. That is why Shang kings had massive bronzes cast and carried out sacrifices for them. The bronzes were filled with food and placed at the temples, literally to feed the spirits. Likewise, the sacrificial pits show that a substantial shedding of blood for these higher powers was a regular occurrence. Shang elites worshipped their ancestors and frequently divined to determine their will.

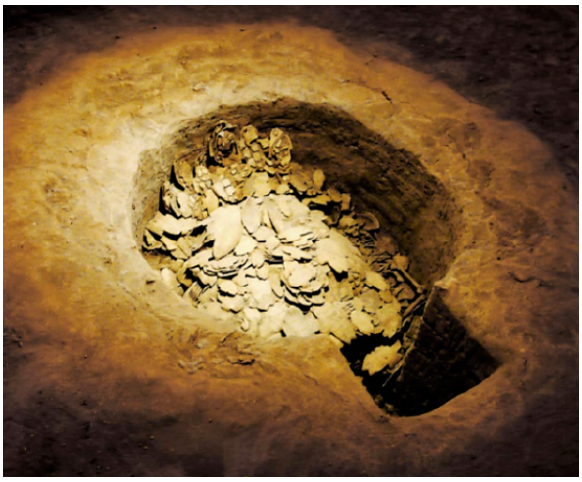


Figure **17.4.5.4**: Cache of oracle bones found at Anyang, China (CC BY-SA 3.0; Xuan Che via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure **17.4.5.5**: An individual scapula showing the cracks made and Chinese characters inscribed during the divination process (CC BY-SA 3.0; Herr Klugbeisser via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)

After the Xia and Shang, the next major dynasty in Chinese history is the **Zhou Dynasty** (1045 – 256 BCE). In 1046 BCE, a Zhou king overthrew the last Shang ruler and established control over much of north China. In the early centuries of Zhou rule, during the **Western Zhou** (1046 – 771 BCE), Zhou kings dispatched kinsmen to territories he granted to them (see Map **17.4.6.1**). These nobles were allowed to rule their own lands hereditarily, so long as they observed certain obligations to their king.

But over time, Zhou kings lost their ability to control these lords, and the lords became increasingly independent. In 771 BCE, in what became a telling sign of weakness, the Zhou king was murdered and his young successor was compelled to relocate farther east, to a capital closer to the heart of the North China Plain. This move marked the beginning of the Eastern Zhou (770 – 256 BCE). Over the long course of this half millennium, Zhou nobility engaged in escalating warfare with each other over matters small and large. As they did so, their lands evolved into powerful states (see Map **17.4.6.2**). Eventually, the noble lords of the most powerful states also declared themselves kings, and fought to gain control over all of China. During the third century BCE, the Zhou Kingdom was destroyed and one of these warring states, the **Qin** [Cheen] **Dynasty**, prevailed over the rest.

But these centuries were not only marked by the growth of states and accelerating warfare between them. Burgeoning turmoil also inspired much thinking about what was needful to restore order and create a good society, as well as what defined the good life. Two major philosophical traditions emerged to address these issues: **Confucianism** and **Daoism**.

17.4.6.1: The Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 – 771 BCE)

In the eleventh century BCE, the Zhou state was a minor power on the western periphery of the Shang realm, located along the Wei [way] River. In 1059, upon witnessing five planets align, the Zhou ruler declared himself king and proceeded to engage in military conquests that made his kingdom a regional power to be reckoned with. This was King Wen ("Cultured King"), a ruler revered as the founder of the Zhou dynasty. But it was his son **King Wu** ("Martial King") who brought down the Shang Dynasty. He assumed the throne upon his father's death and, in 1046, led three-hundred chariots and 45,000 foot soldiers equipped with bronze armor and pole-mounted dagger-axes to a location just outside the Shang capital, where he met with and decisively defeated the last Shang king and his army.

King Wu then returned to his capital in the Wei River Valley, where he passed away in 1043 BCE. His young son took the throne, but was placed under the regency of Wu's capable brother, the Duke of Zhou. Now, the Zhou royal court was faced with the task of governing newly conquered territory, including the former lands of the Shang Dynasty. The king and his regent did so by implementing three policies. First, they established a secondary capital farther east at Luoyang [low-yawng], closer to the North China Plain. Second, they issued proclamations explaining to conquered peoples why they should accept Zhou rule. According to the Duke of Zhou, Heaven had decreed that Shang kings must fall and Zhou rulers should replace them. The Shang dynasty had begun with wise and benevolent rulers, but later kings were cruel and incompetent, and failed to see to the well-being of their subjects. Thus, a dynasty once sanctioned by Heaven had lost this sanction; now, Heaven had called upon Zhou rulers to overthrow the Shang dynasty and initiate a new era of just rule. This political theory, which is known as the **Mandate of Heaven**, would also be used by founders of later dynasties to justify their actions, as well as by theorists to explain the rise and fall of dynasties.

The third policy the Zhou court adopted was to dispatch royal kinsmen to strategically critical locations for the purpose of establishing colonies. At their royal palaces, Zhou kings conducted ceremonies of investiture during which they sacrificed to Heaven and the spirits of deceased ancestors, held banquets, and then bestowed noble titles and grants of land upon members of the royal family and relatives by marriage. Large bronzes were cast to commemorate these occasions (see Figure **17.4.6.1**). These lords– dukes, marquis, earls, and barons–then took their families, contingents of soldiers, and emblems of nobility to the granted territory and set up palaces and ancestral temples in walled towns. From there, these illustrious lineages governed a predominantly rural population of farmers living in villages where life was not easy. Living in hovels and with little opportunity to leave their lord's manors, these farmers were required to work his lands and also to submit a portion of the harvest from their own small farms.



Figure **17.4.6.1**: Western Zhou Bronze Ritual Vessel | A Western Zhou bronze ritual vessel with an inscription commemorating events at the court of King Wu. The king had ordered the Duke of Zhou's son to assume new roles at the Zhou royal court, and the bronze was cast to celebrate his appointments (CC0 1.0; User "Daderot" via Wikimedia Commons)

Historians call this method of governing **Zhou kinship feudalism**. Feudalism generally describes a political and economic system characterized by fragmented authority, a set of obligations (usually of a military nature) between lords and vassals, and grants of land ("fiefs") by rulers in exchange for some type of service (see Chapters Three and Twelve). Indeed, Zhou kings granted land and noble titles to kinsmen in exchange for obedience, periodic visits to the king's palace, tribute, and military support. However, aside from the presence of royal overseers, a hereditary lord enjoyed relative sovereignty in his own domain. The glue that held the Zhou feudal order together was deference to the king and his Mandate and reverence for their shared history–including, most importantly, the deceased spirits of their related ancestors.

Over time, however, Zhou kinship feudalism failed to function as intended by the founding rulers. In brief, Zhou kings' ability to control the noble lords diminished over time, and their prestige suffered accordingly. There were two principal reasons for this. First, ties of kinship so crucial to the founding of Zhou lost their meaning over time. In later generations, lords simply became more interested in and identified with their own territories, and they had little sense of solidarity with what were at best distant cousins ruling neighboring feudal states. Hence, it is hardly surprising that histories inform us that the many lords ceased to pay visits to the king's court. Second, Zhou kings were unable to impose their will on feuding feudal lords and were even defeated by them in several military campaigns. In 771 BCE, for instance, King You [yo] was attacked by the allied forces of the lord of Shen and tribal peoples residing out west. The capital was sacked, and he was killed. Other states came to the rescue, relocating the king's son, Prince Ping, to the eastern capital at Luoyang. Zhou kings remained there for the next five hundred years, during the period called the Eastern Zhou.

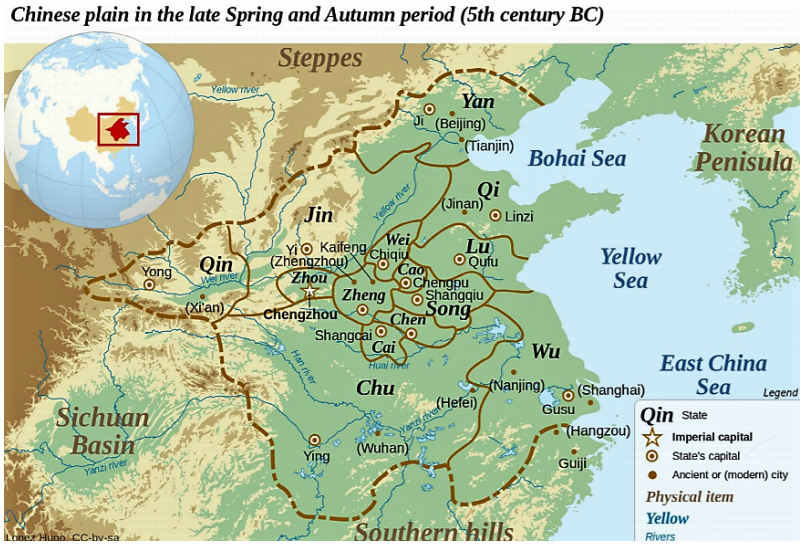


Map **17.4.6.1**: The Western Zhou Dynasty | The capital was located along the Wei River valley, at Haojing. The names of states granted by early Zhou kings to kinsmen and allies, along with their capitals, are indicated. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Philg88" via Wikimedia Commons)

17.4.6.2: The Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770 – 256 BCE) and the Warring States Period (c. 475 – 221 BCE)

When King Ping was relocated to Luoyang, he ruled from a much smaller royal domain surrounded by approximately 150 feudal states and their lords. His and his successors' power was, however, much reduced. No longer able to impose their will on unruly noble lineages, Zhou kings failed to maintain a semblance of peace and order throughout the realm. Instead, this warrior nobility engaged in an escalating contest for power and prestige. By 475 BCE, in the wake of 540 wars fought over the course of two centuries, only fifteen states remained (see Map **17.4.6.2**). But they fought even more fiercely. Over the next 250 years, during what is referred to as the **Warring States Period** (475 – 221 BCE), these states averaged one major battle per year until, at the very end, only one remained standing. That was the state of **Qin** [cheen]. The Warring States period ended in 221 BCE when the Qin ruler defeated the remaining states and unified the former Zhou realm, initiating a new period in China's history. The line of Zhou kings had, however, already been extinguished in 256 BCE, so that date marks the end of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty.

As the frequency and scale of warfare escalated, and states gradually gobbled each other up, the way feudal lords governed their states and conducted military campaigns changed. Prior to the Warring States Period, Zhou kings were still accorded a level of respect, at least as symbols of unity and nominal heads of the Zhou feudal order. At this point, the many lords had no intention of toppling the king; rather, seeing his military weakness, the most powerful ones stepped in to enforce order. The first was Duke Huan of Qi [who-an of chee]. He held this title ("duke") and fief (Qi) because his distant ancestor had served as a commander under King Wu during the Zhou founding. Now, many generations later, his state was a formidable power on the east coast. In 651 BCE, he convened an interstate meeting with other lords to discuss matters of order and security. Upon being elected as their leader, the Zhou king conferred the title of **hegemon**. In this capacity, Duke Huan had the authority to resolve disputes between nobles on behalf of the king.



Map 17.4.6.2: **Eastern Zhou States (fifth century)** | Map of the Eastern Zhou states as they looked during the fifth century BCE. The Zhou kingdom itself had relocated farther east, with its capital at Chengzhou. The map also highlights the state of Qin. This rising power to the west would eventually conquer all of China and establish an empire (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Yug" via Wikimedia Commons)

Over the next two centuries, this title changed hands several times, going to the lord of the most powerful state. These hegemons periodically convened interstate meetings to manage such matters as misbehaving states or foreign invasions. Attending lords cemented their agreements by swearing oaths and drinking the blood of sacrificed animals. Yet, although hegemons maintained a semblance of order, warfare remained constant because it was a way of life for the illustrious lineages of the Zhou realm. Noble lords loved to demonstrate their prowess and raise their prestige through success in hunting and battling. A noble looked for a pretext to engage in a vendetta with another lord, at which point a battle was arranged and then carried out according to the protocols of chivalry. After announcing the impending campaign at the ancestral temple, a lord and his kinsmen, accompanied by farmer foot soldiers, would proceed in their chariots to a prearranged location and engage in a skirmish. In victory, a noble redressed matters of honor and brought glory to his ancestors, something symbolized by the mound of dead enemies placed by his ancestral temple.

However, with the onset of the Warring States Period in the fifth century BCE, the level of violence was no longer contained by the hegemon system and codes of chivalry. Both the purpose and conduct of warfare changed. Lords of the seven most powerful states lost respect for the Zhou kings and even assumed the same title, thus claiming the right to unify all of China under their rule. As opposed to serving a lesson to and resolving some dispute with another lord, these selfdeclared kings waged war to destroy them and take their land.

Hence, battles became increasingly bloody and bitter, and victory went to those kings who could field the most effective killing machines. Chariot-riding kinsmen and a few thousand foot soldiers no longer met that requirement. During the Warring States, rulers introduced large armies composed of mass infantry and cavalry. Soldiers were equipped with armor, crossbows, halberds, dagger-axes, and swords manufactured from bronze, iron, leather, and wood in royal workshops located at capital cities. (View the image of a Warring States Period soldier at the following link: http://brandonqindynasty.weebly.com/...9/8580061.jpeg. One description of an elite soldier states that he wears heavy armor, shoulders a large crossbow and fifty arrows, straps a halberd to his back, buckles a helmet to his head, and places a sword to his side.) Kings also militarized their kingdoms' landscapes by building forts at strategically critical passes, walls to mark off boundaries, and watch towers to signal the enemy's approach. Finally, these rulers no longer relied solely on close kinsmen to wage war alongside them. Rather, they created a class of military commanders and specialists whose promotion was based on their ability to produce victories in the field. It is therefore not surprising that during this time some of China's greatest military treatises were written, most notably the ***Art of War*** by Master Sun [sue-in]. Master Sun was a military commander and strategist who served the lords of the state of Wu just prior to the onset of the Warring States period (c. fifth century BCE). The manual of military strategy and tactics attributed to him stresses the importance of formulating a strategy that insures victory prior to any campaigning. Stratagem is critical. "All warfare is deception," Master Sun states. "Hence,

when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near."

To mobilize large numbers of men for war and supply them with weapons and grain, kings devised ways to make their realms more productive and compliant with their will. Prior to the Warring States Period, it was the norm for nobility to hand out land in their states to kinsmen, just as it had been for the king during the Western Zhou. This practice meant that lesser but related aristocratic lineages lived in estates across each noble's territory, while also serving as ministers at his court. For a king, however, these men might become an obstacle or pose a threat because they held this land hereditarily. Therefore, they devised better ways to control land in their realms. Whenever new territory was added or a noble line was extinguished, kings created counties and appointed magistrates to manage the villages and towns in that area. The magistrate's job would then be to register the population, maintain law and order, collect tax revenue, and conscript people for labor projects and military campaigns. And rather than give those posts to kinsmen, kings appointed men from the lower ranks of the nobility or commoners based on their loyalty and merit. Stated more simply, Warring States Period rulers created administrative units and a civil service. Their embryonic bureaucracies included such features as a system of official posts, salaries paid in grain and gifts, administrative codes, and methods for measuring a servant's performance. Thus, by the end of this period, largely owing to the demands of warfare, the Zhou feudal order had been supplanted by a small number of powerful territorial states with centralized monarchies. Among them, the most successful was the state of **Qin**, which eventually conquered all of China and became an empire. We return to that topic after reviewing the ideas put forward by philosophers in the context of these centuries of turmoil.

17.4.6.3: Philosophy in a Time of Turmoil: Confucianism and Daoism

China's three major pre-modern philosophical and religious traditions are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. The first two had their origins in the later centuries of the Eastern Zhou, while Buddhism only began to arrive from South Asia in the first century C.E. Confucianism and Daoism were both responses to the crisis presented by the breakdown of the Zhou feudal order and escalating warfare in China.

17.4.6.3.1: Confucius and Confucianism

Confucius lived just prior to the Warring States Period (551-479 BCE). What little we know about his life comes primarily from the *Analects*, a record of conversations Confucius held with his students compiled after he died. In later centuries, in China, Confucius was revered as a sage and teacher, and even today outside of China some people might think of him as a stern pedant, perhaps calling to mind sayings beginning with "The Master said." However, in the context of his time, Confucius was anything but stiff and rather a dynamic individual who believed he was mandated by Heaven to return the world to a more socially and politically harmonious time. The *Analects* not only shows a serious and learned man, but also someone capable in archery and horsemanship, who loved music and ritual, and who untiringly travelled the feudal states in the hopes of serving in a lord's retinue (see Figure **17.4.6.2**). According to one passage, a lord once asked one of Confucius's students about his master, but the student fell silent. Later, Confucius asked him, "Why did you not say: As a man, when agitated in thought he forgets to eat, joyfully forgetting his cares, not realizing that old age is near at hand?"



Figure **17.4.6.2**: Portrait of Confucius from the Tang Dynasty (Public Domain; User “Louis le Grand” via Wikimedia Commons)

Confucius was born to a family of minor nobility and modest means in the feudal state of Lu. His father died about the time Confucius was born, and he was raised by his mother, who also passed away when Confucius was young. Like other young men of similar background, he had access to an education and could aspire to serve in some capacity in a feudal state, perhaps at the lord’s court, or as an official or soldier. Confucius chose to become learned and seek office. To his mind, he was living at a time when civilization was collapsing and society was decaying. He believed that, during the early Zhou, the nobility was honorable, observed moral codes, and upheld social standards. He believed that a golden age existed in the past and wished to transmit the ethical values of that time. However, in the course of doing so, he reinterpreted the past and imbued the virtues he stressed with rich, new meanings. Here are a few of the important statements Confucius made, and what they meant:

1. “The noble person is concerned with rightness, the small person is concerned with profit.” (4.16) Confucius redefined the meaning of nobility. For him, nobility was defined not by birth but rather by character and conduct. A truly noble person is one who puts what is right before personal gain and the desire for wealth and fame.
2. “Young men should be filial at home and respectful to their elders when away from home.” (1.6) Filial piety is central to Confucius’s thought. He taught how a person becomes moral because a good society only develops when composed of and led by virtuous people. He saw the practice of morality in the family as the root. Should a young man learn to be respectful and reverent towards parents and elders, he will become a humane person, and humane people are far more likely to contribute in a positive way to society.
3. “The noble man does not abandon humaneness for so much as the space of a meal.” (4.5) For Confucius, the highest virtue is humanity, and many of his conversations center upon defining what it is that makes a person humane. A person of humanity is, for instance, one who is capable of empathy and unselfish concern for the welfare of others. They know the golden rule: “what you would not want for yourself,” he taught, “do not do to others.” (15.23) Confucius emphasized that a society cannot function if people are incapable of taking other’s perspectives and doing their best for them. In addition, he insisted that such virtues as humanity are most fully demonstrated when individuals observe good etiquette. Decorum was important to Confucius.
4. “Heaven has given birth to the virtue that is in me.” 1 (7.22) Interpreters of Confucius have rightly noted that he is quite silent about the supernatural and what happens after death, rather emphasizing the life we have and serving others. Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that he wasn’t religious in any sense, because he frequently spoke of Heaven. He believed that Heaven ordains a certain course of life for each individual, including becoming a moral person. This Heaven, however, is less a deity than a higher moral order, a kind of beneficent presence.

5. “To govern is to rectify. If you lead the people by being rectified yourself, who will dare not be rectified?” (12.17)
   Confucius believed that good governing flows from good men. The first qualification for a ruler or one who serves is moral rectitude. If those who lead do so by virtue and conduct themselves according to rules of propriety, people will learn from them and develop a sense of honor and shame. Consequently, society will become more orderly.

The noble person, filial piety, humaneness, etiquette, Heaven, and government by men of virtue are just some of the ideas Confucius discussed as he traveled the feudal states seeking to advise their lords. However, he only managed to hold some minor offices in Lu and generally failed in his political aspirations. Instead, he gained an avid following of 70 students, whom he accepted regardless of their social status. After he died, they passed on his teachings, and a school of thought emerged from his teachings known as Confucianism. Those who belonged to it are **Confucians**–individuals distinguished by their commitment to the ideas articulated by Confucius, classical learning, and the value they place on character and conduct as the key to a good society and political order.

17.4.6.3.2: Philosophical and Institutional Daoism

During the turmoil of the Warring States period, however, other individuals developed a philosophy very different from Confucianism called Daoism. These Daoists largely rejected Confucian ideas about human moral development and social order as artificial constructs. Rather, they pointed to a natural condition that both individuals and society can recover, one that existed before desires trapped people in a world of strife. Their central concept is the Dao (“Way”). The Dao is mysterious: it is beyond sense perception and yet the source of life and the universe, the ultimate truth transcending the polarities that make up life and yet pervades them, empty and yet the mother of all things.

Paradoxically, although the Dao is indescribable and can’t be seen or heard, the goal of the Daoist is to accord with and follow it. But this goal won’t be accomplished through more seeking and more knowledge. Rather, the mind must be emptied out, calmed, and purified, until desires are absent and a primordial, natural condition is restored. At that point, when the individual is in accord with the ineffable Way, life becomes spontaneous, natural, and effortless.



Figure **17.4.6.3**: An image representing basic elements of Daoist cosmology | According to that cosmology, the yin and yang (at center, black and white) arise from one underlying primordial reality, and then differentiate into powers represented by eight trigrams (whose names are indicated in Chinese on the periphery) (CC BY-SA 2.5; User “Pakua_with_name” via Wikimedia Commons)

The two most important early books belonging to this tradition are named after their putative authors: the *Laozi* (“Old Master”) and *Zhuangzi* (“Master Zhuang”). Historians believe the “Old Master” was a fictional sage invented by Warring States Period philosophers who compiled the book attributed to him. Master Zhuang, however, lived during the fourth century BCE.

In later centuries, the Daoism of these early philosophers was taken in new directions. The definition of the Way was broadened to include the idea that individuals have a spiritual essence in need of harmonizing and liberation. By so doing, it was believed, one’s health would be preserved and life prolonged. Daoists even entertained the idea that one could become immortal. To achieve these goals, techniques were developed, including special dietary regimens, yoga, Chinese boxing, meditation, and alchemy.

Over the course of the first millennium CE, Daoism also became a popular and institutionalized religion. Daoist masters, claiming divine inspiration, composed esoteric texts for their followers. These texts explained how the natural world originated from a primordial ether (*qi*) and its division into two polar forces: the *yin* and *yang* (see Figure **17.4.6.3**). They presented a universe with multiple heavenly and hellish realms populated with divinities and demons. The principal purpose of these Daoists was to attend to a person's physical and psychological well-being. That involved not only teaching individual techniques for preserving the life spirit, but also the use of exorcism and faith healing to remove malevolent influences. Daoists also developed communal prayers and rituals that could cure illness, free souls from hell, win blessings from heaven, and eliminate sins from the community. Eventually, a Daoist church developed, with its own ordained priesthood, temples, and monasteries.

17.4.6.4: Endnotes

1 These selections from the Analects are translated in De Bary and Bloom, ed., Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1: From Earliest Times to the Present, 44-63.

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17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China

In 219 BCE, while touring his realm, the **First Emperor of Qin** [cheen] (259 – 210 BCE) erected a stone tablet atop a mountain with an inscription proclaiming:

> *They [the Qin ministers] recall and contemplate the times of chaos:*
>
> *When [regional lords] apportioned the land, established their states,*
>
> *And thus unfolded the pattern of struggle.*
>
> *Attacks and campaigns were daily waged;*
>
> *They shed their blood in the open countryside. . . .*
>
> *Now today, the August Emperor has unified All-under-Heaven into one family—*
>
> *Warfare will not arise again! Disaster and harm are exterminated and erased,*
>
> *The black-headed people live in peace and stability, benefits and blessings are lasting and enduring.*[2]

Indeed, just two years prior, in 221 BCE, the First Emperor had brought the Warring States Period to a close by defeating the last remaining state. Hence, he had realized the aspirations held by the many rulers he subjugated, that is, to unify the known world under one powerful monarch and, by so doing, to initiate an age of peace and prosperity, one rooted in obedience to a sagely ruler.



Map **17.4.7.1**: The Qin Empire in 210 BCE | The capital was located along the Wei River Valley at Xianyang. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Itsmine" via Wikimedia Commons)

The title "First Emperor of Qin," however, was assumed by this conqueror only in the wake of his final victory, and it made sense. Having crushed the many warring kingdoms, the First Emperor did indeed create something new and more significant: an immense territorial state centrally administered from his capital, by a monarch with unchallenged sovereignty (see Map 4.8). So how did his state–the Qin kingdom–prevail?

When the First Emperor inherited the Qin throne at the age of 13 in 246 BCE, he became King Zheng [jung], young ruler of the most powerful of the seven remaining Warring States. Looking back, he would understand that he had inherited a state whose origins dated back to the Western Zhou Period, when land to the west of the Zhou kings was granted as a fief to his chieftain forbears. The Qin star first rose when a Qin lord assisted King Ping in relocating to the eastern capital during the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou Period (c. 770 BCE). At that time, the old Zhou heartland was granted to him, and he was elevated to the status of a regional lord, the Duke of Qin.

The Dukes of Qin were important players throughout the centuries of warfare and alliances so characteristic of the Eastern Zhou, and especially after the reforms of Duke Xiao [she-ow] (r. 361 – 338). These reforms were based on the advice of his chancellor **Shang Yang** [shawng yawng], an individual famed for being one of the founders of another major intellectual tradition that developed during the Warring States Period: **Legalism**. The legalists were in tune with the efforts rulers were putting forth to strengthen their states. Their goal was to devise the best techniques for organizing a state's territory and people so as to maximize a ruler's power and control in times of both war and peace. Legalists believed that the best way to do so was to concentrate authority in one central administration governed by an absolute monarch.

To these ends, Shang Yang introduced many measures, laying the foundations for future Qin greatness. He believed that the basis for state power lay with an obedient and disciplined farming population, because that was the principal source of revenue and conscripts for the army. So he organized villages across the land into units of five families each, and made the members of each unit responsible for each other. Every member would be rewarded based on the amount of grain the unit produced or the number of severed heads returned from the battlefield. For meritorious service to the state, a unit could advance along a system of ranks, each of which bestowed certain privileges. But should any member commit a crime, everyone would be severely punished. To make this more effective, the Qin state developed a legal code with clear lists of penalties for specific crimes, made it publicly available, and applied it uniformly to people regardless of their social status. Also, the Qin was among the most effective in establishing a civil service and county system to administer the law. Qin subjects lived under a regime with a transparent set of expectations, and also a system of rewards and punishments. Such rationality in matters of efficiently organizing a state through the uniform application of laws and regularizing administration, as implemented by Shang Yang, were a mark of legalist thinkers' methods.

After Duke Xiao's and Shang Yang's time, Qin rulers assumed the title of king and engaged in numerous battles, destroying several neighboring states. Some of these were major engagements. According to one account, after the Qin kingdom defeated the state of Zhao, a Qin general ordered 400,000 captured soldiers buried alive. Also, the Qin put an end to the Zhou royal line after conquering their territory in 256 BCE. Hence, King Zheng was heir to a kingdom whose success in battle derived in part from legalist reforms. In line with that tradition, he too employed a legalist advisor.



Figure **17.4.7.1**: Replica of the palace of the First Emperor of Qin (CC BY 2.0; User "kanegen" via Wikimedia Commons)

As of 230 BCE, only six other Warring States remained (see Map **17.4.7.1**). Over the next decade, King Zheng led a series of massive campaigns each of which entailed both sides fielding over one hundred thousand soldiers. This was a bloody time, as one

state after another fell. By 221 BCE, the Chinese realm was unified under Qin rule.

Although the Qin Dynasty (221 – 207 BCE) was brief-lived, it had a lasting effect on China because of the stable administrative foundation it laid. The First Emperor of Qin and his advisors invented the title used by all subsequent rulers. They made newly conquered territory a part of their centralized bureaucracy. From his royal court and central administration, the emperor governed a land organized into a hierarchical system of commanderies (provinces that began as military outposts) and counties. His regime standardized currency and the system of writing, and issued regulations for uniform weights and measures.

The emperor was also a great builder. Over 6800 kilometers of road were laid to connect the capital at Xianyang to each province and the northern border. Walls built by former northern states to protect against non-Chinese nomads to their north were linked together in an earlier version of the Great Wall. All of these measures served to facilitate communication and commerce across the land and, therefore, political stability and cultural unification. As a symbol of his power, the First Emperor also constructed an imposing palace (see Figure **17.4.7.1**) and mausoleum (see Introduction). For all these reasons, historians mark Qin unification as the beginning of China's imperial era.

17.4.7.1: Endnotes

2 Adapted from a translation in Yuri Pines, "The Messianic Emperor: A New Look at Qin's Place in China's History," 264-265.

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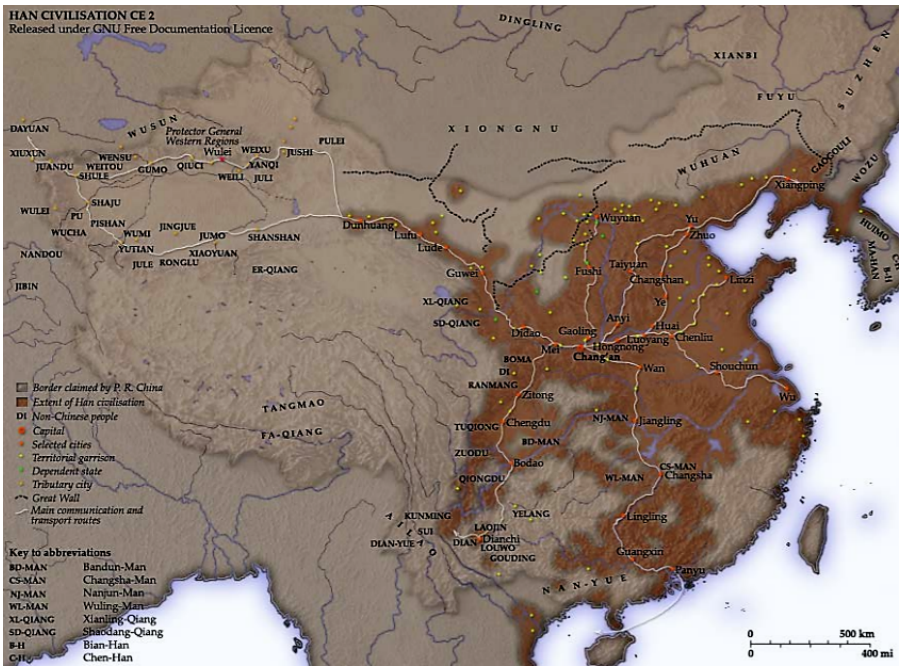
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17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

After the First Emperor died in 210 BCE, the Qin Empire rapidly disintegrated. Historians debate causes but highlight weak successors manipulated by the intrigues of a high minister and court eunuch; excessive demands on the population for building projects, tax revenue, and military conscription; and a climate of fear created by the harshly punitive legal system. Regardless, by 207 BCE revolts were breaking out across the land, as rebels accrued armies, seized territory, and even declared themselves kings. China then fell into a state of civil war for five years until the intervention of **Liu Bang** [lee-oh bawng] (d. 195 BCE). A former farmer and village headman who rebelled and built an army and kingdom through his military acumen and charisma, Liu Bang defeated his adversaries and declared himself emperor of a new dynasty.

17.4.8.1: Government and Society during the Han Dynasty

The **Han Dynasty**, ruled by 24 successive emperors from the Liu imperial family, is normally divided into a Western Han (202 – 8 BCE) and Eastern Han (25 – 220 CE) because for a brief time an imperial in-law usurped the throne and established his own short-lived dynasty. This brief interregnum aside, the Han Dynasty lasted 400 years, making it second in length only to the Zhou Dynasty. So important was the Han to establishing a pattern in Chinese civilization distinguishing people belonging to it from those around them that Chinese people today refer to their ethnic group as Han Chinese. Also, after adopting the foundations laid by the Qin Dynasty, the Han further strengthened them, cementing an imperial pattern that persisted in China until the fall of the last dynasty (Qing) in 1911.



Map **17.4.8.1**: Map of the Han Dynasty in 2 CE | During the Western Han, the capital was located at Chang'an, while during the Eastern Han, it was located at Luoyang. Note the location of the Xiongnu confederation of nomadic pastoralists living on the steppe lands to the north of China. Han China also extended control far into Central Asia in order to secure the Silk Road trade routes. Most of the dependent states and tributary cities indicated by green and orange dots were brought under the control of China during the reign of Emperor Wu. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Yeu Ninje via Wikimedia Commons)

As opposed to studying a chronology of important events during these centuries, let's consider the general picture for the political system and society of the Han Empire. The majority of people– as much as 90 percent of the population–were farmers, living out their lives in villages of a dozen to over 100 households. Some were independent farmers who owned small farms; some, tenants who leased land from owners of larger farms; and some, local magnates with large estates (see Figure **17.4.8.1**). The government relied heavily on the first group for revenue and conscription and therefore tried to keep these owner-farmers in business with low taxes, relief in times of hardship, and improvement in their agricultural methods. Unfortunately, over the course of the dynasty, many farmers fell on hard times and were forced to sell their land to powerful landlords, thus becoming their tenants or even slaves.

Landlordism thus became a major social and political problem, as local great families dominated ever more dependent poor, undermining the central government's revenue base.

The remaining ten percent of the population lived in urban areas–the towns and cities of Han China–as artisans and traders or officials and garrison soldiers. By some estimates, the total population during these centuries hovered at 60 million, which means about six million were urban residents. Many cities, such as the capitals of both the Western and Eastern Han, had over 100,000 residents (see Map **17.4.8.1**). The first imperial capital, Chang'an [chawng-an] ("Forever Peace"), was a walled city with twelve gates, watchtowers, market places, residential wards, administrative buildings and, of course, the imperial palace. Some of the agricultural produce, manufactured goods, and raw materials filling up the marketplaces testify to what artisans and traders were busy making, buying, and selling: cooked meats, pickled vegetables, fish, and grains; utensils and tools made of wood, brass, and iron; lacquer ware, jade, and furs; and textiles fashioned from silk and hemp. Imperial highways and lesser byways, and canals and other waterways, provided the routes for moving these goods both within and beyond China. Ever suspicious of the profit motive and believing in the foundational importance of the farmer, government officials supervised city markets and established agencies to regulate the most important industries.

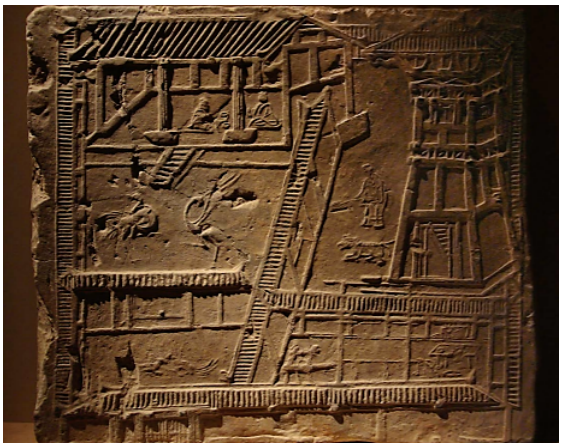


Figure **17.4.8.1**: Estate of a wealthy official during the Eastern Han Dynasty, as represented in the interior of his tomb (CC BY-SA 2.5; User "Editor at Large" via Wikimedia Commons)

These commoner classes–farmers, artisans, and traders–were governed by a highly organized state and its corps of educated, professional civil servants. For administrative purposes, the empire was eventually divided into roughly 100 commanderies and 1300 counties. 130,000 officials constituted the bureaucracy. At the lowest level, working with village and town leaders, county magistrates handled such matters as tax collection, population registration, conscription for military service, law and order, and public works. They submitted reports to, and took orders from, commandery level military and civil officials, who then did the same with the nine ministries of the central government. These ministries handled such matters as revenue, justice, and foreign relations. The heads of each of these ministries, as well as two chancellors, routinely held audiences with the emperor to decide all policy matters. An independent branch of government, the censorate, audited the rest and reported directly to the emperor.

From the outset, the Han Dynasty inherited the Qin legalist system of government, with its emphasis on rational and efficient methods of administration and use of systems of rewards and punishments to promote order. However, early in the Han, Confucian scholars criticized Qin governing for lacking humaneness, and Han rulers increasingly saw the benefit of Confucian ideas to governing. This change was particularly the case with **Emperor Wu** [woo] (r. 141 – 87 BCE). During his reign, Confucius's ideas were molded into an ideology that legitimated monarchy and a hierarchical social order. This ideology is called **Imperial Confucianism**. As an ideology, it simply provided a blueprint for how the political and social order should function.



Figure 17.4.8.2: Painting depicting paragons of filial piety on a box excavated from a Han Dynasty tomb | During the Han Dynasty, Confucian values penetrated society, especially the idea that a child should actively demonstrate their reverence and respect for parents. (Public Domain; User "PericlesofAthens" via Wikimedia Commons)

Rulers saw the benefit in having officials who were highly educated, loyal, of good character, and who understood the formalities of ritual and etiquette. An Imperial Academy was founded at the capital in 124 so that students could be educated in classical Confucian texts, including the *Analects*. Across the country, these students were nominated by local officials based on their learnedness and virtuous conduct. Successful graduates went on to serve as officials, and, because that conferred the highest prestige and status on an individual in Han China, Confucian values penetrated society. Texts were compiled explaining good etiquette, conduct, and ritual requirements for each family member and members of society based on their superior or subordinate status. Filial piety was celebrated in both art and texts (see Figure 17.4.8.2), and law codes reinforced social norms by, for example, supporting the authority of the family patriarch, division of property among sons, and arranged marriages. In brief, over the course of the Han Dynasty, Chinese increasingly identified themselves as defenders of a Confucian civilization.

The emperor was at the pinnacle of both Han society and the political system, while the imperial family and in-laws constituted a privileged aristocracy. The emperor's authority derived in theory from his having received the mandate of Heaven, his virtue, and his role as mediator between the celestial realms and human world; as such, he could expect his subjects' obedience and loyalty. He resided within the walls of the imperial palace at the capital city, attended by eunuchs who handled his personal needs, palace administration, and the imperial harem. Emperors had numerous consorts but also a principal wife–the empress–who held a special status and was quite influential, usually because she bore the heir to the throne, but also because she and her in-laws were an intimate part of the emperor's palace life. Often, the imperial family, imperial in-laws, eunuchs, and high officials broke apart into squabbling factions fighting for power and influence; this contention had deleterious consequences for the smooth functioning of the political system.

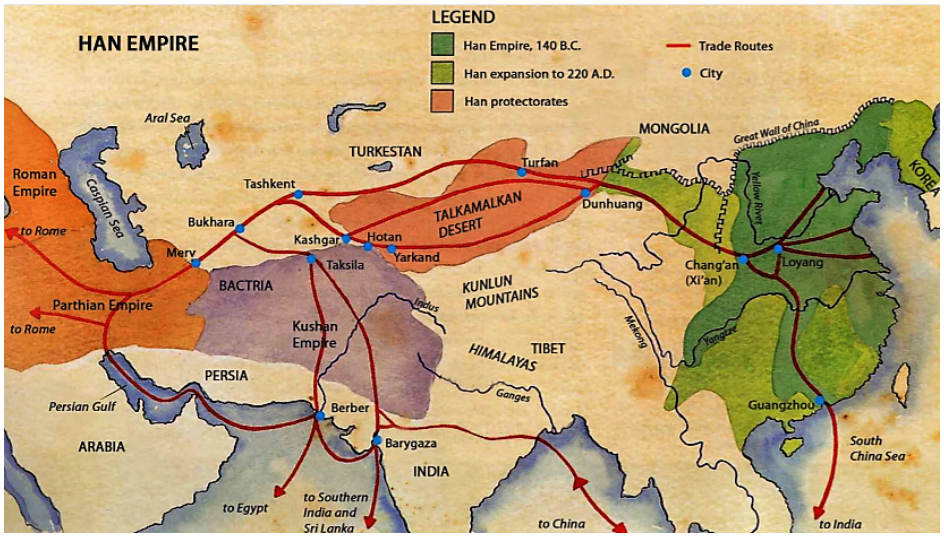
17.4.8.2: China and the Outer World during the Han Dynasty

Strengthened by its ever more confident political system and society, Han China also became an expansive empire, occupying and colonizing territory all along its borders. Sometimes this process was gradual: as migrants and merchants moved into neighboring areas, the government followed by setting up garrisons to protect them and eventually counties with civil servants to govern them. In other cases, armies were sent to subdue unstable borders or to secure trade routes. Regardless, as the dominant power in the region, China's actions profoundly influenced and shaped the history of peoples and states in neighboring areas of Central and East Asia.

Traditionally, the biggest threats to the settled agricultural population of China came from non-Chinese nomadic pastoralists scattered about the steppe lands along the northern border (see Chapter Ten). These skilled horsemen and hunters tended their herds from horseback, resided in mobile campsites made up of yurts, and organized as tribes. These tribes usually selected the most skilled male warriors as their chieftains and also periodically organized into confederations so as to raid Chinese villages and towns (see Chapter Ten). During the Han, the most threatening confederation was knit together by Xiongnu [she-ong-new] (see Map 17.4.8.1). The founding emperor, Liu Bang, sought to subdue them with his armies but was defeated and forced to pay tribute and offer imperial princesses in marriage to their chieftains. Emperor Wu, however, enjoying a stronger government, sent massive armies of over 100,000 soldiers campaigning deep into Xiongnu territory, breaking up their confederation and forcing them to

relocate. Although his armies suffered great losses, Emperor Wu established garrisons across the northern border to consolidate his gains and protect China.

As Emperor Wu brought the Xiongnu under control, he became curious about Central Asian territories lying to the west of China. Interested in finding allies that might support him in his efforts to control nomad confederations, he sent envoys on exploratory missions. They returned with news of trade routes extending from oasis city-states ringing the forbidding deserts of the Taklamakan Desert to countries lying beyond the Pamir Mountains. What they were speaking of were the earliest **Silk Roads** (see Map **17.4.8.2**). Merchants had been using camels to carry such goods as silk from China to distant civilizations while bringing back gold, horses, and various handicrafts and foodstuffs. For that reason, beginning in 104 BCE, Emperor Wu dispatched armies to subdue the region as far as the Pamir Mountains, making the Han Dynasty overlords to Central Asian states, which were now obligated to send tribute and hostages. A frontier network of walls and watchtowers was then extended partway into the region. The Silk Roads were thus secured, and, because it could be conducted more safely, the volume of traffic grew. During the Han Dynasty, China demonstrated its intention of being a dominant player in Central Asia.



Map **17.4.8.2**: Map of the Silk Road trade routes during the Han Dynasty (CC BY-SA 4.0; Wikimedia Commons User “Алый Король” and Leo Timm via Wikimedia Commons and The Epoch Times)

17.4.8.3: Conclusion: The Han Dynasty and Empires in History

These are some of the outstanding features of the Han Empire, and ones that can also be compared to other empires that existed at this time in other parts of the world, such as Mauryan Empire in India, Persian Empire in the Middle East, or Roman Empire. Each empire conferred a special status on rulers, had an organized imperial administration with an educated civil service, maintained a large army to defend an expanding and increasingly well-defined territory, and developed an ideology and legal codes that justified authority and reinforced social order. Confident in the superiority of their organized governments, powerful militaries, and worldview, each of these empires proceeded to extend control over neighboring states and peoples.

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17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE

Like these other empires, the Han Dynasty also eventually fell. China was then divided up by independent, short-lived kingdoms until 589 CE, when the Sui Dynasty reunited most of the territory once controlled by the Han. Thus, for four centuries, during what is known as the Period of Division, China was politically unstable and racked by endemic warfare. Yet, in spite of the violence, these centuries also saw vibrant cultural developments, as Buddhism became an organized institutional religion reshaping the spiritual landscape.

17.4.9.1: Political History–From Three Kingdoms (220 – 280) and the Western Jin (265 – 317) to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (317 – 589)

During the second century CE, a combination of factors led to massive rebellions against the Han Dynasty by lower classes living in the countryside. Many once thriving, independent farmers who fell on hard times lost their land to powerful local families who used their political connections to amass large estates. A series of floods and droughts and the famines and epidemics they caused only worsened these farmers' plight, and the government was ineffective in providing relief. During the later Han, government revenue had fallen because local magnates kept their growing estates off the tax rolls. Also, many later Liu emperors were mere youths dominated by quarreling factions of imperial in-laws and eunuchs, so the quality of governing declined.

Desperate to escape poverty and starvation, many villagers fled their homes or joined roving bandit gangs. Some rallied behind individuals who promised the dawn of a new age, thereby becoming part of large, militarized religious societies with political goals. One was the **Yellow Turbans**, a society named after the yellow cloth members wrapped around their heads. The founder, Zhang Jue [jawng joo-eh], claimed he was a devoted follower of the legendary Daoist philosopher Laozi, who had by this time been deified and envisioned living in a Daoist heaven. Zhang accrued a following of disciples by instructing them in faith healing, establishing a rudimentary organization, and prophesying an impending apocalypse. He led his followers to believe that the apocalypse would be followed by an age of peace when the sky would turn yellow and all would be equal. The movement grew into the tens of thousands. Some followers proclaimed 184 CE was propitious, daubing the characters for that year in mud on the gates to government offices. The Yellow Turbans rebelled, and unrest spread across north China. Other similar millenarian religious movements followed.

The Han Dynasty was in crisis but lacked the strong leadership of earlier rulers like the founder Liu Bang or Emperor Wu. Youthful emperors were forced to rely on generals who commanded permanent standing armies around the empire as if they were private possessions. But by empowering military strongmen to suppress rebellions, Han rulers sealed the fate of the dynasty. Generals feuded amongst each other and competed to impose a military dictatorship on the court. Eventually, in 220 CE, one general deposed the Han emperor, but he failed to unite the realm because by that time the country had been divided up by three kingdoms and their rival warlords.

Within their realms, each warlord sought to strengthen his hand against the others by restoring order and establishing a functioning state. After all, they needed fighting men and revenue. **Cao Cao** (155 – 220 CE) was the most effective in achieving these goals. He was the adopted son of a Han court eunuch and eventually entered the military. As a commander, he earned his spurs leading Han armies against the Yellow Turbans. As the dynasty fell apart, he gained control over it and established a dictatorship in northern China. It was his son who removed the last Han ruler and established the Wei [way] Dynasty (220 – 265 AD), one of the **Three Kingdoms** (see Map **17.4.9.1**).



Map **17.4.9.1**: Map of the Three Kingdoms | These took shape as the Han Dynasty ended. Cao Cao was the founder of the northern state of Wei. (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

By this time, as a result of the rebellions and civil wars, much land in north China had gone to waste. So Cao Cao turned it into huge state farms where he could settle his soldiers, landless poor, and, most importantly, tribes of nomadic herders from the steppe lands to the far north who had served him as he came to power. Thus, Cao rulers created colonies of farmers who supplied tax revenue and, as hereditary military families, soldiers for Wei armies. Such stateowned land and hereditary soldiers became the mainstays of warlord dynasties throughout this time.



Map **17.4.9.2**: China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties | The Eastern Jin was the first of the southern dynasties, all of which had Jiankang as their capital. The north was divided up among shifting kingdoms established by non-Han chieftains. The names of these ethnic groups are indicated on the map. (© Paul Noll. Used with permission.; Paul Noll via Original Work)

The two other kingdoms, Wu and Han, were located in the south. Over the course of decades, the ruling warlords of all three states fought each other in campaigns involving much treachery and stratagem. In 263 CE, the Han kingdom fell to the invading forces of

Wei commanders. But then, just two years later, a powerful Wei family–the Sima– usurped the throne and changed the kingdom's name to Western Jin [jean] (265 – 317 CE). The Western Jin conquered Wu in 280 BCE, thereby bringing to an end the Three Kingdoms period.

The Western Jin had reunified China, but that unity wasn't to last. The policy of settling tribes of non-Chinese nomads in north China backfired. Among them, rebel chieftains rose up, carved out kingdoms of their own, and expanded their power all across the north. One Xiongnu chieftain, Liu Yuan [lee-oh you-anne], even declared he was a descendant of a Han Dynasty imperial princess and therefore had the right to restore the Han Empire. His son descended on the Western Jin court at Luoyang and eventually, in 317 CE, forced it to flee east to Jiankang [jeean cawng] (today's city of Nanjing).



Figure 17.4.9.1: Terracotta figurine depicting a Northern Wei soldier on horseback | The Northern Wei was one of the Northern Dynasties (CC BY-SA 3.0; Guillaume Jacquet via Wikimedia Commons)

China was again divided up among competing dynasties, a state of affairs that would persist until 589 CE, during a time referred to as the **Northern and Southern Dynasties** (317 – 589). Six successive Southern Dynasties were all located at Jiankang, and had as their base of power the Yangzi River basin (see Map 17.4.9.2). But their rulers were usually militarily weak and lacked revenue, due to southern China's comprising a colonial frontier dominated by powerful families with large estates and private armies. These families highly valued their pedigrees, intermarried, and saw themselves as the heirs to Confucian civilization. At the southern court, they dominated high offices, thus constituting a hereditary aristocracy. The ruling family was always limited in power by their influence.

The situation was even more complex in the north during those three centuries. The kingdom established by Liu Yuan along the Yellow River was just one of numerous short-lived Northern Dynasties established by non-Chinese chieftains of different ethnicities. The Liu rulers, for instance, were Xiongnu, while others were of Turkic ancestry. At times, the north was divided among numerous, rival regimes, while, at others, it was unified. But all of these kingdoms shared similar characteristics. They were ruled by military dynasts who wanted to restore the Chinese empire. Their armies consisted of an elite, heavily armored cavalry drawn from aristocratic military families that was supplemented by Chinese foot soldiers (see Figure 17.4.9.1). They employed educated Chinese to serve as civil officials and administer their territories.



Map **17.4.9.3**: Map of the Sui Dynasty | Map of the Sui Dynasty, which reunified China at the end of the Period of Division. Neighboring states and peoples in Sui times, as well as the boundaries of modern China, are also indicated. (Public Domain; User "Arab Hafez" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Northern and Southern Dynasties came to an end in 589 CE after Yang Jian [yawng geean], a general hailing from the ruling clan of a northern kingdom, first established control over all of north China and then defeated the last southern dynasty. He ruled his new Sui [sway] Dynasty as Emperor Wen [one]. China was once again united under one dynasty (see Map **17.4.9.3**).

17.4.9.2: China's Third Great Tradition: The Introduction of Buddhism to China

Aside from the shifting configuration of kingdoms, perhaps the most notable development during the Period of Division was the introduction of Mahayana ("Great Vehicle") Buddhism into China (for the development of Mahayana Buddhism, see Chapter Three). Beginning from the second century CE, at the end of the Han Dynasty, Buddhist merchants and monks from India and Central Asia brought their faith and scriptures to China by the Silk Roads and maritime trading routes (see Map **17.4.9.4**). The impact was immense and can be compared to the Christianization of the Mediterranean region and spread of devotional forms of Hinduism in South Asia during this same period of time (see Chapters Three and Six). Historians estimated that by the time the Sui Dynasty reunited China four centuries later, China had approximately 33,000 Buddhist temples and two million monks and nuns. Buddhism had become a large-scale religious organization with these temples, clerics, and scriptures (see Figure **17.4.9.2**), as well as a widespread popular faith capturing the imagination of common people and rulers alike.



Figure **17.4.9.2**: Giant Buddhas (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "WikiLaurent" via Wikimedia Commons)

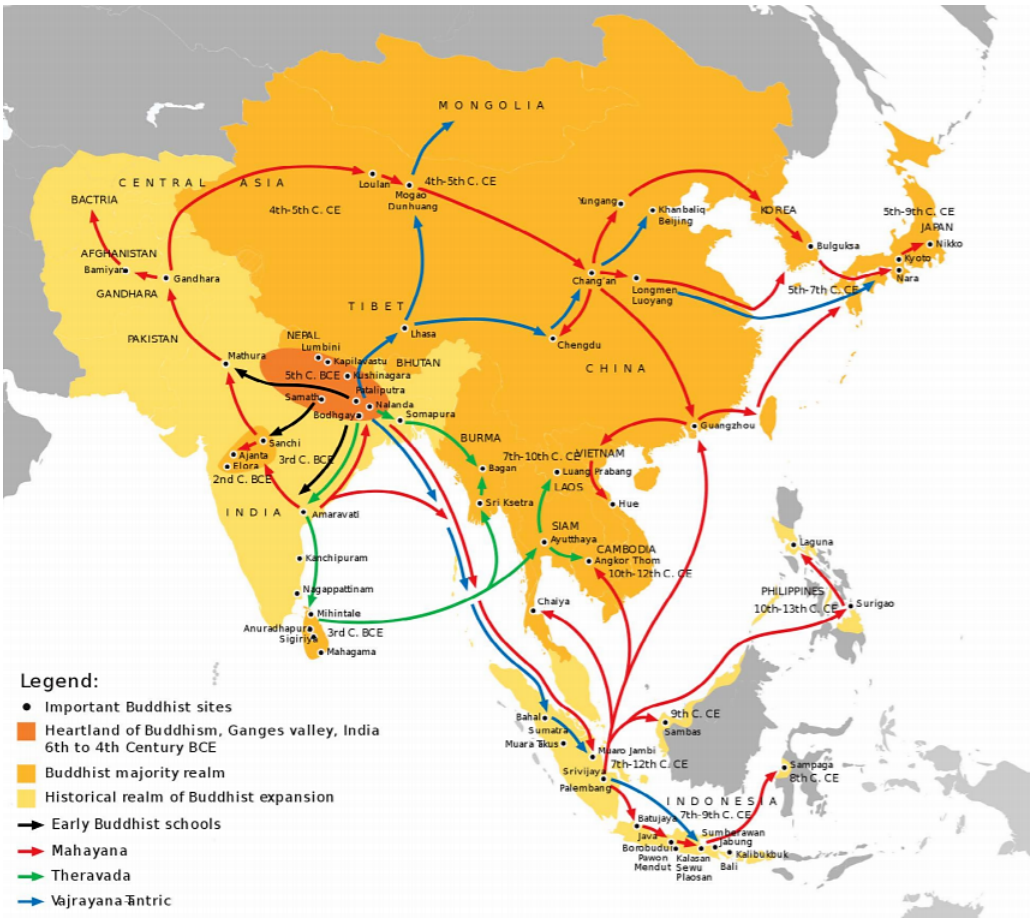
Historians have also hypothesized why this spread occurred. First of all, Buddhism clearly met a spiritual need. During the Period of Division, turmoil from rapid political change and constant warfare brought much suffering and instability to people's lives. Now, here was a religion that explained their suffering with notions of karma and rebirth and also offered hope with paths to salvation and enlightenment. Buddhism placed the world amidst visions of multiple hells and heavens where merciful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas worked for the salvation of all beings.

Buddhism appealed to people in different ways. For scholarly elites living in capital cities or as hermits in mountain retreats, Buddhist doctrines about the nature of reality, self, and enlightenment were appealing because they seemed similar to concepts in Daoist philosophy. Both philosophies questioned the reality of ordinary understandings of the self and world, emphasized that our

desires create an illusory world, and offered techniques for achieving liberation. Nirvana, for instance, was compared to the Dao (Daoist “Way”).

For rulers, Buddhism served political purposes. Since the faith became so popular, rulers who took vows and sponsored temple construction and the ordination of monks looked good because they were upholding the dharma, that is, the Buddhist law. Some even went so far as to have monks recognize them as incarnate Buddhas. Lastly, Buddhist monks–whether foreign or Chinese–were some of the most educated people at their courts and could assist rulers with mundane matters, like international relations, but also esoteric ones, such as spells and divination. Monks won support by promising that their rituals and incantations had magical potency.

Lastly, for most people, Buddhism was a devotional religion. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were merciful beings to be worshipped because their good karma redounded to the benefit of all beings. By going to a temple and burning incense or praying and making offerings before a Buddha statue, the faithful might have a simple wish granted: an illness cured, loved ones helped, or a better rebirth ensured.



Map **17.4.9.4**: Expansion of Buddhism | This map shows how Buddhism spread to China and the rest of East Asia via land-based routes in Central Asia and maritime routes. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Gunawan Kartapranata via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia

17.4.10.1: The Early Tang Dynasty

The Sui [sway] Dynasty did not last long (581 – 618 CE) and only had two emperors: Emperor Wen and Emperor Yang. Both envisioned recapturing the glory of the Han Dynasty; hence, they engaged in many construction projects and military campaigns. Immense capital cities were built at Chang'an and Luoyang and, in order to supply them with sufficient grain, a canal system was created to connect the Yellow River to the Yangzi River. These emperors also believed that Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula were properly Chinese territory; therefore, they repeatedly launched enormous military expeditions to attack the most powerful Korean kingdom located there. Emperor Yang's ground and naval campaign in 611 CE, for instance, required enlisting over one million combat troops and hundreds of thousands of additional men just to transport supplies. All of these campaigns met defeat.



Figure **17.4.10.1**: Statue depicting a Tang Dynasty official holding a tablet with a report for his superiors | Giant Buddhas and other revered deities in Buddhism sculpted out of the walls of caves and cliffs in Longmen, China beginning from the Period of Division (CC BY-SA 2.5; User "Editor at Large" via Wikimedia Commons)

What is more, that very same year, the Yellow River flooded, and rebellions broke out along it. Natural disasters combined with these emperors' heavy demands led to widespread unrest, and the Sui Dynasty unraveled. Bandit leaders, local officials, and local elites took matters into their own hands by organizing their communities for self-defense. After the emperor took flight to the south, General Li Yuan [lee you-an], who was stationed along the northern border to defend against the steppe nomads, marched into Chang'an, where he declared the founding of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE). Emperor Yang's life came to an end when he was assassinated by his own men.

Like the Han Dynasty, the Tang was one of the most dynamic and long-lived dynasties in China's history. That dynamism was made possible by how effectively early Tang rulers consolidated the empire internally and then engaged in military expansion (see Map 4.16). Consolidating the empire required first reestablishing solid political, economic, and military institutions. Fortunately, Tang rulers could draw upon nearly a millennium of historical experience going back to the Qin Dynasty, when a centralized monarchical political system governing all of China was first established. At the capital, Tang emperors had at their disposal sophisticated ministries that in turn oversaw a vast provincial and county administrative system. To serve in high office, a man usually had to come from one of a small number of highly prestigious families with illustrious family pedigrees. These families took pride in their superior education and manners and maintained their exclusiveness by intermarrying. Thus, the Tang Dynasty was dominated by an aristocracy. Nevertheless, some men from a larger pool of locally prominent families entered the civil service

based on merit, by graduating from colleges located at the capitals or succeeding at civil service examinations (see Figure 17.4.10.1).



Map 17.4.10.1: The Tang Dynasty at its height in 700 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

In earlier times, empires rarely flourished without a solid agricultural foundation and revenue base. To ensure sufficient grain and labor service, Tang rulers believed that land must be equitably distributed to farmers. So they implemented the **equal fields system.** In this system, each family was to receive an equal plot of land (adjusted for terrain and productivity) for life, as well as a smaller plot as a permanent possession. The former was for growing grain, and the latter, for hemp and mulberry trees. In exchange, each farming family had to pay a tax in grain and cloth and provide twenty days of labor service. To make this work, officials carried out censuses and land surveys and periodically redistributed land. Of course, this system was quite onerous and difficult to carry out in practice, but it did function well for about a century.

The Tang also flourished because special attention was paid to molding an orderly society through the promulgation of sophisticated law codes. From ancient times, in China, law was viewed as an expression of the will of the emperor, whose pronouncements defined illegal conduct and proper punishments for it. Also, law was critically important to maintaining order, not only in the social but also the natural world. Crimes committed both by subjects and the state could disturb the cosmos and lead to natural disasters. Thus, law maintained social and cosmic harmony. That is why codes were so important.

The **Tang Code** contains twelve sections, one addressing general principles, and the rest, administrative and penal law. Most of the statutes define criminal offenses and the punishment for each of them. The magistrate's role, then, was primarily to investigate and determine precisely the nature of the crime so that the proper punishment could be assigned. In Tang times, people believed that the severity of punishment should be based on the relative status of the perpetrator and victim. For instance, a crime committed against a family member was more serious than one committed against a stranger, and a crime committed against an official was more serious than one committed against a commoner. Within families, too, the status of members mattered. Whereas a father could flog his son without consequence, a son faced capital punishment should he beat his father. In brief, Tang laws encoded the status hierarchy and values of imperial Confucianism. The most serious crimes were those committed against the emperor, country, senior family members, and social superiors. Nevertheless, those of higher status were held accountable for their actions; a magistrate who failed to justly administer the law faced punishment. In fact, Tang monarchs were so concerned that justice might fail to be upheld that they often proclaimed amnesties, nullifying the sentences of all but the worst criminals.



Figure 17.4.10.2: Relief of soldier and horse from the tomb of Emperor Taizong (Public Domain; Yen Li-pen via Wikimedia Commons)

Lastly, Tang rulers established a formidable military. At first, the army consisted of six hundred militias stationed at headquarters located near the capitals and throughout the countryside, a large standing army located at the capital, and frontier garrisons strung out along the northern border. These forces were largely maintained by drawing men from a military population. That is, Tang rulers relied on a large number of families that maintained military traditions and provided sons for periods of service in lieu of paying taxes and providing labor service. As necessary, these men could be assembled into expeditionary armies consisting of heavy cavalry and marching infantry (see Figure 17.4.10.2).

Having laid these solid institutional foundations, the Tang Dynasty followed with military expansion. Offensives waged to the north divided up and subdued powerful Turkic khans and their confederations of steppe nomads. Tang imperial power was then projected deep into Central Asia, Manchuria, and northern Vietnam, making China the most dominant country in East Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries.

17.4.10.2: The Emergence of East Asia: The Case of Korea and Japan

In the introduction, we defined East Asia in both geographic and cultural terms, highlighting Korea and Japan. East Asia first emerges as an identifiable cultural sphere during the Tang Dynasty. By Tang times, kingdoms had already emerged on the Korean Peninsula and the main islands of Japan, but it was during the Tang that ruling elites in both of these states made extensive efforts to adapt components of the Chinese political, legal, and writing system, as well as of Chinese culture, to their own societies.

17.4.10.2.1: Korea's History from the Fourth Century BCE to 900 CE

We have already learned about China's history from the Han Dynasty (203 BCE – 220 CE) through the Period of Division (220 – 589 CE) and into the Tang Dynasty. During those same centuries, the first states formed on the Korean Peninsula, and historians generally organize that time into three periods: the early historical period (c. 400 BCE – 313 CE), **Three Kingdoms Period** (313 – 668 CE), and the **Silla Dynasty** (668 – 892 CE).

By the fourth century BCE, the peninsula had already long been populated by peoples who had migrated there from northeast Asia and settled into agricultural villages. These peoples were not originally speakers of Chinese; rather, they spoke languages belonging to the Altaic language family, which possibly includes Korean. This point is important because people unfamiliar with East Asia sometimes think that the languages *spoken* by Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese are closely related, when in fact they are quite different. However, it is also important to note that in ancient times throughout East Asia, the Chinese writing system was adopted by literate elites for the purpose of writing their spoken languages. Only over time were native scripts developed out of it.

The political picture for the early historical period is complex because the peninsula and neighboring Manchuria looked like a mosaic of chiefdom confederations and petty kingdoms, each governed by elite families living in walled towns. These polities first took shape during these centuries. By the early centuries CE, three kingdoms extending from Manchuria to where Seoul lies today (the capital of South Korea) covered the northern half, while the southern half was divided up by confederations of chiefdoms. The most powerful kingdom was **Goguryeo** [Ko-gooryo] c. 37 BCE – 668 CE).

The Korean peninsula lies very close to China, with only Manchuria and the Yellow Sea dividing the two states. Long before Korea's early historical period, rulers of Chinese states had taken an interest in controlling both trade routes leading into this region and the peoples living there. In 108 BCE, during the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu even sent expeditions into Manchuria and Korea.

He opened up a corridor leading from China through Manchuria into the peninsula and established four commanderies to control the area (see Map **17.4.10.2**).



Map **17.4.10.2**: A map of Korea during the early historical period | After 108 BCE, Han China established commanderies in Korea. Lelang was one of them and was located where the capital of North Korea– Pyongyang–is today. The most powerful neighboring kingdom was Goguryeo. Mahan and Jinhan were southern tribal confederations. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Historiographer" via Wikimedia Commons)

But Han China by no means colonized the entirety of this northeastern region. Kingdoms and tribal confederations remained to the east and south, most notably Goguryeo. After the Han Dynasty collapsed, northern China was in turmoil and unable to control these frontiers. In 313 CE, King Mich'on of Goguryeo, in an effort to expand the size of his kingdom, seized Chinese territory. That date marked the beginning of a new stage in Korean history referred to as the **Three Kingdoms period** (313 CE – 668 CE).

The Three Kingdoms were Goguryeo, Baekje [peck-jay], and **Silla** [she-la] (see Map **17.4.10.3**). Like Goguryeo, the early histories of Baekje and Silla date back to the early historical period, during which time they were consolidated from southern chiefdom confederations (see Map **17.4.10.2**). Each kingdom was dominated by a warrior elite composed of the ruling and aristocratic clans. For most of the Three Kingdoms period, Goguryeo was the dominant military and political power, spreading its control over much of Manchuria and northern Korea. During the fifth century CE, its capital was moved to Pyongyang, site of a former Han Commandery. This move made this city–the capital of North Korea today–important to Korean history. Murals on Goguryeo tombs located in the vicinity show what this kingdom's elites valued (see Figure **17.4.10.3**). They are depicted as heavily-clad warriors fighting on horseback with bows and arrows, and swords and halberds. A cosmos depicts guardian spirits and nature gods belonging to a native Korean tradition of shamanism.

Given the geopolitical position of Korea, it is not surprising that all three kingdoms highly valued martial traditions. First of all, they fought with each other for control over territory and resources on the peninsula. Secondly, positioned as Korea is between China and Japan, those states often intruded upon peninsular conflicts. For all these reasons, Silla, Baekje, and Goguryeo monarchs readily borrowed ideas from China that might benefit their realms and give them more power. That borrowing included introducing elements of Chinese political institutions and legal traditions, as well as Buddhism and Confucianism. All of these kingdoms sent students to study in China and patronized Chinese Buddhist monks and learned Confucians who visited their courts. These visitors were knowledgeable in many fields of learning, including science and technology. As we have seen, Buddhism not only promised salvation but also magical powers of healing, and rulers could style themselves as living Buddhas. That is why they sponsored the building of temples and formation of a Buddhist religious order. Confucianism, on the other hand, provided models of civility, courtly etiquette, and bureaucratic governance for ruling elites, and rulers could style themselves in Chinese fashion as sovereign monarchs. Hence, Confucian academies were established to train students of aristocratic families for service.



Map **17.4.10.3**: Map of the Three Kingdoms Period in Korea, c. sixth century CE (CC BY-SA 3.0 ; User "Chris 73" via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure **17.4.10.3**: Mural from a Goguryeo tomb, showing a warrior hunting (Public Domain; User "Maksim" via Wikimedia Commons)

Towards the end of the Three Kingdoms period, however, it was not the great northeastern power of Goguryeo that unified the Korean Peninsula. This achievement went to the Silla Dynasty and did so for two reasons. First, Silla rulers were particularly effective in using Chinese political practices to centralize their power. They adopted Chinese-style titles, central government agencies, and law codes; made Buddhism a state-sponsored religion; and established an academy for studying Chinese classical texts, law, medicine, and astronomy. Second, Silla monarchs built alliances with Tang emperors that worked to their advantage. As we have seen, the Chinese Sui Dynasty fell because Sui rulers suffered terrible defeats at the hands of the armies of the great kingdom of Goguryeo. Tang Dynasty rulers continued the invasions but also failed. For that reason, they were open to building alliances with Silla and combining their military forces. Together, they defeated Baekje in 660 and Goguryeo in 668. Much to the Tang emperor's surprise, Silla then drove out Tang forces, preventing any efforts on China's part to control the Korean peninsula. The Silla Dynasty (668 – 892 CE) thus became the first one to unify the peninsula (see Map **17.4.10.1**).

In sum, Goguryeo and the Silla Dynasty were, in succession, two of the most powerful kingdoms in ancient Korea. Their histories were deeply shaped by the intrusion of Chinese states into the region. For that reason, they can be categorized as instances of **secondary state formation**. Throughout history, some states developed and centralized their control over a territory largely in response to the impact of a powerful neighboring state that had developed before them. As they did so, they also borrowed ideas for how states should be organized from that neighboring power, even as native traditions and language are retained.

17.4.10.2.2: Japan from the Yayoi Period to the Seventh Century

Those who follow the history of World War II might know that, during those years, the highest authority in Japan was Emperor Hirohito. Even today, Japan has an emperor and empress, although they no longer have any formal political power in this now democratic nation and rather serve in a cultural and symbolic role. Interestingly, the Japanese monarchy is the oldest continuous one in the history of the world and traces its beginnings to at least the fourth century CE.

Japan's early historical development presents unique characteristics because of its geography. The island archipelago was close enough to Chinese and Korean states to borrow from them and benefit from migration and yet far enough away so that invasions were never a sudden impetus to change (see Map 4.5.1). Therefore, although we can also speak of **secondary state formation** for Japan, that is largely because of the conscious choice on the part of ruling elites to adopt political ideas and cultural patterns from China and Korea.



Figure **17.4.10.4**: An earthenware "flame pot" from the Jōmon Period, dating to c. 3000 BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Morio" via Wikimedia Commons)

But even during the prehistoric period, geography impacted Japan's development in other ways. The first evidence for Paleolithic hunter-gatherers dates back to c. 30,000 BCE. In the resource-rich environments of mountainous and forested Japan, small bands of mobile, multi-generational families were able to thrive on game, shellfish, fruits, tubers, and nuts. In fact, foraging strategies were so successful that even when sedentary village communities first formed, they thrived without agriculture. This period of time is known as the **Jōmon** [joe-moan] **Period** (c. 11,000 – 500 BCE). The archaeological record reveals that, up and down the archipelago, foragers had settled into permanent base camps. These were hamlet communities made up of pit dwellings for homes and raised floor structures for holding community functions. Jōmon, meaning "cord-marked," refers to the type of pottery they used (see Figure **17.4.10.4**). This case is one of the few in prehistory where a culture invented and used pottery long before farming.



Figure **17.4.10.5**: A reconstruction of Yoshinogari, a Yayoi Period chiefdom | It was located in northwest Kyushu and flourished c. first century BCE. (Public Domain; User "Sanjo" via Wikimedia Commons)

Farming began during the next stage in Japanese history–the **Yayoi** [ya-yo-ee] **Period** (500 BCE – 250 CE). The label refers to a site near Tokyo where artifacts were discovered evidencing new developments in Japan. Most importantly, rice-paddy agriculture and dry-field farming were introduced, techniques that supported population growth and the formation of more and larger village communities. The impetus to agriculture was likely earlier experimentation with simple horticulture, a warming climate, and migration from mainland East Asia. Those migrants also brought knowledge of iron- and bronze-working; hence, tools and weapons fashioned from metals became widespread.

Japan, but, during the latter half, they evolved into something more substantial. Archaeologists have excavated the foundations of large settlements surrounded by moats and embankments (see Figure **17.4.10.5**). These fortified bastions were home to up to two thousand residents and contained ceremonial centers, differentiated residences and burials, watchtowers, and palisades. Some burials contained skeletons evidencing wounds or dismemberment. Combining this evidence with clues from contemporary Chinese historical sources, specialists have concluded that, by the end of the Yayoi period, powerful chiefdoms had emerged in Japan, and they were allying with and battling each other to control trade routes and territory.



Map **17.4.10.4**: Map depicting extent of the Yamato Kingdom c. seventh century CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Morio” via Wikimedia Commons)

In retrospect, the late Yayoi Period clearly was a transitional phase leading to the formation of the first kingdom in Japanese history. That happened in the next stage, the **Mounded Tomb Period** (250 – 600 CE). Among the warring chiefdoms, one emerged as dominant. Hailing from the Kinai region of Japan (see Map 4.5.1), Yamato chieftains expanded their power through force and diplomacy, and eventually forged a kingdom (see Map **17.4.10.4**). The principal evidence for their growing power are the massive, keyhole-shaped tombs giving this period its name (see Figure **17.4.10.6**). In fact, nearly ten thousand tombs have been identified, but the largest ones belong to the Yamato rulers, the ancestors to the long-lived Japanese imperial line. Although the large royal ones have not yet been excavated, smaller tombs containing an abundance of horse trappings, iron weapons, and armor provide evidence that mounted warfare was introduced from the Korean peninsula, perhaps accelerating the pace of state formation.



Figure **17.4.10.6**: The Daisen Tomb in Osaka, Japan, c. fifth century | At 486 meters in length, this is the largest of the keyhole tombs. It was the burial site for a Yamato king. (© National Land Image Information (Color Aerial Photographs), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. Used with Permission.; Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Government of Japan via Wikimedia Commons)

As they conquered more territory, Yamato rulers devised strategies for strengthening their monarchy and incorporating leaders of the many powerful chieftain clans dominating local areas up and down the archipelago. For service at their royal court or as

provincial officials, they granted them office and noble titles, thereby building a coalition of great clans. In addition, in the sixth century CE, Yamato rulers began to study the great Sui (581 – 618 CE) and Tang (618 – 907 CE) Dynasties in China and to introduce reforms based upon what they learned. The next two centuries in Japanese history, the **Asuka-Nara** Period (c. 600 – 800 CE), was defined by these Chinese-style reforms, although the name itself refers to the successive locations of the royal court.



Figure **17.4.10.7**: The Grand Shrine at Ise | This Shinto Shrine was first built c. fourth century CE in honor of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, progenitor of the Japanese imperial line. According to legends, it contains the Amaterasu's sacred mirror, which was handed down to the first emperors. The shrine has been rebuilt many times (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "N yotarou" via Wikimedia Commons)

Prince Shōtoku [showtoe-coo] (573 – 621 CE) and **Empress Suiko** [sue-ee-ko] (r. 593 – 628) led the way by sending several embassies to the capital of China and then remodeling their capital and court. In his "Seventeen Article Constitution," Shōtoku called for the introduction of Buddhism and Confucian ethics. His articles, for instance, stated that the sovereign's relation to subjects was like Heaven's to the earth, and his or her commands should thus be obeyed. Empress Suiko adopted the title "Heavenly Monarch," thus shifting the character of the monarch from a martial king to a Chinese-style sovereign. In brief, they introduced a Confucian-oriented, emperor-centered state ideology that clearly established a hierarchical system of ranks and norms for court etiquette. For the remainder of this period, other reformers and monarchs would only deepen the reforms by introducing Chinese-style law codes. These laws reshaped the government and land according to a bureaucratic and administrative structure very similar to that of Tang China.

Nevertheless, distinctly Japanese patterns remained throughout this time. First, the royally-recognized great clans of earlier times evolved into an aristocratic class that dominated the court and the upper ranks of officialdom. Secondly, in addition to establishing a council to manage the growing numbers of Buddhist temples and clerics, the court established a Council of Kami Affairs to oversee native Japanese religious traditions. That tradition is known as Shinto [sheen-toe], or the "Way of the Kami."

Shinto began in prehistoric times as reverence for kami—spirits and deities associated with natural phenomena, such as the sun or moon. Really, anything mysterious might become a kami, including a mountain, charismatic ruler, or serpent. During the Yayoi and Mounded Tomb Periods, these kami became the subjects of myths that explained their origins and powers, and shrines were erected to house sacred objects symbolizing them. By properly purifying oneself, conducting rituals, and praying to a kami, an individual could avert a disaster and ensure his own or the community's well-being. Also, clans would claim important kami as their guardian spirits and fashion stories about how their ancestors descended from them. In fact, Yamato monarchs claimed they were descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and constructed a shrine at Ise [ee-say] to house her kami body (see Figure **17.4.10.7**). Finally, during the Asuka-Nara Period, the Yamato court developed a centralized system to keep track of and regulate Shinto shrines throughout its realm, thereby harnessing higher powers to support its claim to rule the land.

In sum, like Korea, Japan's history was highly impacted by developments in China, even as native languages, traditions, and creative adaptation remained foundational to the unique identities of each. However, Korea was far more subject to the intrusion of Chinese states in the Korean Peninsula, something that did not happen in Japan. Rather, as the first state formed on the archipelago, ruling elites looked to China for ideas as to how the kingdom might be governed. In the course of doing so, they also introduced the great tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.

17.4.10.3: The Decline and Collapse of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty reached its zenith during the eighth century under the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712 – 756 CE), but then went into decline. At first, the problem was overexpansion. Tang rulers had expanded the empire's boundaries in nearly every direction, including far into Central Asia. To defend the northwestern border, a system of regional frontier commands was established, each with its own commander and professional army. The earlier system of militias and garrisons manned by hereditary military families declined.

This decline turned out to be dangerous. After one general, An Lushan, butted heads with the emperor's chief minister, he marched his frontier army of 100,000 soldiers south to the capital, forcing the court to flee. An was eventually executed by his own men, and a Tang emperor returned to the throne, but the turmoil unleashed by this rebellion rendered the Tang Dynasty ineffective. During the ensuing turmoil, the empire shrank and Central Asia was lost (see Map **17.4.10.5**). Also, both Tang supporters and pardoned rebels were granted military governorships, giving them control over provinces. Many then chose not to remit tax revenue to the central government, appointed their own subordinates, and designated their successors. They had, in effect, become warlords with their own loyal, regional bases.

Furthermore, as the political system decentralized in this way, the system of equitable land distribution collapsed. Thus, much like during the end of the Han Dynasty, landlords used their power and influence to build great estates. Large numbers of farmers ended up without land and survived only by joining bandit gangs or the ranks of warlord armies. When droughts and famine hit in the late ninth century, a massive rebellion broke out. The last Tang emperor was turned into a puppet by military commanders and eventually, in 907 CE, abdicated. China then entered yet another period of division until the Song Dynasty restored order in 960 CE.



Map **17.4.10.5**: The Tang Dynasty in 800 CE | Note how Tang territory had shrunk after the An Lushan rebellion. Central Asia was now controlled by Tibetan and Turkic Uighur Empires (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

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17.4.11: The Song Dynasty

Like every Chinese dynasty before it, the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE) was born out of turmoil and warfare. After the Tang Dynasty fell, China was once again divided up by numerous, contending kingdoms. The founder of the Song, **Zhao Kuangyin** [j-ow kwong-yeen], was a military commander and advisor to the emperor of one of these kingdoms, but after he died and his six-year-old son came to the throne, Zhao staged a coup. He left the capital with his troops, ostensibly to fight enemies to the north. But just outside the capital, his troops instead proclaimed him emperor, a title he accepted only with feigned reluctance and after his followers promised obedience and to treat the child emperor and people living in the capital environs humanely. On February 3, 960, the child was forced to abdicate, and Zhao took the throne as Emperor Taizu [tiedzoo]. He and his brother, the succeeding Emperor Taizong [tie-dzawng], ruled for the first forty years of a dynasty that would last over three hundred, laying the foundations for its prosperity and cultural brilliance. The Song Dynasty saw a total of eighteen emperors and is most notable for the challenges it faced from northern conquest dynasties, economic prosperity, a **civil service examination system** and the educated elite of **scholar-officials** it created, cultural brilliance, and **footbinding**.

During the Song, China once again confronted tremendous challenges from conquests by military confederations located along the northern border. So threatening and successful were these that the Song Dynasty counted as just one of many powerful players in a larger geopolitical system in Central and East Asia. The first two northern conquest dynasties, the Liao [lee-ow] and Jin [jean], emerged on the plains of Manchuria when powerful tribal leaders organized communities of hunters, fishers, and farmers for war (see Map **17.4.11.1**).



Map **17.4.11.1**: The Northern Song Dynasty in 1100 CE | Note that China (in yellow, with the capital at Kaifeng) was surrounded by powerful neighbors, such as the Khitan Liao state to the north. Khitan designates an ethnic group and Liao the name of their dynasty. (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

As their power grew, they formed states and conquered territory in northern China, forcing the Chinese to pay them large subsidies of silk and silver for peace. So Chinese rulers and their councilors were in constant negotiations with peoples they viewed as culturally-inferior barbarians under conditions where they were forced to treat them as equals, as opposed to weaker tribute-paying states in a Chinese-dominated world. At first, they used a combination of defensive measures and expensive bilateral treaties, which did make for a degree of stability. But a high price was exacted. Halfway through the Song, the Jin Dynasty destroyed the Liao and occupied the entire northern half of China, forcing the Song court to move south (see Map **17.4.11.2**). To rule Chinese possessions, Jin rulers even took on the trappings of Chinese-style emperors and developed a dual administrative system. Steppe tribes were ruled by a traditional military organization, while the farming population of China was governed with Chinese-style civilian administration. The Song Dynasty thus constantly faced the prospect of extinction and was challenged in its legitimacy by rival emperors claiming the right to rule the Chinese realm.



Map 17.4.11.2: China during the Southern Song Dynasty, c. 1200 CE | Another military conquest dynasty, the Jin, had destroyed the Liao Dynasty and forced the Chinese emperor to relocate his capital further south, at Lin'an. (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

One reason Song monarchs were able to buy peace was the extraordinary prosperity during their rule and the resulting tax revenue made available. During those centuries, China was by many measures the most developed country in the world. In 1100 CE, the population was one hundred million, more than all of medieval Europe combined. That number doubled the population of 750 CE, just three hundred years prior. The reason for such growth was flourishing agricultural production, especially rice-paddy agriculture. More drought-resistant and earlier-ripening strains of rice, combined with better technology, lead to higher yields per acre.

The impact was enormous. The productivity of farmers stimulated other industries, such as ironworking. Estimates place iron production at as high as twenty thousand tons per year. That amount made iron prices low and, therefore, such products as spades, ploughshares, nails, axles, and pots and pans more cheaply available. Seeing its profitability, wealthy landowning and merchant families invested in metallurgy, spurring better technology. Bellows, for instance, were worked by hydraulic machinery, such as water mills. Explosives derived from gunpowder were engineered to open mines. Similar development of textile and ceramic industries occurred.

Indeed, during the Song, China underwent a veritable economic revolution. Improvements in agriculture and industry, combined with a denser population, spurred the **commercialization** of the economy. A commercialized economy is one that supports the pursuit of profit through production of specialized products for markets. A Song farmer, for instance, as opposed to just producing rice to get by, might rather purchase it on a market and instead specialize in tea or oranges. Since markets were proliferating in towns and cities and transport via land and water was now readily available, farmers could rely on merchants to market their goods across the country. To support this economic activity, the government minted billions of coins each year as well as the world's first paper currency.

A denser population and sophisticated economy led to urbanization. During the Song, at a time when London had roughly fifteen thousand people, China had dozens of cities with over fifty thousand people and capitals with a half million. Song painted scrolls show crowds of people moving through streets lined with shops, restaurants, teahouses, and guest houses (see Figure 17.4.11.1).



Figure **17.4.11.1**: This section of a Song Dynasty period scroll depicts a bridge in Kaifeng, the first capital. (Public Domain; User "Zhuwq" via Wikimedia Commons)

To manage their realm, Song rulers implemented a n**ational civil service examination** to recruit men for office. Prior dynasties had used written examinations testing knowledge of Confucian classics to select men for office, but only as a supplement to recommendation and hereditary privilege. During the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, however, aristocratic families that had for centuries dominated the upper echelons of officialdom disappeared. The first Song emperor, Zhao Kuangyin, rode to power with the support of military men; having largely unified China, he then sought to restore civil governance based in Confucian principles of humaneness and righteousness. So he invited senior commanders to a party and, over a cup of wine, asked them to relinquish their commands for a comfortable retirement. They obliged. He and his successors consequently made the examination system the pre-eminent route to office, even establishing a national school system to help young men prepare for and advance through it. Thus, during the Song Dynasty, civil offices came to be dominated by men who had spent years, even decades, preparing for and passing through a complex series of exams. Hence, they were both scholars and officials. Success in entering this class placed a person at the pinnacle of society, guaranteeing them prestige and wealth. These **scholar-officials**, and their Confucian worldview, dominated Chinese society until the twentieth century.

In theory, since any adult male could take the examinations, the system was meritocratic. But in reality, because they were so difficult and quotas were set, very few actually passed them. Estimates suggest that only one in one hundred passed the lowest level exam. This ratio meant that, in order to succeed, a young man had to begin memorizing long classical texts as a child and to continue his studies until he passed or gave up hope. Only affluent families could afford to support such an education.

Nevertheless, the meritocratic ideal inspired people from all classes to try and so promoted literacy and a literary revival during the Song Dynasty. As a part of this revival and to provide a curriculum for education, scholar-officials sought to reinvigorate Confucianism. The philosophical movement they began is known as **Neo-Confucianism**. By the Song Dynasty, whereas Confucianism largely shaped personal behavior and social mores, Buddhist and Daoist explanations of the cosmos, human nature, and the human predicament dominated the individual's spiritual outlook. NeoConfucians responded to this challenge by providing a metaphysical basis for Confucian morality and governance. **Zhu Xi** (1130 – 1200), arguably the most important philosopher in later imperial Chinese history, produced a grand synthesis that would shape the worldview of the scholar-official class. He argued that the cosmos consists of a duality of principles and a material force composing physical things. One principle underlies the cosmos and individual principles provide the abstract reason for individual things. In human beings, principle manifests as human nature, which is wholly good and the origins of the human capacity to become moral persons. However, an individual's physical endowment obscures their good nature and leads to moral failings, which is why a rigorous Confucian curriculum of moral self-cultivation based in classical texts like Confucius' Analects is necessary. Most importantly, Zhu Xi argued, individual morality was the starting point for producing a well-managed family, orderly government, and peace throughout the world.

Furthermore, during the Song Dynasty, moveable-type printing also began to be widely used, contributing to an increase in literacy and broader exposure to these new ideas. Chinese characters were carved on wood blocks, which were then arranged in boxes that could be dipped in ink and printed on paper (see Figure **17.4.11.2**). Books on a multitude of topics–especially classics and histories–became cheaply and widely available, fueling a cultural efflorescence at a time when education had become paramount to climbing the social ladder. Other inventions that made China one of the most technologically innovative during this time include gunpowder weapons (see Figure **17.4.11.3**) and the mariner's compass.



Figure **17.4.11.2**: A woodblock used to print one page of classical Chinese | The characters read from top to bottom and right to left. During the Song, individual, moveable woodblocks with one character were also carved and arranged in square frames. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Vmenkov" via Wikimedia Commons)

Looked at from many angles, then, the Song was truly a dynamic period in China's history. However, some observers have bemoaned the fact that **footbinding** began during this dynasty and see that practice as a symbol of increasing gender oppression. Scholars believe footbinding began among professional dancers in the tenth century and was then adopted by the upper classes. Over time it spread to the rest of Chinese society, only to end in the twentieth century. At a young age, a girl's feet would be wrapped tightly with bandages so that they couldn't grow, ideally remaining about four-inches long. That stunting made walking very difficult and largely kept women confined to their homes. Eventually, the bound foot, encased in an embroidered silk slipper, became a symbol of femininity and also one of the criteria for marriageability (see Figure **17.4.11.4**).



Figure **17.4.11.3**: Buddhist scroll (c. 950) showing demons threatening the Buddha with a bomb and fire lance | During the Tang Dynasty, alchemists attempting to produce an elixir of immortality accidentally invented gunpowder when experimenting with saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal. Gunpowder weapons first begin to be widely used in East Asia and during the Song Dynasty. The earliest evidence for their use is this scroll. The fire lance is a predecessor to the gun. Gunpowder and projectiles were placed in a tube and projected at the enemy. True guns and cannon are developed during the thirteenth century, towards the end of the Song Dynasty. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Vmenkov" via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17.4.11.4: Silk slipper for a bound foot, dating to a later Chinese dynasty. (CC0 1.0; User "Vassil" via Wikimedia Commons)

More generally, social norms and the law did place women in a subordinate position. Whereas men dominated public realms like government and business, women married at a young age and lived out most of their lives in the domestic sphere. Indeed, in earlier times, China was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. It was patriarchal because the law upheld the authority of senior males in the household and patrilineal because one's surname and family property passed down the male line—though a wife did have control over her dowry. Importantly, ancestor worship, the pre-eminent social and religious practice in Chinese society, was directed toward patrilineal forbears. That is why it was important for the woman to move into the spouse's home, where she would live together with her parents-in-law. Patrilocal describes this type of social pattern. Marriages were almost always arranged for the benefit of both families involved, and, during the wedding ceremony, the bride was taken in a curtained sedan chair to the husband's home where she was to promise to obey her parents-in-law and then bow along with her husband before the ancestral altar. Ideally, she would become a competent household manager, educate the children, and demonstrate much restraint and other excellent interpersonal skills.



Figure 17.4.11.5: Painting of ladies at the Song court preparing silk. (Public Domain; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston via Wikimedia Commons)

Although gender hierarchy was, therefore, the norm, other scholars have observed that ideals were not always reality and women did exercise their agency within the boundaries placed upon them. A wife could gain dignity and a sense of self-worth by handling her roles capably; she would also earn respect. Song literature further reveals that women were often in the fields working or out on city streets shopping. Among the upper classes, literacy and the ability to compose essays or poetry made a woman more marriageable. For this reason, some women were able to excel. Li Qingzhao [lee ching-jow] (c. 1084 – 1155) is one of China's

greatest poets (see Figure **17.4.11.6**). She came from a prestigious scholar-official family. Her father was both a statesman and classical scholar, and her mother was known for her literary achievements. In her teens, Li began to compose poetry, and, over the course of her life, she produced many volumes of essays and poems. Poems to her husband even suggest mutual love and respect and treating her as an equal. In fact, throughout Chinese history, it was not unusual for women to challenge and transgress boundaries. At the highest level, during both the Han and Tang Dynasties, we find cases of empress dowagers dominating youthful heirs to the throne and even one case of an empress declaring her own dynasty.



Figure **17.4.11.6**: A modern statue of Li Qingzhao placed in a museum built in her honor. | The museum is located in Jinan, China, her hometown. (CC BY 3.0; User "Gisling" via Wikimedia Commons)

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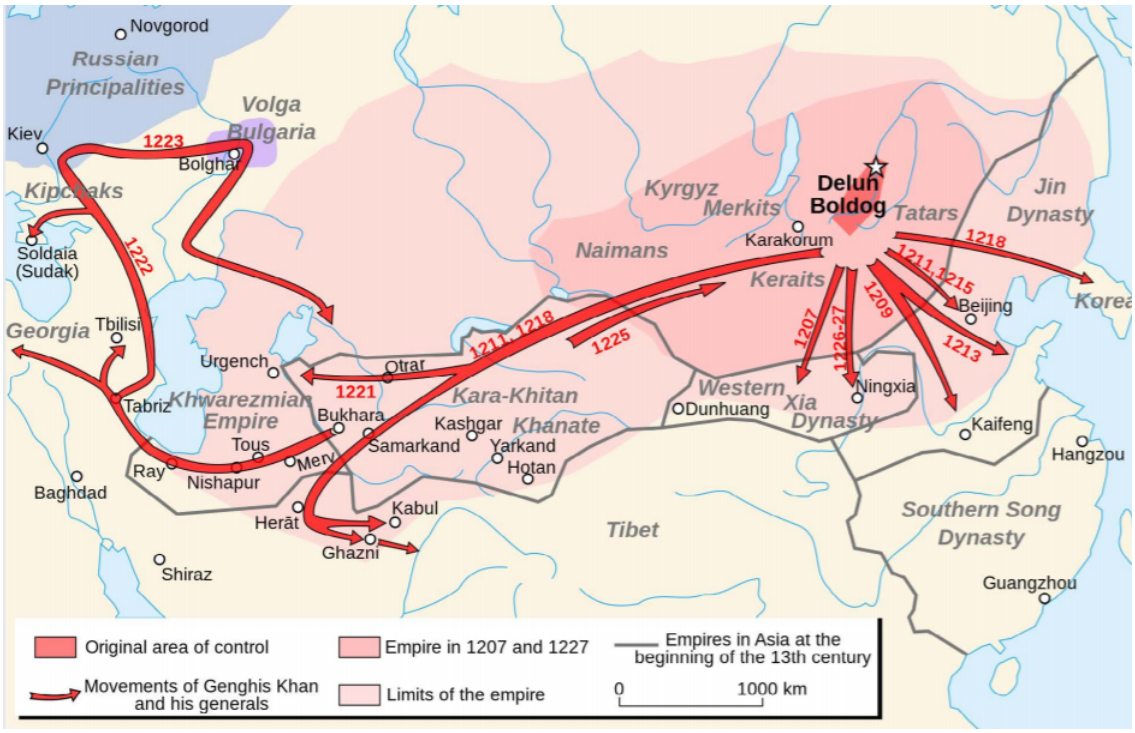
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17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty

The last major dynasty prior to China's early modern period is the **Yuan** [you-an] **Dynasty**. Like earlier neighbors lying to the north of the Song, the Yuan was also a northern conquest dynasty. The key players here were steppe nomads living on the grasslands of Mongolia, known as Mongols, and their leader Genghis Khan. The story of their rise and how they created the largest territorial empire in the history of the world properly belongs to Chapter Eleven, which covers Central Asia, so we here only provide a brief introduction. The most important point to bear in mind is that the Mongols conquered many countries, including China, and incorporated them into a large Eurasian empire.

In the twelfth century CE, the Mongols were one of many tribes of nomadic pastoralists living on the steppes of Central Asia. Although these tribes were made up of peoples of differing ethnicity, they held in common a way of life. Since the steppe was unsuited to farming, they relied principally on their herds, but also on what they could obtain by trading with neighboring sedentary peoples. The nomads lived in temporary campsites, periodically breaking down their yurts and relocating as the seasons required. Since the tribes often fought with each other or turned to raiding, nomads were also excellent at mounted warfare. Their chieftain leaders–referred to as khans–were usually selected based on skill in battle and charisma.

Undoubtedly, the most famous khan in Central Asian history is Genghis Khan. In the late twelfth century, he accrued an army of loyal followers and began to subdue tribes across the Mongolian steppe. In 1206 CE, at a gathering of tribal leaders, he was proclaimed Universal Khan of a tribal confederation. Using a powerful military with a tight command structure, Genghis proceeded to unleash a wave of campaigning in northern China and Central Asia, thereby adding much territory to a growing Mongol Empire (see Map **17.4.12.1**). After he died in 1227 CE, this empire was divided into four khanates, each of which went to one of his four sons as their territorial inheritance.



Map **17.4.12.1**: Map of Mongol Empire as it expanded during the first waves of conquests, from 1207-1225 | During this first wave, not the Song Dynasty but its northern neighbor, the Jin Dynasty, was attacked (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Bkkbrad" via Wikimedia Commons)

Tolui, Genghis Khan's youngest son, was granted the Mongol homeland as well as subjugated territory in northern China held by the Jin Dynasty. But this rugged warrior died in 1232 at the young age of forty, so the task of managing Chinese territory fell to Tolui's capable wife Sorghagtani Beki and her second son, **Kublai Khan** (1215 – 1294 CE). Unlike his predecessors, who largely treated Chinese as chattel and ruthlessly exploited their towns and villages, Kublai saw the advantages of taking a more enlightened approach. With the advice of Chinese advisors, he adopted Chinese-style methods for governing China. In fact, after Kublai was

elected as the fifth Universal Khan in 1260, he chose to move his capital from Mongolia to Beijing, making it the center of his khanate. He then took on the trappings of a Chinese-style sovereign and, in 1273, declared the founding of the Great Yuan Dynasty. Accordingly, he asserted that the Mandate of Heaven had been transferred to him from the Song Dynasty.



Figure **17.4.12.1**: Portrait of Kublai Khan (Public Domain; User "Yaan" via Wikimedia Commons)

Kublai then engaged in a decade of conquest that concluded with the fall of the Song. This victory over the Song Dynasty, China required careful preparation. The Song was located in the southern two-thirds of China, where the terrain was matted with lakes, rivers, and canals. The Mongols had little experience with naval warfare, so they turned to Chinese advisors to build a navy. Mongol cavalry boarded the ships and floated down rivers leading to the Song capital, laying siege to cities along the way. When they reached it in 1276, Kublai's generals took the capital without bloodshed. The regent to the young Song emperor worked out conditions for surrender to them. Hence, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty had won control over China. After Kublai died, nine of his descendants ruled as emperors until the dynasty fell to native rebellions in 1368.



Figure **17.4.12.2**: Blue and white porcelain plate manufactured during the Yuan Dynasty (Public Domain; User "Yaan" via Wikimedia Commons)

Historians differently assess the impact of Mongol Yuan rule on China. Earlier generations of historians judged that violent Mongol conquests devastated the land and led to a population drop. The Mongol style of rule was despotic. Rather than sustain the openness of Chinese society and use the merit-based examination system to bring talent into their government, Mongol rulers placed Chinese in rigid occupational categories and suspended the exams. Many capable men simply avoided official service and turned to other professions.

Recent studies, however, offer a more positive assessment. Because Yuan rulers followed the counsel of Confucian advisors and adopted traditional Chinese methods for governing, for most Chinese life went on as before. Early on, much attention was also paid to the farming population. To promote agriculture, Yuan rulers provided relief measures and promoted the formation of rural

cooperatives. Also, Mongols highly valued crafts and implemented policies that greatly benefited artisans and promoted their work. Hence, arts such as textiles and ceramics flourished (see Figure **17.4.12.1**). Finally, the assessment of Yuan rule in China should be linked to a broader assessment of the impact of Mongol rule on world history (see Chapter Eleven). While duly acknowledging the devastation caused by Mongol conquests, historians also find much merit in Mongol patronage of arts and support for constructions projects and advancements in the areas of medicine and astronomy. Most importantly, the massive Eurasian empire they forged initiated a new era of trade and contacts between Europe and China, as well as the regions lying between.

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17.4.13: Conclusion

We have now passed through nearly four millennia of East Asian history. We prefaced that history with the development of Neolithic cultures leading up to the second millennium BCE, at which point the first kingdoms in Chinese history emerged. Longshan culture (3000 – 1900 BCE) consisted of competing chiefdoms that laid the foundations for the emergence of the first major states.

The first major state was the Xia Dynasty (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE). Although historians debate whether or not it was legendary and lack written sources from that time, the archaeological evidence points to a Bronze Age civilization with a capital city at Erlitou. The next dynasty, the Shang (c. 1600 – 1046 BCE), brings us into history proper, because we have written evidence in the form of oracle bones and bronze inscriptions. The last Shang capital was located at Anyang on the North China Plain near the Yellow River. The dynasty's most important legacies were the earliest form of Chinese writing and ancestor worship. The oracle bones were used to divine the will of higher powers and the spirits of deceased Shang kings.

The next dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty (1045 – 256 BCE), began when chieftains to the west of the Shang declared themselves kings and overthrew it. They justified doing so with the Mandate of Heaven, which states that a higher power withdraws its support from corrupt ruling families and transfers it to righteous ones. Because it lasted eight hundred years and saw much change, the Zhou is divided into two major periods, the Western (1045 – 771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (770 – 256 BCE). During the Western Zhou, Zhou kings ruled by granting land and noble titles to kinsmen and allies in exchange for loyalty and service. The resulting political system, which saw China divided up by over one hundred feudal states, is known as Zhou feudalism. During the Eastern Zhou, this nobility became increasingly independent and fought with each other for power and territory. A few declared themselves kings and forged powerful militaries by gearing their kingdoms for war. In the end, in 221 BCE, the state of Qin prevailed, initiating China's imperial era. Also, in the midst of the dislocation caused by Eastern Zhou instability, three of China's major philosophical traditions emerged: Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism.

The short-lived Qin Dynasty was followed by the much longer lasting Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE). During the Han Dynasty, Confucianism was adopted as the governing philosophy and also penetrated society, shaping the Chinese worldview. The Han also became an empire, as borders were expanded in all directions. During the reign of Emperor Wu (141 – 87 BCE), China extended control over parts of Korea, northern Vietnam, and also much of Central Asia. The resulting stability and the productivity of the economy spurred the development of the Silk Routes.

After the Han dynasty fell, China was divided up by independent, short-lived kingdoms until 589 CE, when the Sui Dynasty reunited most of the territory once controlled by the Han. Thus, for four centuries, during what is known as the Period of Division (220 – 589 CE), China was politically unstable and racked by endemic warfare. Yet, in spite of the violence, these centuries also saw vibrant cultural developments, as Buddhism became an organized institutional religion reshaping the spiritual landscape.

The Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) was yet another long-lived one in Chinese history. Tang rulers built an empire on the foundations of solid political and legal institutions, agricultural policy, and a formidable military. Also during the Tang Dynasty, East Asia first emerged as an identifiable cultural sphere. By Tang times, kingdoms had already formed on the Korean Peninsula and the main islands of Japan, but it was during the Tang that ruling elites in both of these states made extensive efforts to adapt components of the Chinese political, legal, and writing system, as well as of Chinese culture, to their own societies. During the seventh century CE, the Silla Dynasty unified the Korean Peninsula, and the Yamato heavenly sovereigns unified much of Japan. Two other unique East Asian civilizations had taken shape.

The last major dynasty surveyed was the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE), one that is notable for the challenges it faced from northern conquest dynasties, its economic prosperity, and the civil service examination system and the educated elite of scholar-officials it created. Also, since footbinding developed during the Song, we considered the status of women in Chinese society, where gender hierarchy was the norm.

The Song Dynasty ended with Mongol conquests in 1279 CE. The Mongol Yuan Dynasty made China one part of a much larger Eurasian territorial empire. Mongol ruled lasted until 1368 CE, when native rebellions overthrew a faltering Yuan state, initiating a new period in Chinese history: the Ming Dynasty. This dynasty properly belongs to early modern history.

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17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources

17.4.15.1: China

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/

Confucius – the Analects selections and complete online editions.

acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~p.../analects.html (selections)

www.olemiss.edu/courses/inst2...ianthought.pdf (selections)

http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analect...(Eno-2015).pdf (complete text)

Empress Wu Zetian and women during the Tang Dynasty

http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/toc-06.html

The *Laozi (Dao de jing)* selections and complete online editions.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup..._daodejing.pdf (selections)

ctext.org/dao-de-jing (complete text)

www.indiana.edu/~p374/Daodejing.pdf (complete text)

Mandate of Heaven

acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~p.../shu-jing.html

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup...s_king_wen.pdf

Mongols and the Mongol Yuan Dynasty

afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/index.html

Oracle Bones of the Shang Dynasty

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup...ne_general.pdf

Sunzi's (Master Sun's) Art of War

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup...art_of_war.pdf (selections)

http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html (complete text)

17.4.15.2: Japan

Prince Shōtoku's Constitution

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/shotoku.pdf

Yoshinogari (a Yayoi Period archaeological site)

http://www.yoshinogari.jp/en/

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.5: The Greek World from Bronze Age to Roman Conquest

This chapter's title refers to the Greek World, rather than Greece. While Greece is a unified country today, the territory of the present-day country was not unified under one rule until the rise of the Macedonians in the fourth century BCE. Instead, the basic unit of organization in the period covered in this chapter was the ***polis***, an independent city-state, which consisted of a walled city that controlled and protected the farmland around it. Historians estimate that close to 1,500 of these city-states dotted the ancient Greek landscape.

17.5.1: Chronology

17.5.2: Introduction

17.5.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.5.4: Key Terms

17.5.5: Geography and Topography

17.5.6: Periods of Greek History

17.5.7: Methodology- Sources and Problem

17.5.8: From Mythology to History

17.5.9: Archaic Greece

17.5.10: The Classical Period

17.5.11: Hellenistic Period

17.5.12: Conclusion

17.5.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.5.14: Links of Primary Sources

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17.5.1: Chronology

c. 3300 – 1150 BCE Bronze Age

c. 1100 – 700 BCE Dark Ages

c. 700 – 480 BCE Archaic Period

480 – 323 BCE Classical Period

431 – 404 BCE The Peloponnesian War

323 – 146 BCE Hellenistic Period

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17.5.2: Introduction

Sometime in the eighth century BCE, an aristocratic resident of the Greek trading colony of Pithekoussai—located on the tiny island of Ischia just off the coast of Naples in Italy—held a symposium at his home. Most of what happened at the party stayed at the party, but what we do know is that it must have been a good one. One of the guests, presumably operating under the influence of his host's excellent wine, took the liberty of scratching the following ditty onto one of his host's fine exported ceramic wine cups: "I am the Cup of Nestor, good to drink from. Whoever drinks from this cup, straightaway the desire of beautifully-crowned Aphrodite will seize him."



Figure **17.5.2.1**: "The Cup of Nestor" | Pythekoussai this so-called Cup of Nestor is one of the earliest examples of writing in the Greek alphabet, as well as the earliest known written reference to the Homeric epics. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Antonius Proximo" via Wikimedia Commons)

While party pranks do not commonly make history, this one has: this so-called **Cup of Nestor** is one of the earliest examples of writing in the **Greek alphabet**, as well as the earliest known written reference to the Homeric epics. Overall, this cup and the inscription on it exemplify the mobility of the Ancient Greeks and their borrowing of skills and culture from others around the Mediterranean while, at the same time, cultivating a set of values specific to themselves. After all, just like the very residents of Pithekoussai, the cup had originally made the journey all the way from the island of Euboea, off the coast of Athens, to Pithekoussai, on the island of Ischia.

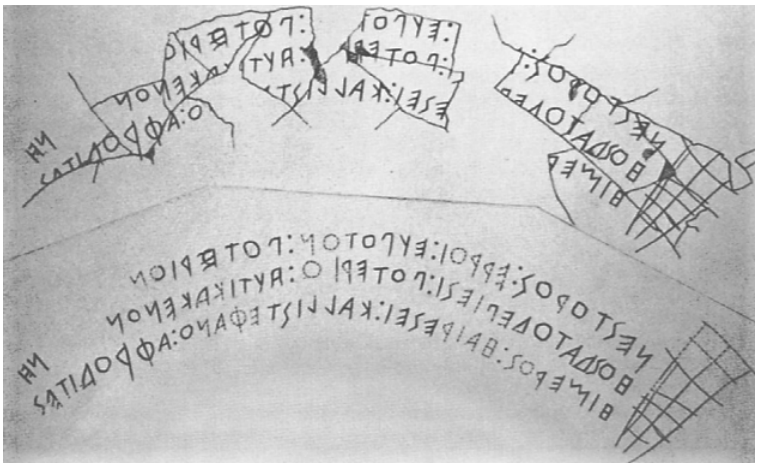


Figure **17.5.2.2**: "The Cup of Nestor" | Detailed reconstruction of the inscription. (Public Domain; User "Dbachmann" via Wikimedia Commons)

Furthermore, the new script, in which the daring guest wrote on the cup, had just recently been borrowed and adapted by the Greeks from the **Phoenicians**, a seafaring nation based in modern-day Lebanon. Indeed, our clever poet wrote from right to left, just like the Phoenicians. Finally, the poem mentions Nestor, one of the heroes of **Homer's *Iliad***, an epic about the **Trojan War**, and a source of common values that all Greeks held dear: military valor, competitive excellence on both the battlefield and in all areas of everyday life, and a sense of brotherhood that manifested itself most obviously in the shared language of all the Greeks. That feeling of kinship facilitated collaboration of all the Greeks in times of crisis from the mythical Trojan War to the **Persian Wars**, and finally, during the Greeks' resistance against the Roman conquest.



Map **17.5.2.3**: Map of the Island of Ischia and the Environs | The “Cup of Nestor” journeyed from the island of Euboea, off the coast of Athens, to Pithekoussai, on the island of Ischia. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Norman Eistein” via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.5.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. In what ways did Greek geography and topography impact the history of the ancient Greek world?

2. What are the different periods of Greek history, and what are the chief defining characteristics of each period?

3. What primary sources are available for the study of Greek history, and what are the limitations of these sources?

4. What were the most important developments in the Greek world in the Archaic Period?

5. What was the significance of the Persian Wars for the subsequent history of the Greek World?

6. What were the stages of the Peloponnesian War? How did the outcome of the war impact Greece in the fourth century?

7. What were some of the most important contributions of Classical Athens in the areas of art, government and law, philosophy, and literature?

8. How and why did the Macedonians conquer the Greek world? Why did the empire conquered by Philip and Alexander disintegrate after Alexander's death?

9. What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Hellenistic kingdoms as political entities? Why did they prove to be inherently unstable?

10. What were some of the achievements and legacies of the Hellenistic period?

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17.5.4: Key Terms

- Achaemenid Empire
- Alexander the Great
- Alexandria
- Antigonid dynasty
- Archaeological evidence
- Archaic Period
- Archidamian War
- Archimedes of Syracuse
- Aristophanes
- Aristotle
- Asia Minor
- Athenian democracy
- Athens
- Battle of Chaeronea
- Battle of Leuctra
- Battle of Marathon
- Battle of Thermopylae
- Bronze Age
- Chigi vase
- Classical Period
- Cleisthenes
- Cleopatra VII
- Crete
- “Cup of Nestor”
- Cynic philosophers
- Cyrus the Great
- Darius
- Dark Ages
- Decelean War
- Delian League / Athenian Empire
- Delphi
- *Ekklesia*
- Epicureanism
- Epidaurus
- Euripides
- First Peloponnesian War
- *Gerousia*
- Great Library of Alexandria
- Greek alphabet
- Greek colonization
- Hannukah
- Hellenistic Period
- Helots
- Herodotus
- Herophilus of Chalcedon
- Homer
- Homer’s *Iliad*
- Hoplite phalanx

- Kingdom of Pergamon
- *Kleos*
- Isthmus of Corinth
- Linear A
- Linear B
- Macedonian Wars with Rome / Third Macedonian War
- Magna Graecia
- “Mask of Agamemnon”
- Mauryan Empire
- Megara Hyblaea
- Messenia
- Minoans
- Mycenaeans
- Oligarchy
- Olympic Games
- Orientalizing style
- *Othismos*
- Pan-Hellenic
- Peace of Nicias
- Peisistratus
- Peloponnese
- Peloponnesian War
- Pericles
- Persian Wars
- Pharos of Alexandria
- Philip II of Macedon
- Phoenicians
- Plato
- *Polis / poleis*
- Ptolemaic Egypt
- Ptolemy I Soter
- Pythia
- *Sarissa*
- Seleucid Empire
- Septuagint
- Sicilian Expedition
- Skepticism
- Socrates
- Solon
- Sophocles
- Sparta
- Spartan constitution
- Stoic philosophy
- Theban Hegemony
- Theban Sacred Band
- *Thetes*
- Thucydides
- Tyranny
- Tyranny of the Thirty
- Trojan War

- Tyrtaeus
- Wars of the *Diadochi*
- Xerxes

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17.5.5: Geography and Topography

This chapter's title refers to the Greek World, rather than Greece. While Greece is a unified country today, the territory of the present-day country was not unified under one rule until the rise of the Macedonians in the fourth century BCE. Instead, the basic unit of organization in the period covered in this chapter was the ***polis***, an independent city-state, which consisted of a walled city that controlled and protected the farmland around it. Historians estimate that close to 1,500 of these city-states dotted the ancient Greek landscape.

Each of these ***poleis*** (plural form of *polis*) possessed its own form of government, law-code, army, cults of patron gods, and overall culture that set it apart from the other city-states. While the two most famous *poleis*, **Athens** and **Sparta**, controlled vast territories of farmland, most city-states were quite small, with a population of just a few thousand citizens. Furthermore, the Greek world in antiquity encompassed much more than present-day Greece, extending as far as Italy in the West and the territories of modern-day Turkey and Ukraine in the East.

The geography and topography of the Greek mainland and the Mediterranean region surrounding it influenced the history of the Greek people in a number of crucial ways. First, the mountainous nature of mainland Greece, especially in the north, allowed different regions to remain somewhat isolated. The most isolated of all, Thessaly and Macedon, were viewed as uncivilized barbarians by the rest of the Greeks in the Archaic and Classical periods (one oft-mentioned example of their "barbarism" in Greek literature is that they drank their wine undiluted!)and largely kept to themselves until their rise to military prominence in the mid-fourth century BCE.

The mountains throughout the northern portion of mainland Greece, in addition to isolating regions from each other and promoting regional culture, also provided tactical defenses in the face of external attacks. Most famously, the Persians learned the hard way about the challenges of navigating the Greek landscape during the second Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. Indeed, the story of the 300 Spartans who fought to the death at the **Battle of Thermopylae** addresses the challenge of the Persian army trying to cross the mountains to the north of Attica in order to invade Athens by land.

The **Isthmus**, a narrow strip of land controlled by Corinth, played a similar role in separating mainland Greece from the large peninsula of the **Peloponnese**. An inland city in southern Peloponnese, Sparta conquered **Messenia**, its surrounding region, early in its history and extended political control over much of the peninsula by early fifth century BCE. Unless the interests of Sparta herself were directly involved, Sparta practiced a policy of isolation and limited military intervention in other city-states affairs and wars, a practice enabled due to Sparta's far southern location in Peloponnese.



Map **17.5.5.1**: Map of the Ancient Greek city-states at the beginning of the Persian Wars | Historians estimate that close to 1,500 of these city-states dotted the ancient Greek landscape. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Bibi Saint-Poi” via Wikimedia Commons)

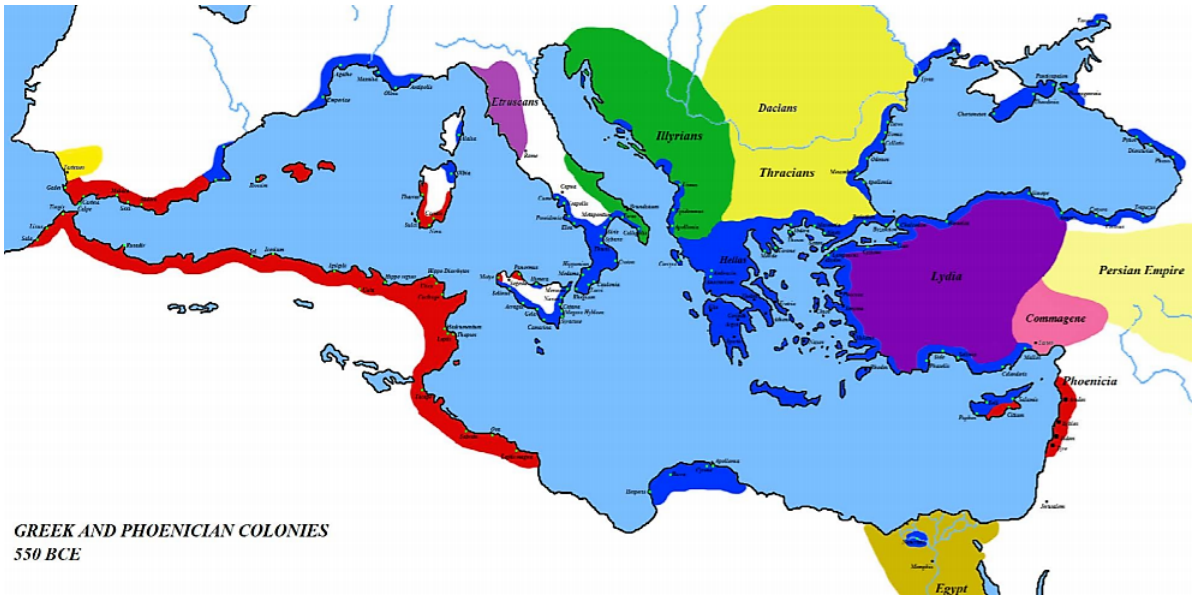
No less influential for the history of the Greek city-states than the topographical features were the resources that the land in different regions provided for agriculture and manufacturing. Mainland Greece was notoriously unsuitable for agriculture. Growing the grain staples wheat and barley in the rocky and clay-filled soil of Athens was especially difficult, while the mountainous regions across the entire mainland were optimal for herding, rather than agriculture. One notable exception, however, were olive trees, which grew abundantly. Olive oil, as a result, was ubiquitously used for eating, bathing, and lamps, and even as currency or prize for victors in athletic games. In addition, early on in their history, the inhabitants of Attica and Corinth found a way to profit from the clay in their soil by developing advanced ceramic pot-making and decorating techniques. Remains of Athenian and Corinthian wares have been found at archaeological sites all over the Mediterranean, attesting to their popularity abroad.



Figure **17.5.5.1**: Corinthian black-figure amphora, depicting the myth of Perseus and Andromeda c. 575-550 BCE, found in Cerveteri, Italy | The inhabitants of Attica and Corinth found a way to profit from the clay in their soil by developing advanced ceramic pot-making and decorating techniques. Remains of Athenian and Corinthian wares have been found at archaeological sites all over the Mediterranean, attesting to their popularity abroad. (CC BY-SA 2.0; User “Butko” via Wikimedia Commons)

Finally, precious metals were in short supply in the mainland, but the few that were available had an impact on the history of their regions. Most famously, the discovery of the silver mines at Laurion in Attica contributed to the increased prosperity of Athens in the mid-fifth century BCE.

But the topography and geography of mainland Greece and the Peloponnese only tells us a part of the story. The Aegean is filled with islands, some of which remained autonomous, but most came under the control of the Athenian maritime empire in the fifth century BCE. In addition, the **Greek colonization** movement of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE resulted in the foundation of numerous Greek city-states in **Asia Minor** (modern-day Turkey), **Magna Graecia** (southern Italy), Sicily, and the Black Sea littoral.



Map **17.5.5.2**: Map of the Greek (blue areas) and Phoenician city-states and colonies (red areas) c. 550 BCE. (User "Javierfv1212"; User "Javierfv1212" via Wikimedia Commons)

The history of the Greek world from its earliest settlements to the Roman conquest, therefore, is inextricably tied together with the history of the Mediterranean as a whole. And since the Greek areas of influence overlapped with those controlled by the Phoenicians, Persians, and eventually the Romans, interactions, often warlike, were unavoidable as well. As the modern historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell noted, the Mediterranean was "the Corrupting Sea"1whose inhabitants were like frogs around the pond, watching each other, and borrowing each other's cultural and technological achievements. As this chapter and the next will show, the Greeks and the Romans were the farthest-leaping frogs of all.

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17.5.6: Periods of Greek History

Historians today separate Greek history into particular periods, which shared specific features throughout the Greek world:

The **Bronze Age** (c. 3,300 – 1,150 BCE) – a period characterized by the use of bronze tools and weapons. In addition, two particular periods during the Bronze Age are crucial in the development of early Greece: the Minoan Age on the island of **Crete** (c. 2,000 – 1,450 BCE) and the Mycenean period on mainland Greece (c. 1,600 – 1,100 BCE), both of them characterized by massive palaces, remnants of which still proudly stand today. The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations had writing (dubbed **Linear A** and **Linear B**, respectively), which they used for keeping lists and palace inventories.

The **Dark Ages** (c. 1,100 – 700 BCE) – a period that is "dark" from the archaeological perspective, which means that the monumental palaces of the Mycenean period disappear, and the archaeological record reveals a general poverty and loss of culture throughout the Greek world. For instance, the Linear A and Linear B writing systems disappear. The Greeks do not rediscover writing until the invention of the Greek alphabet at the end of the Dark Ages or the early Archaic Period.

Archaic Period (c. 700 – 480 BCE) – the earliest period for which written evidence survives; this is the age of the rise of the Greek city-states, colonization, and the Persian Wars.

Classical Period (c. 480 – 323 BCE) – the period from the end of the Persian Wars to the death of **Alexander the Great**. One of the most important events during this period is the Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE), which pitted Athens against Sparta, and forced all other Greek city-states to choose to join one side or the other. This period ends with the death of Alexander the Great, who had unified the Greek world into a large kingdom with himself at its helm.

Hellenistic Period (323 – 146 BCE) – the period from the death of Alexander to the Roman conquest of Greece; this is the age of the Hellenistic monarchies ruling over territories previously conquered by Alexander and his generals. Some historians end this period in 30 BCE, with the death of **Cleopatra VII**, the last surviving ruler of Egypt who was a descendant of one of Alexander's generals.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to examining each of these periods in greater detail, covering chief political, military, and cultural developments.

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17.5.7: Methodology- Sources and Problem

Before launching into the story of the early Greek world, it is important to consider the methodology that Greek historians utilize. In other words, how do we know what we know about the Greek world? Modern scholars of ancient history are notoriously obsessed with evaluating their primary sources critically, and with good reason. Studying Greek history, especially in its earliest periods, is like putting together a puzzle, most of whose pieces are missing, and some pieces from another puzzle have also been added in for good measure. Greek history requires careful consideration of a wide range of sources, which fall into two broad categories: literary sources (including both fiction and non-fiction), and material culture. The job of the historian, then, is to reconstruct the story of the Greek people using these very different sources.

While historians of the modern world rely on such archival sources as newspapers, magazines, and personal diaries and correspondence of individuals and groups, historians of the ancient world must use every available source to reconstruct the world in which their subject dwelled. Literary sources, such as epics, lyric poetry, and drama, may seem strange for historians to use, as they do not necessarily describe specific historical events. Yet, as in the case of other early civilizations, such sources are a crucial window into the culture and values of the people who produced them. For instance, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, discussed in Chapter 2, is a key text for the study of early Mesopotamia.

The earliest literary sources for Greek history are the Homeric epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey.* They are, however, one of the most challenging sources to interpret, with one modern historian dubbing them a "historian's headache."[2] Composed orally before the existence of the Greek alphabet, the epics were not written down until sometime in the sixth century BCE. The epics most likely do not reflect the society of any particular Greek city-state in any one period, but rather consist of an amalgam of features from the Bronze Age to the early Archaic Period. Their value for historians, as a result, rests more on their impact on subsequent Greek culture, rather than on their providing information about Bronze Age Greeks. More than any other literary source, the Homeric Epics influenced the mentality of the Greeks in thinking about war and what it means to be a hero.

Most other literary sources from the Archaic and Classical periods are easier to interpret than the Homeric Epics, as we often can date these later sources more precisely and thus know the period whose values or problems they reflect. There is, however, one important limitation to keep in mind: the overwhelming majority of surviving literature is from Athens, with very few sources from other city-states. Some of this distribution of evidence has to do with the differing values of the city-states themselves. For example, while Greeks of the Classical period considered Sparta to be as great a city as Athens, Spartans valued military valor over all else, so they did not cultivate arts and letters the way Athenians did. As a result, the only literary sources from Sparta are the works of two poets, Alcman and Tyrtaeus. Tyrtaeus' military elegies, like the Homeric epics, glorify heroic death in battle over life without honor and were likely sung by Spartan warriors as they marched into battle.

Several genres of non-fiction survive as well, allowing historians to study specific events and problems in the history of the Greek world, and especially Athens. The works of three major historians survive from Classical Athens. **Herodotus**, dubbed the Father of History, wrote the *Histories* about the Persian Wars in mid-fifth century BCE. **Thucydides**, an Athenian general in the Peloponnesian War, wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War over the course of the war (431 – 404 BCE). Finally, Xenophon wrote a history of the end of the Peloponnesian War, starting with 411 BCE, where Thucydides' work ended, and into the fourth century. In addition to the works of the historians, philosophical treatises – most notably, those of **Plato** and **Aristotle** – provide crucial insight into the political thought, moral values, and perceptions of the world in late fifth and fourth centuries BCE. The approximately 100 surviving courtroom speeches from the same period likewise provide us with a window into the Athenian legal system. Finally, the Hippocratic corpus, a series of medical treatises and physicians' journals from the Classical period, help us to understand the Greeks' views of the human body and diseases. But in addition to the geographical restrictions of these sources, which largely document Athens, it is also important to note two other key limitations of the available evidence. First, virtually all of the literary sources were written by men and provide very little evidence of the lives and perspectives of women in the Greek world, except as seen through the eyes of men. Second, most of the authors were wealthy and socially prominent individuals; thus, their perspective does not reflect that of less affluent citizens and slaves.

Archaeological evidence thankfully allows historians to fill some of the gaps in the literary evidence, but also comes with problems of its own. One joke that refers to the optimism of archaeologists reflects some of these problems of interpretation: whenever an archaeologist finds three stones that are together, he labels the find as a Minoan palace. Whenever he finds two stones that are together, he thinks he has found a city wall. Whenever he finds one building stone, he thinks he has found a house.



Figure 17.5.7.1: Megara Hyblaea, main road, looking north | The careful planning of the road and the buildings is still evident, as the ruins on both sides of the road are perfectly aligned. (CC BY-SA 2.0; User "Alun Salt" via Wikimedia Commons)

Archaeological evidence thankfully allows historians to fill some of the gaps in the literary evidence, but also comes with problems of its own. One joke that refers to the optimism of archaeologists reflects some of these problems of interpretation: whenever an archaeologist finds three stones that are together, he labels the find as a Minoan palace. Whenever he finds two stones that are together, he thinks he has found a city wall. Whenever he finds one building stone, he thinks he has found a house.

Still, archaeological sources provide us with key information about different aspects of everyday life in different city-states. For example, the excavations of the sixth-century BCE colony **Megara Hyblaea** in Sicily shows that Greek colonists were interested in city planning and in equality of citizens, as demonstrated by the equal size of the lots.



Figure 17.5.7.2: Attic Black-Figure Hydria, c. 520 BCE | Shows women getting water from a public fountain. (CC BY-SA 2.5; User "Jastrow" via Wikimedia Commons)

Material finds, such as pottery remains, in different sites across the Mediterranean also allow historians to map trading routes – for instance, Figures 17.5.7.1 and 17.5.7.2 show vases that were made in Euboea and Corinth respectively, but were found in Greek colonies in Italy. In addition, images on pottery provide information about stories and myths that have entered popular culture and that sometimes reflect further aspects of everyday life. For instance, the prevalence of images of women gathering at public fountains on Athenian hydriae (water pots) from the late sixth century BCE shows the importance of the public fountains for the social life of women in Athens in the period.

Finally, written archaeological sources, such as inscriptions on stone or pottery shards from all over the Greek world, and papyri from Hellenistic Egypt, are the equivalent of documentary archives from the ancient world. The evidence from epigraphy (inscriptions) includes laws that were written on large stones and set up in public, such as the monumental law-code from Gortyn, Crete, and lists of war-dead, as well as private tomb inscriptions.

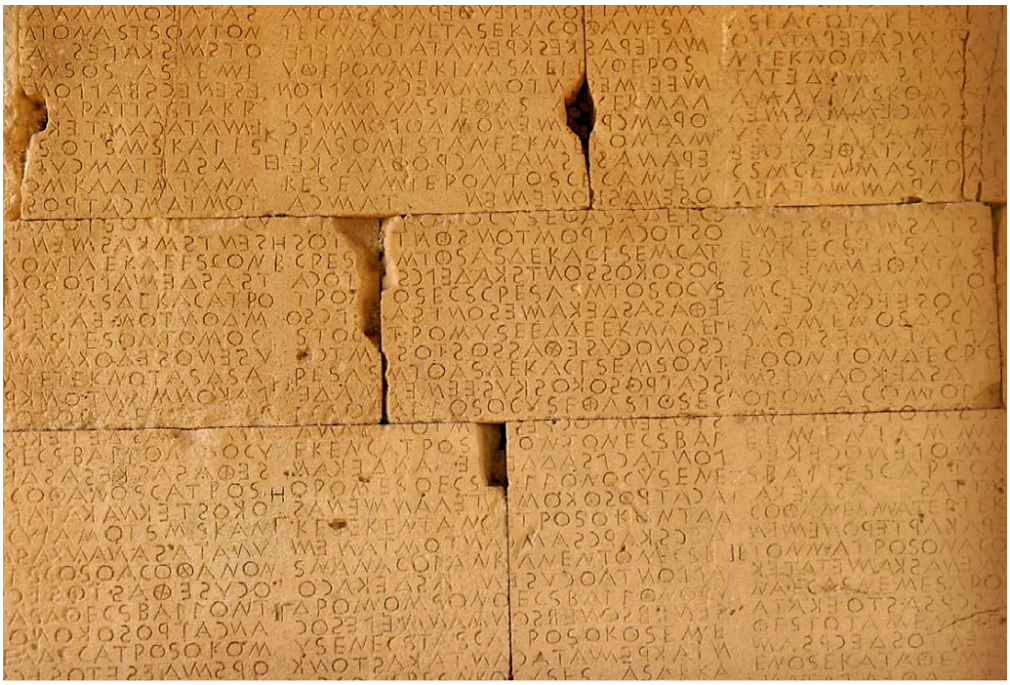


Figure **17.5.7.3**: The Gortyn Code (c. fifth century BCE) | Close-up of part of the inscription. (CC BY-SA 2.5; User “Afrank99” via Wikimedia Commons)

Papyri, on the other hand, include such private documents as prenuptial agreements (among the strangest are prenuptial documents for brother-sister marriages – legal in Egypt but nowhere else in the Greek world), divorce documents, loans, and village police reports (cattle theft appears to have been a serious problem in the Faiyum in the Hellenistic Period!).

Taken together, the literary and archaeological sources allow the historian to complete much more of the puzzle than would have been possible with just one of these types of sources. Still, significant gaps in knowledge remain nevertheless, and are, perhaps, one of the joys of studying ancient history: the historian gets to play the part of a sleuth, attempting to reconstruct the history of events based on just a few available clues.

2 Kurt Raaflaub, “A Historian’s Deadache: How to Read ‘Homeric Society’?” in N. Fisher and H. Van wees eds., Archaic Greece: New Approaches and New Evidence (London: Duckworth: 1998).

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17.5.8: From Mythology to History

The terms “mythology” and “history” may seem, by modern definitions, to be antithetical. After all, mythology refers to stories that are clearly false, of long-forgotten gods and heroes and their miraculous feats. History, on the other hand, refers to actual events that involved real people. And yet, the idea that the two are opposites would have seemed baffling to a typical resident of the ancient Mediterranean world. Rather, gods and myths were part of the everyday life, and historical events could become subsumed by myths just as easily as myths could become a part of history. For instance, Gilgamesh, the hero of the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, was a real king of Uruk, yet he also became the hero of the epic. Each Greek city-state, in particular, had a foundation myth describing its origins as well as its own patron gods and goddesses. Etiological myths, furthermore, served to explain why certain institutions or practices existed; for instance, the tragic trilogy *Oresteia* of the Athenian poet Aeschylus tells the etiological myth for the establishment of the Athenian murder courts in the Classical period.

Yet, while the Greeks saw mythology and history as related concepts and sometimes as two sides of the same coin, one specific mythical event marked, in the eyes of the earliest known Greek historians, the beginning of the story of Greek-speaking peoples. That event was the Trojan War.

17.5.8.1: Homer and the Trojan War

It is telling that the two earliest Greek historians, Herodotus, writing in the mid-fifth century BCE, and Thucydides, writing in the last third of the fifth century BCE, began their respective histories with the Trojan War, each treating it as a historical event. The Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* portray the war as an organized attack of a unified Greek army against Troy, a city in Asia Minor (see map 5.5.1). The instigating offense? The Trojan prince Paris kidnapped Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, from her husband Menelaus, king of Sparta. This offense, interpreted as a slight to Menelaus’ honor, prompted Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and Menelaus’ brother, to raise an army from the entire Greek world and sail to Troy. The mythical tradition had it that after a brutal ten-year siege, the Greeks resorted to a trick: they presented the Trojans with a hollow wooden horse, filled with armed soldiers. The Trojans tragically accepted the gift, ostensibly intended as a dedication to the goddess Athena. That same night, the armed contingent emerged from the horse, and the city finally fell to the Greeks. Picking up the story ten years after the end of the Trojan War, the *Odyssey* then told the story of Odysseus’s struggles to return home after the war and the changes that reverberated throughout the Greek world after the fall of Troy.

The Homeric epics were the foundation of Greek education in the Archaic and Classical periods and, as such, are a historian’s best source of pan-Hellenic values. A major theme throughout both epics is personal honor, which Homeric heroes value more than the collective cause. For example, when Agamemnon slights Achilles’ honor in the beginning of the *Iliad*, Achilles, the best hero of the Greeks, withdraws from battle for much of the epic, even though his action causes the Greeks to start losing battles until he rejoins the fight. A related theme is competitive excellence, with ***kleos*** (eternal glory) as its goal: all Greek heroes want to be the best; thus, even while fighting in the same army, they see each other as competition. Ultimately, Achilles has to make a choice: he can live a long life and die unknown, or he can die in battle young and have everlasting glory. Achilles’ selection of the second option made him the inspiration for such historical Greek warriors and generals as Alexander the Great, who brought his scroll copy of the *Iliad* with him on all campaigns. Finally, the presence of the gods in the background of the Trojan War shows the Greeks’ belief that the gods were everywhere, and acted in the lives of mortals. These gods could be powerful benefactors and patrons of individuals who respected them and sought their favor, or vicious enemies, bent on destruction. Indeed, early in the *Iliad*, the god Apollo sends a plague on the Greek army at Troy, as punishment for disrespecting his priest.

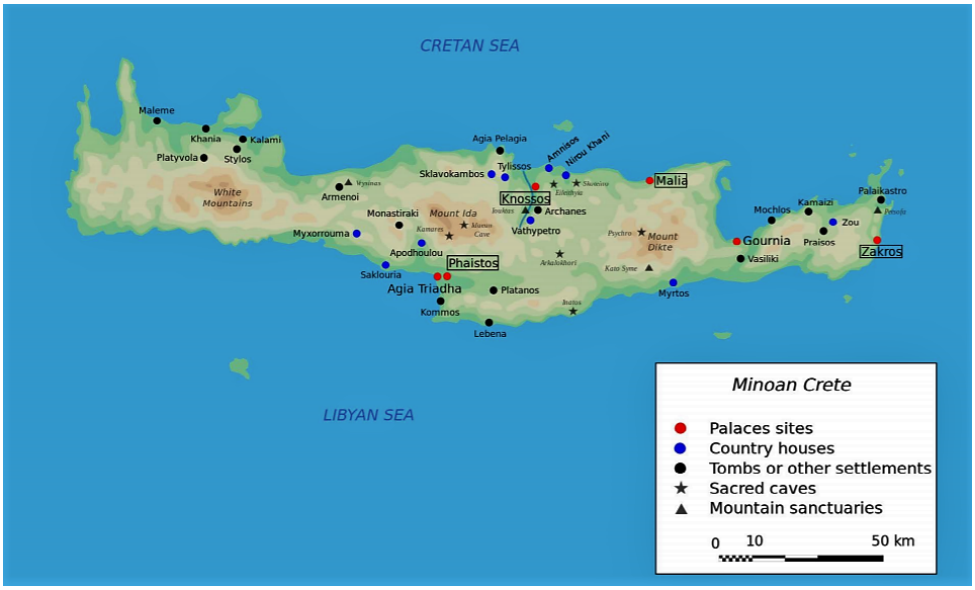
It is important to note that while the Homeric epics influenced Greek values from the Archaic period on, they do not reflect the reality of the Greek world in any one period. Furthermore, they were not composed by a single poet, **Homer**; indeed, it is possible that Homer never existed. Because the epics were composed orally by multiple bards over the period of several hundred years, they combine details about technological and other aspects of the Bronze Age with those of the Dark Ages and even the early Archaic Age. For instance, the heroes use bronze weapons side-by-side with iron. Archaeological evidence, however, allows historians to reconstruct to some extent a picture of the Greek world in the Bronze Age and the Dark Ages.

17.5.8.2: Greece in the Bronze Age, and the Dark Ages

While there were people living in mainland Greece already in the Neolithic Period, historians typically begin the study of the Greeks as a unique civilization in the Bronze Age, with the **Minoans**. The first literate civilization in Europe, the Minoans were a palace civilization that flourished on the island of **Crete** c. 2,000 – 1,450 BCE.

As befits island-dwellers, they were traders and seafarers; indeed, the Greek historian Thucydides credits them with being the first Greeks to sail on ships. Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who first excavated Crete in the early 1900s, dubbed them Minoans, after the mythical Cretan king Minos who was best known for building a labyrinth to house the Minotaur, a monster that was half-man, half-bull. Bulls appear everywhere in surviving Minoan art, suggesting that they indeed held a prominent place in Minoan mythology and religion.

Four major palace sites survive on Crete. The most significant of them, Knossos, has been restored and reconstructed for the benefit of modern tourists.



Map **17.5.8.1**: Map of Minoan Crete (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Bibi Saint-Poi" via Wikimedia Commons)

Historians hypothesize that the palaces were the homes of local rulers, who ruled and protected the surrounding farmland. The palaces seem to have kept records in two different writing systems, the earliest known in Europe: the Cretan hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts. Unfortunately, neither of these systems has been deciphered, but it is likely that these were palace inventories and records pertaining to trade. The palaces had no surrounding walls, suggesting that the Cretans maintained peace with each other and felt safe from outside attacks, since they lived on an island. This sense of security proved to be a mistake as, around 1,450 BCE, the palaces were violently destroyed by invaders, possibly the **Mycenaeans** who arrived from mainland Greece. Recent discoveries also suggest that at least some of the destruction may have been the result of tsunamis which accompanied the Santorini/ Thera volcanic eruption in the 1600s BCE.



Figure **17.5.8.1**: The Bull-Leaping Fresco from Knossos (CC0 1.0; User "Jebulon" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Mycenaeans, similarly to the Minoans, were a palace civilization. Flourishing on mainland Greece c. 1,600 – 1,100 BCE, they received their name from Mycenae, the most elaborate surviving palace and the mythical home of Agamemnon, the commander-inchief of the Greek army in the Trojan War. The archaeological excavations of graves in Mycenae reveal a prosperous civilization that produced elaborate pottery, bronze weapons and tools, and extravagant jewelry and other objects made of precious metals and gems. One of the most famous finds is the so-called "**Mask of Agamemnon,**" a burial mask with which one aristocrat was buried, made of hammered gold.



Figure **17.5.8.2**: Reconstructed North Portico at Knossos (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Bernard Gagnon" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Mycenaeans also kept palace records in a syllabic script, known as Linear B. Related to the Cretan Linear A script, Linear B, however, has been deciphered, and identified as Greek.



Figure 17.5.8.3: Mask of Agamemnon, Mycenae (CC BY 2.0 ; User “Xuan Che” via Wikimedia Commons)

Archaeological evidence also shows that sometime in the 1,200s BCE, the Mycenaean palaces suffered a series of attacks and were gradually abandoned over the next century. The period that begins around 1,000 BCE is known as the “Dark Ages” because of the notable decline, in contrast with the preceding period. The Mycenaean Linear B script disappears, and archaeological evidence shows a poorer Greece with a decline in material wealth and life expectancy. Some contact, however, must have remained with the rest of the Mediterranean, as shown by the emergence of the Greek alphabet, adapted from the Phoenician writing system towards the end of the Dark Ages or early in the Archaic Period.

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17.5.9: Archaic Greece

The story of the Greek world in the Dark Ages could mostly be described as a story of fragmentation. With a few exceptions, individual sites had limited contact with each other. The Archaic period, however, appears to have been a time of growing contacts and connections between different parts of mainland Greece. Furthermore, it was a time of expansion, as the establishment of overseas colonies and cities brought the Greeks to Italy and Sicily in the West, and Asia Minor and the Black Sea littoral in the East. Furthermore, while Greeks in the Archaic period saw themselves as citizens of individual city-states, this period also witnessed the rise of a **Pan-Hellenic** identity, as all Greeks saw themselves connected by virtue of their common language, religion, and Homeric values. This Pan-Hellenic identity was ultimately cemented during the Persian Wars: two invasions of Greece by the Persian Empire at the end of the Archaic period.

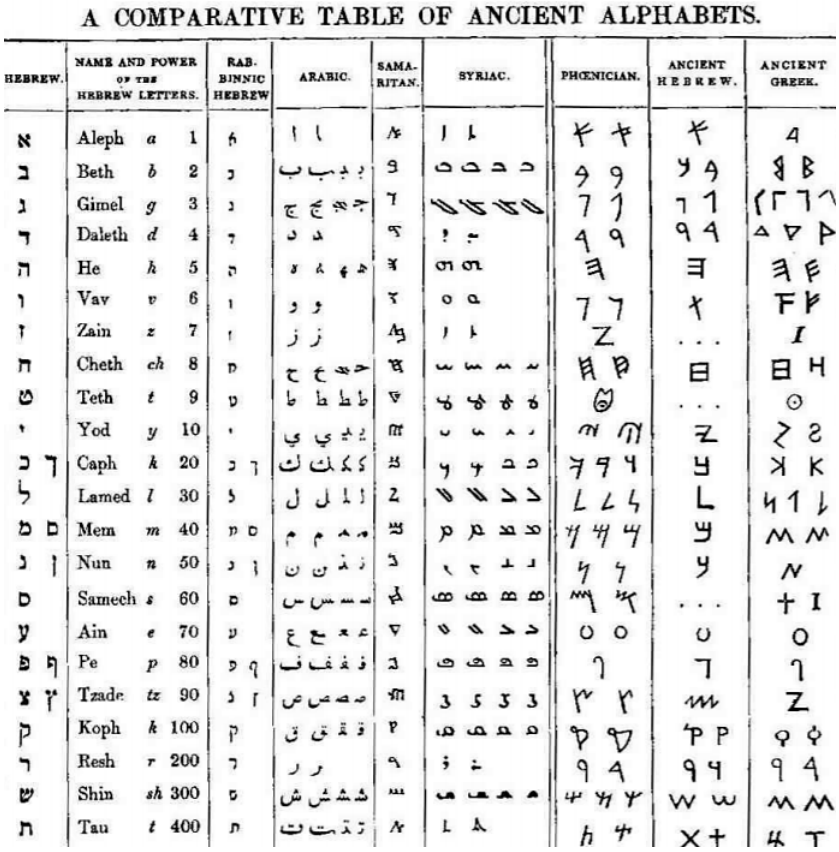


Figure **17.5.9.1**: Comparative chart of writing systems in the Ancient Mediterranean | As this chart shows, in addition to the influence of the Phoenician alphabet on the Greek, there were close connections between the Phoenician, Egyptian, and Hebrew writing systems as well. (Public Domain; Samuel Prideaux Tregelles via Google Books)

17.5.9.1: Rise of the Hoplite Phalanx and the Polis

A Corinthian vase, known today as the **Chigi Vase**, made in the mid-seventh century BCE, presents a tantalizing glimpse of the changing times from the Dark Ages to the Archaic Period. Taking up much of the decorated space on the vase is a battle scene. Two armies of warriors with round shields, helmets, and spears are facing each other and appear to be marching in formation towards each other in preparation for attack.

Modern scholars largely consider the vase to be the earliest artistic portrayal of the **hoplite phalanx,** a new way of fighting that spread around the Greek world in the early Archaic Age and that coincided with the rise of another key institution for subsequent Greek history: the *polis*, or city-state. From the early Archaic period to the conquest of the Greek world by Philip and Alexander in the late fourth century BCE, the *polis* was the central unit of organization in the Greek world.

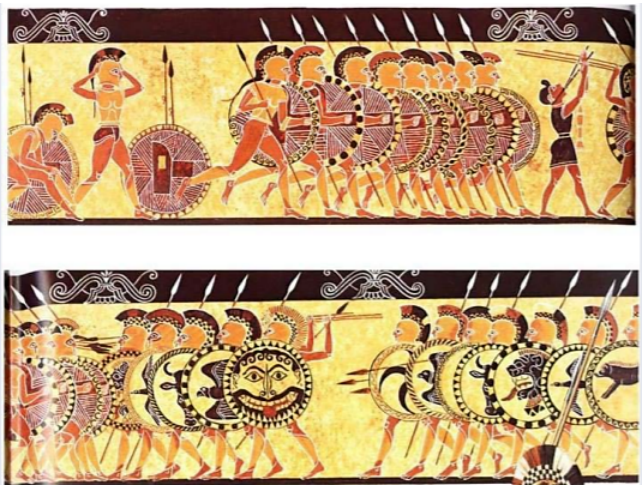


Figure **17.5.9.2**: "Unrolled" reconstructed image from the Chigi Vase (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Phokion" via Wikimedia Commons)

While warfare in the *Iliad* consisted largely of duels between individual heroes, the hoplite phalanx was a new mode of fighting that did not rely on the skill of individuals. Rather, it required all soldiers in the line to work together as a whole. Armed in the same way – with a helmet, spear, and the round shield, the *hoplon*, which gave the hoplites their name – the soldiers were arranged in rows, possibly as much as seven deep. Each soldier carried his shield on his left arm, protecting the left side of his own body and the right side of his comrade to the left. Working together as one, then, the phalanx would execute the othismos (a mass shove) during battle, with the goal of shoving the enemy phalanx off the battlefield would execute the ***othismos*** (a mass shove) during battle, with the goal of shoving the enemy phalanx off the battlefield.

Historians do not know which came into existence first, the phalanx or the *polis*, but the two clearly reflect a similar ideology. In fact, the phalanx could be seen as a microcosm of the *polis*, exemplifying the chief values of the *polis* on a small scale. Each *polis* was a fully self-sufficient unit of organization, with its own laws, definition of citizenship, government, army, economy, and local cults. Regardless of the differences between the many *poleis* in matters of citizenship, government, and law, one key similarity is clear: the survival of the *polis* depended on the dedication of all its citizens to the collective well-being of the city-state. This dedication included service in the phalanx. As a result, citizenship in most Greek city-states was closely connected to military service, and women were excluded from citizenship. Furthermore, since hoplites had to provide their own armor, these citizen-militias effectively consisted of landowners. This is not to say, though, that the poorer citizens were entirely excluded from serving their city. One example of a way in which they may have participated even in the phalanx appears on the Chigi Vase. Marching between two lines of warriors is an unarmed man, playing a double-reed flute (seen on the right end of the top band in Figure **17.5.9.2**). Since the success of the phalanx depended on marching together in step, the flute-player's music would have been essential to ensure that everyone kept the same tempo during the march.

17.5.9.2: Greek Religion

One theory modern scholars have proposed for the rise of the polis connects the locations of the city-states to known cult-sites. The theory argues that the Greeks of the Archaic period built city-states around these precincts of various gods in order to live closer to them and protect them. While impossible to know for sure if this theory or any other regarding the rise of the polis is true, the building of temples in cities during the Archaic period shows the increasing emphasis that the poleis were placing on religion.

It is important to note that Greek religion seems to have been, at least to some extent, an element of continuity from the Bronze Age to the Archaic period and beyond. The important role that the gods play in the Homeric epics attests to their prominence in the oral tradition, going back to the Dark Ages. Furthermore, names of the following major gods worshipped in the Archaic period and beyond were found on the deciphered Linear B tablets: Zeus, king of the gods and god of weather, associated with the thunderbolt; Hera, Zeus' wife and patroness of childbirth; Poseidon, god of the sea; Hermes, messenger god and patron of thieves and merchants; Athena, goddess of war and wisdom and patroness of women's crafts; Ares, god of war; Dionysus, god of wine; and the twins Apollo, god of the sun and both god of the plague and a healer, and Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon. All of these gods continued to be the major divinities in Greek religion for its duration, and many of them were worshipped as patron gods of individual cities, such as Artemis at Sparta, and Athena at Athens.

While many local cults of even major gods were truly local in appeal, a few local cults achieved truly Pan-Hellenic appeal. Drawing visitors from all over the Greek world, these Pan-Hellenic cults were seen as belonging equally to all the Greeks. One of the most famous examples is the cult of Asclepius at Epidaurus. Asclepius, son of Apollo, was a healer god, and his shrine at **Epidaurus** attracted the pilgrims from all over the Greek world. Visitors suffering from illness practiced incubation, that is, spending the night in the temple, in the hopes of receiving a vision in their dreams suggesting a cure. In gratitude for the god's healing, some pilgrims dedicated casts of their healed body parts. Archaeological findings include a plentitude of ears, noses, arms, and feet.



Figure **17.5.9.3**: Themis and Aegeus | The Pythia seated on the tripod and holding a laurel branch – symbols of Apollo, who was the source of her prophecies. This is the only surviving image of the Pythia from ancient Greece (Public Domain; User "Bibi Saint-Poi" via Wikimedia Commons)

Starting out as local cults, several religious festivals that included athletic competitions as part of the celebration also achieved Pan-Hellenic prominence during the Archaic period. The most influential of these were the Olympic Games. Beginning in 776 BCE, the **Olympic Games** were held in Olympia every four years in honor of Zeus; they drew competitors from all over the Greek world, and even Persia. The Pan-Hellenic appeal of the Olympics is signified by the impact that these games had on Greek politics: for instance, a truce was in effect throughout the Greek world for the duration of each Olympics. In addition, the Olympics provided a Pan-Hellenic system of dating events by Olympiads or four-year cycles.

Finally, perhaps the most politically influential of the Pan-Hellenic cults was the oracle of Apollo at **Delphi**, established sometime in the eighth century BCE. Available for consultation only nine days a year, the oracle spoke responses to the questions asked by inquirers through a priestess, named the **Pythia**. The Pythia's responses came in the form of poetry and were notoriously difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, city-states and major rulers throughout the Greek world considered it essential to consult the oracle before embarking on any major endeavor, such as war or founding a colony.

17.5.9.3: Maritime Trade and Colonization

The historian Herodotus records that sometime c. 630 BCE, the king of the small island of Thera traveled to Delphi to offer a sacrifice and consult the oracle on a few minor points. To his surprise, the oracle's response had nothing to do with his queries. Instead, the Pythia directed him to found a colony in Libya, in North Africa. Having never heard of Libya, the king ignored the advice. A seven year drought ensued, and the Therans felt compelled to consult the oracle again. Receiving the same response as before, they finally sent out a group of colonists who eventually founded the city of Cyrene.



Figure **17.5.9.4**: **Archaic kouros (youth) statue, c. 530 BC** | Note the Egyptian hairstyle and body pose. (Public Domain; User "Mountain" via Wikimedia Commons)

While this story may sound absurd, it is similar to other foundation stories of Greek colonies and emphasizes the importance of the Delphic oracle. At the same time, though, this story still leaves open the question of motive: why did so many Greek citystates of the Archaic period send out colonies to other parts of the Greek world? Archaeology and foundation legends, such as those recorded by Herodotus, suggest two chief reasons: population pressures along with shortage of productive farmland in the cities on mainland Greece, and increased ease of trade that colonies abroad facilitated. In addition to resolving these two problems, however, the colonies also had the unforeseen impact of increasing interactions of the Greeks with the larger Mediterranean world and the ancient Near East. These interactions are visible, for instance, in the so-called **Orientalizing style** of art in the Archaic period, a style the Greeks borrowed from the Middle East and Egypt.

However, the presence of Greek colonies in Asia Minor also played a major role in bringing about the Greco-Persian Wars.

17.5.9.4: Aristocracy, Democracy, and Tyranny in Archaic Greece

Later Greek historians, including Herodotus and Thucydides, noted a certain trend in the trajectory of the history of most Greek *poleis*: most city-states started out with a monarchical or quasimonarchical government. Over time the people gained greater representation, and an assembly of all citizens had at least some degree of political power—although some degree of strife typically materialized between the aristocrats and the poorer elements. Taking advantage of such civic conflicts, **tyrants** came to power in most city-states for a brief period before the people banded together and drove them out, thenceforth replacing them with a more popular form of government.

Many modern historians are skeptical about some of the stories that the Greek historians tell about origins of some *poleis*; for instance, it is questionable whether the earliest Thebans truly were born from dragon teeth. Similarly, the stories about some of the Archaic tyrants seem to belong more to the realm of legend than history. Nevertheless, the preservation of stories about tyrants in early oral tradition suggests that city-states likely went through periods of turmoil and change in their form of government before developing a more stable constitution. Furthermore, this line of development accurately describes the early history of Athens, the best-documented *polis*.

In the early Archaic period, Athens largely had an aristocratic constitution. Widespread debtslavery, however, caused significant civic strife in the city and led to the appointment of **Solon** as lawgiver for the year 594/3 BCE, specifically for the purpose of reforming the laws. Solon created a more democratic constitution and also left poetry documenting justifications for his reforms—

and different citizens' reactions to them. Most controversial of all, Solon instituted a one-time debt-forgiveness, *seisachtheia*, which literally means "shaking off." He proceeded to divide all citizens into five classes based on income, assigning a level of political participation and responsibility commensurate with each class. Shortly after Solon's reforms, a tyrant, **Peisistratus**, illegally seized control of Athens and remained in power off and on from 561 to 527 BCE. Peisistratus seems to have been a reasonably popular ruler who had the support of a significant portion of the Athenian population. His two sons, Hippias and Hipparchus, however, appear to have been less well-liked. Two men, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, assassinated Hipparchus in 514 BCE; then in 508 BCE, the Athenians, with the help of a Spartan army, permanently drove out Hippias. In subsequent Athenian history, Harmodius and Aristogeiton were considered heroes of the democracy and celebrated as tyrannicides.

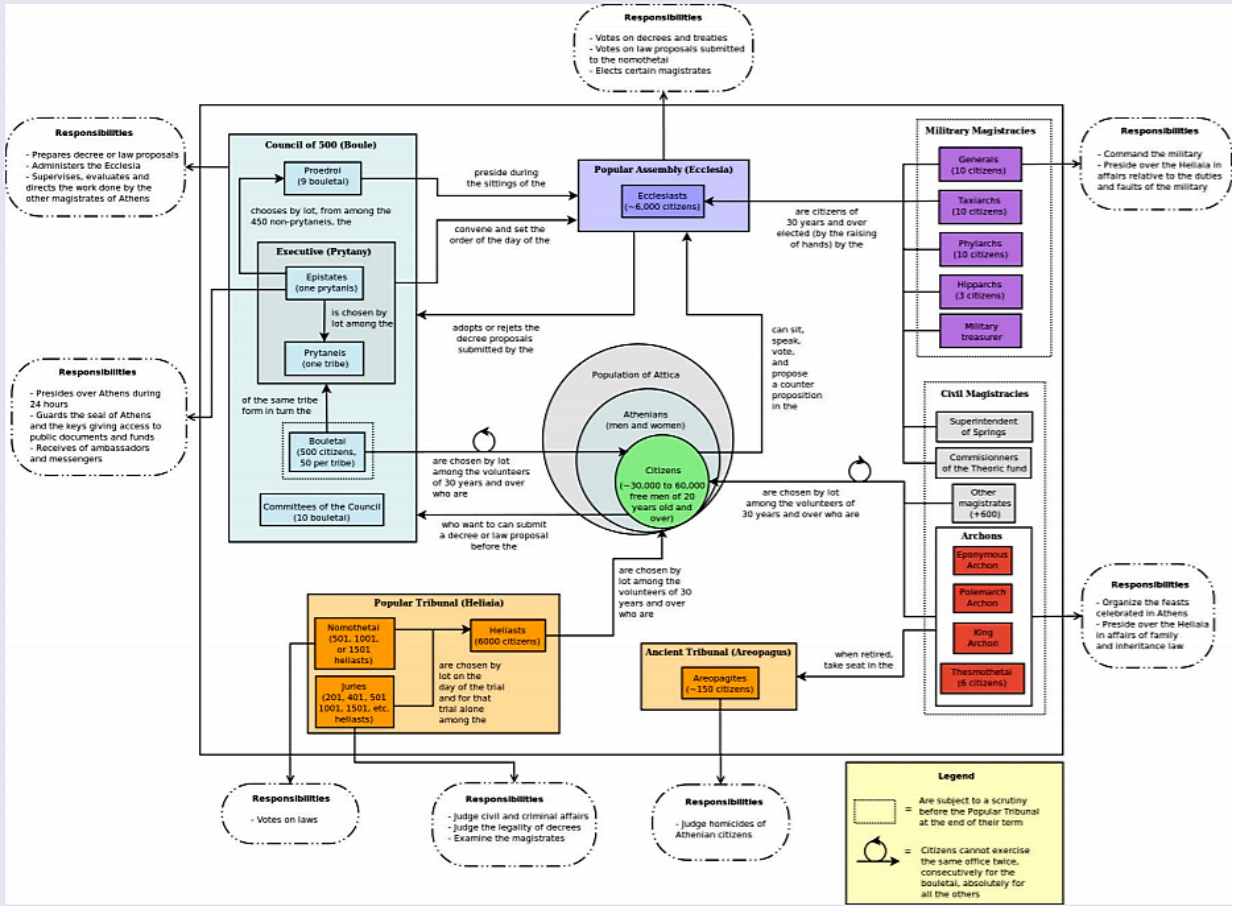


Figure **17.5.9.5**: The structure of the Classical Athenian democracy, fourth century BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Mathieugp" via Wikimedia Commons)

Immediately following the expulsion of Hippias, Athens underwent a second round of democratic reforms, led by **Cleisthenes.** The Cleisthenic constitution remained in effect, with few changes, until the Macedonian conquest of Athens in the fourth century BCE and is considered to be the Classical **Athenian democracy**. Central to the democracy was the participation of all citizens in two types of institutions: the ***ekklesia***, an assembly of all citizens, which functioned as the chief deliberative body of the city; and the law-courts, to which citizens were assigned by lot as jurors. Two chief offices, the generals and the archos, ruled over the city and were appointed for one-year terms. Ten generals were elected annually by the *ekklesia* for the purpose of leading the Athenian military forces. Finally, the leading political office each year, the nine archons, were appointed by lot from all eligible citizens. While this notion of appointing the top political leaders by lot may seem surprising, it exemplifies the Athenians' pride in their democracy and their desire to believe that, in theory at least, all Athenian citizens were equally valuable and capable of leading their city-state.

Developing in a very different manner from Athens, Sparta was seen by other Greek *poleis* as a very different sort of city from the rest. Ruled from an early period by two kings – one from each of the two royal houses that ruled jointly – Sparta was a true oligarchy, in which the power rested in its ***gerousia***, a council of thirty elders, whose number included the two kings. While an assembly of all citizens existed as well, its powers were much more limited than were those of the Athenian assembly. Yet because

of much more restrictive citizenship rules, Spartan assembly of citizens would have felt as a more selective body, as Figure **17.5.9.6** illustrates.

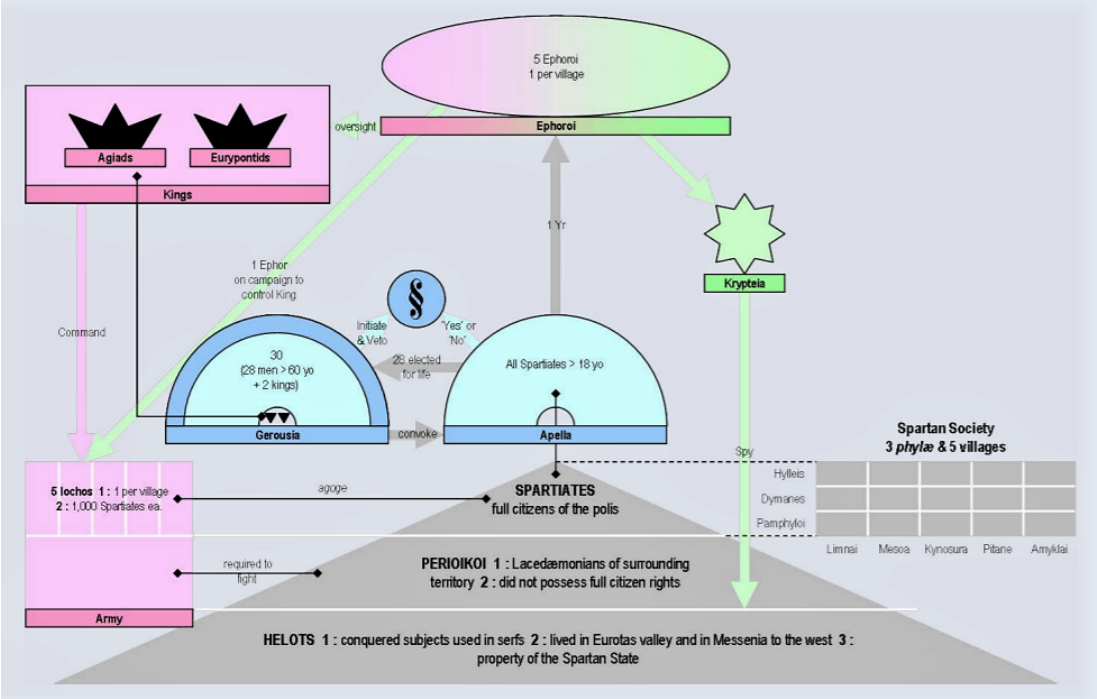


Figure **17.5.9.6**: Structure of the Spartan Constitution (CC BY 3.0; User "Putinovac" via Wikimedia Commons)

A crucial moment in Spartan history was the city's conquest of the nearby region of Messenia in the eighth century BCE.



Map **17.5.9.1**: Map of Sparta and the Environs (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Marsyas" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Spartans annexed the Messenian territory to their own and made the Messenians **helots**. While the helots could not be bought or sold, they were permanently tied to the land in a status akin to medieval European serfs. The availability of helot labor allowed the Spartans from that point on to focus their attention on military training. This focus transformed Sparta into the ultimate military state in the Greek world, widely respected by the other Greek *poleis* for its military prowess. Other Greeks were fascinated by such Spartan practices as the communal bringing up of all children apart from their parents and the requirement that all Spartan girls and women, as well as boys and men, maintain a strict regimen of exercise and training.

But while Athens and Sparta sound like each other's diametrical opposites, the practices of both *poleis* ultimately derived from the same belief that all city-states held: that, in order to ensure their city's survival, the citizens must place their city-state's interests above their own. A democracy simply approached this goal with a different view of the qualifications of its citizens than did an oligarchy.

A final note on gender is necessary, in connection with Greek city-states' definitions of citizenship. Only children of legally married and freeborn citizen parents could be citizens in most city-states. Women had an ambiguous status in the Greek *poleis*. While not full-fledged citizens themselves, they produced citizens. This view of the primary importance of wives in the city as the mothers of citizens resulted in diametrically opposite laws in Athens and Sparta, showing the different values that the respective cities emphasized. In Athens, if a husband caught his wife with an adulterer in his home, the law allowed the husband to kill said adulterer on the spot. The adultery law was so harsh precisely because adultery put into question the citizenship status of potential children, thereby depriving the city of future citizens. By contrast, Spartan law allowed an unmarried man who wanted offspring to sleep with the wife of another man, with the latter's consent, specifically for the purpose of producing children. This law reflects the importance that Sparta placed on producing strong future soldiers as well as the communal attitude of the city towards family and citizenship.

17.5.9.5: The Persian Wars

Despite casting their net far and wide in founding colonies, the Greeks seem to have remained in a state of relatively peaceful coexistence with the rest of their Mediterranean neighbors until the sixth century BCE. In the mid-sixth century BCE, Cyrus, an ambitious king of Persia, embarked on a swift program of expansion, ultimately consolidating under his rule the largest empire of the ancient world and earning for himself the title "**Cyrus the Great**."

Cyrus' **Achaemenid Empire** bordered the area of Asia Minor that had been previously colonized by the Greeks. This expansion of the Persian Empire brought the Persians into direct conflict with the Greeks and became the origin of the Greco-Persian Wars, the greatest military conflict the Greek world had known up until that point.

Over the second half of the sixth century, the Persians had taken over the region of Asia Minor, also known as Ionia, installing as rulers of these Greek city-states tyrants loyal to Persia. In 499 BCE, however, the Greek city-states in Asia Minor joined forces to rebel against the Persian rule. Athens and Eretria sent military support for this Ionian Revolt, and the rebelling forces marched on the Persian capital of Sardis and burned it in 498 BCE, before the revolt was finally subdued by the Persians in 493 BCE.



Map **17.5.9.2**: The Achaemenid Empire under the rule of Cyrus (CC BY 3.0; User "Gabagool" via Wikimedia Commons)

Seeking revenge on Athens and Eretria, the Persian king **Darius** launched an expedition in 490 BCE.

Darius' forces captured Eretria in mid-summer, destroyed the city, and enslaved its inhabitants. Sailing a short distance across the bay, the Persian army then landed at Marathon. The worried Athenians sent a plea for help to Sparta. The Spartans, in the middle of a religious festival, refused to help. So, on September 12, 490 BCE, the Athenians, with only a small force of Plataeans helping, faced the much larger Persian army in the **Battle of Marathon**. The decisive Athenian victory showed the superiority of the Greek hoplite phalanx and marked the end of the first Persian invasion of Greece. Furthermore, the victory at Marathon, which remained a point of pride for the Athenians for centuries after, demonstrated to the rest of the Greeks that Sparta was not the only great military power in Greece.



Map **17.5.9.3**: | **Map of the Greek World during the Persian Wars (500-479 BCE)** (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Bibib Saint-poi” via Wikimedia Commons)

Darius died in 486 BCE, having never realized his dream of revenge against the Greeks. His son, **Xerxes**, however, continued his father’s plans and launched in 480 BCE a second invasion of Greece, with an army so large that, as the historian Herodotus claims, it drank entire rivers dry on its march. The Greek world reacted in a much more organized fashion to this second invasion than it did to the first. Led by Athens and Sparta, some seventy Greek *poleis* formed a sworn alliance to fight together against the Persians. This alliance, the first of its kind, proved to be the key to defeating the Persians as it allowed the allies to split forces strategically in order to guard against Persian attack by both land and sea. The few Greek city-states who declared loyalty to the Persian Empire instead–most notably, Thebes–were seen as traitors for centuries to come by the rest of the Greeks.

Marching through mainland Greece from the north, the Persians first confronted the Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae, a narrow mountain pass that stood in the way of the Persians’ accessing any point south. In this now-legendary battle, 300 Spartans, led by their king Leonidas, successfully defended the pass for two days before being betrayed by a local who showed a roundabout route to the Persians. The Persians then were able to outflank the Spartans and kill them to the last man. This battle, although a loss for the Greeks, bought crucial time for the rest of the Greek forces in preparing to face the Persians. It is also important to note that although the Spartans were considered even in the ancient world to be the heroes of Thermopylae, they were also accompanied by small contingents from several other Greek city-states in this endeavor.

The victory at Thermopylae fulfilled the old dream of Darius, as it allowed access to Athens for the Persians. The Athenian statesman Themistocles, however, had ordered a full evacuation of the city in advance of the Persian attack through an unusual interpretation of a Delphic oracle stating that wooden walls will save Athens. Taking the oracle to mean that the wooden walls in question were ships, Themistocles built a massive fleet which he used to send all of the city’s inhabitants to safety. His gamble proved to be successful, and the Persians captured and burned a mostly empty city.

The Athenians proceeded to defeat the Persian fleet at the Battle of Salamis, off the coast of Athens, thus shortly before winter turning the tide of the war in favor of the Greeks. Finally, in June of 479 BCE, the Greek forces were able to strike the two final blows, defeating the Persian land and sea forces on the same day in the Battle of Plataea on land and the Battle of Mycale on sea.

The victory at Mycale also resulted in a second Ionian revolt, which this time ended in a victory for the Greek city-states in Asia Minor. Xerxes was left to sail home to his diminished empire.

Xerxes was left to sail home to his diminished empire. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the Persian Wars on subsequent Greek history. Seen by historians as the end-point of the Archaic Period, the Persian Wars cemented Pan-Hellenic identity, as they saw cooperation on an unprecedented scale among the Greek city-states. In addition, the Persian Wars showed the Greek military superiority over the Persians on both land and sea. Finally, the wars showed Athens in a new light to the rest of the Greeks. As the winners of Marathon in the first invasion and the leaders of the navy during the second invasion, the Athenians emerged from the wars as the rivals of Sparta for military prestige among the Greeks. This last point, in particular, proved to be the most influential for Greek history in the subsequent period.

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17.5.10: The Classical Period

So far, the story of the Greek world in this chapter has proceeded from a narrative of the fragmented Greek world in the Dark Ages to the emergence and solidification of a Pan-Hellenic identity in the Archaic Period. The story of the Greeks in the Classical Period, by contrast, is best described as the strife for leadership of the Greek world. First, Athens and Sparta spent much of the fifth century BCE battling each other for control of the Greek world. Then, once both were weakened, other states began attempting to fill the power vacuum. Ultimately, the Classical Period will end with the Greek world under the control of a power that was virtually unknown to the Greeks at the beginning of the fifth century BCE: Macedon.

17.5.10.1: From the Delian League to the Athenian Empire

In 478 BCE, barely a year after the end of the Persian Wars, a group of Greek city-states, mainly those located in Ionia and on the island between mainland Greece and Ionia, founded the **Delian League**, with the aim of continuing to protect the Greeks in Ionia from Persian attacks. Led by Athens, the league first met on the tiny island of Delos. According to Greek mythology, the twin gods Apollo and Artemis were born on Delos. As a result, the island was considered sacred ground and, as such, was a fitting neutral headquarters for the new alliance. The league allowed member states the option of either contributing a tax (an option that most members selected) or contributing ships for the league's navy. The treasury of the league, where the taxes paid by members were deposited, was housed on Delos.



Map **17.5.10.1**: Map of The Athenian Empire in 431 BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Marsyas" via Wikimedia Commons)

Over the next twenty years, the Delian League gradually transformed from a loose alliance of states led by Athens to a more formal entity. The League's Athenian leadership, in the meanwhile, grew to be that of an imperial leader. The few members who tried to secede from the League, such as the island of Naxos, quickly learned that doing so was not an option as the revolt was violently subdued. Finally, in 454 BCE, the treasury of the Delian League moved to Athens. That moment marked the transformation of the Delian League into the **Athenian Empire**.

Since the Athenians publicly inscribed each year the one-sixtieth portion of the tribute that they dedicated to Athena, records survive listing the contributing members for a number of years, thereby allowing historians to see the magnitude of the Athenian operation.

While only the Athenian side of the story survives, it appears that the Athenians' allies in the Delian League were not happy with the transformation of the alliance into a full-fledged Athenian Empire. Non-allies were affected a well. The fifth-century BCE Athenian historian Thucydides dramatizes in his history one particularly harsh treatment of a small island, Melos, which effectively refused to join the Athenian cause. To add insult to injury, once the treasury of the Empire had been moved to Athens, the Athenians had used some funds from it for their own building projects, the most famous of these projects being the Parthenon, the great temple to Athena on the Acropolis.



Figure 17.5.10.1: Model of the Acropolis, with the Parthenon in the middle (CC BY-SA 2.0; User "Benson Kua" via Wikimedia Commons)

The bold decision to move the treasury of the Delian League to Athens was the brainchild of the leading Athenian statesman of the fifth century BCE, Pericles. A member of a prominent aristocratic family, Pericles was a predominant politician for forty years, from the early 460s BCE to his death in 429 BCE, and was instrumental in the development of a more popular democracy in Athens. Under his leadership, an especially vibrant feeling of Athenian patriotic pride seems to have developed, and the decision to move the Delian League treasury to Athens fits into this pattern as well. Shortly after moving the treasury to Athens, Pericles sponsored a Citizenship Decree in 451 BCE that restricted Athenian citizenship from thence onwards only to individuals who had two freeborn and legitimately-wed Athenian parents, both of whom were also born of Athenian parents. Then c. 449 BCE, Pericles successfully proposed a decree allowing the Athenians to use Delian League funds for Athenian building projects, and, c. 447 BCE, he sponsored the Athenian Coinage Decree, a decree that imposed Athenian standards of weights and measures on all states that were members of the Delian League. Later in his life, Pericles famously described Athens as "the school of Hellas;" this description would certainly have fit Athens just as much in the mid-fifth century BCE as, in addition to the flourishing of art and architecture, the city was a center of philosophy and drama.

The growing wealth and power of Athens in the twenty or so years since the Persian Wars did not escape Sparta and led to increasingly tense relations between the two leading powers in Greece. Sparta had steadily consolidated the Peloponnesian League in this same time-period, but Sparta's authority over this league was not quite as strict as was the Athenian control over the Delian League. Finally, in the period of 460-445 BCE, the Spartans and the Athenians engaged in a series of battles, to which modern scholars refer as the **First Peloponnesian War**. In 445 BCE, the two sides swore to a Thirty Years Peace, a treaty that allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with few exceptions. Still, Spartan unease in this period of Athenian expansion and prosperity, which resulted in the First Peloponnesian War, was merely a sign of much more serious conflict to come. As the Athenian general and historian Thucydides later wrote about the reasons for the Great Peloponnesian War, which erupted in 431 BCE: "But the real cause of the war was one that was formally kept out of sight. The growing power of Athens, and the fear that it inspired in Sparta, made the war inevitable" (Thucydides, I.23).

17.5.10.2: The Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE)

Historians today frown on the use of the term “inevitable” to describe historical events. Still, Thucydides’ point about the inevitability of the Peloponnesian War is perhaps appropriate, as following a conflict that had been bubbling under the surface for fifty years, the war finally broke out over a seemingly minor affair. In 433 BCE, Corcyra, a colony of Corinth that no longer wanted to be under the control of its mother-city, asked Athens for protection against Corinth. The Corinthians claimed that the Athenian support of Corcyra was a violation of the Thirty Years Peace. At a subsequent meeting of the Peloponnesian League in Sparta in 432 BCE, the allies, along with Sparta, voted that the peace had been broken and so declared war against Athens.

At the time of the war’s declaration, no one thought that it would last twenty-seven years and would ultimately embroil the entire Greek-speaking world. Rather, the Spartans expected that they would march with an army to Athens, fight a decisive battle, then return home forthwith. The long duration of the war, however, was partly the result of the different strengths of the two leading powers. Athens was a naval empire, with allies scattered all over the Ionian Sea. Sparta, on the other hand, was a land-locked power with supporters chiefly in the Peloponnese and with no navy to speak of at the outset of the war.

The Peloponnesian War brought about significant changes in the government of both Athens and Sparta, so that, by the end of the war, neither power looked as it did at its outset. Athens, in particular, became more democratic because of increased need for manpower to row its fleet. The lowest census bracket, the ***thetes***, whose poverty and inability to buy their own armor had previously excluded them from military service, became by the end of the war a full-fledged part of the Athenian forces and required a correspondingly greater degree of political influence. In the case of Sparta, the war had ended the Spartan policy of relative isolationism from the rest of the affairs of the Greek city-states. The length of the war also brought about significant changes to the nature of Greek warfare. While war was previously largely a seasonal affair, with many conflicts being decided with a single battle, the Peloponnesian War forced the Greek city-states to support standing armies. Finally, while sieges of cities and attacks on civilians were previously frowned upon, they became the norm by the end of the Peloponnesian War. In short, Thucydides’s narrative of the war shows that the war had a detrimental effect on human nature, encouraging a previously unprecedented degree of cruelty on both sides. It is important to note, though, that as brutal as sieges could be during the Peloponnesian War, Greek siege warfare during the fifth century BCE was still quite primitive, as no tools existed for ramming or otherwise damaging the city gates or walls. Furthermore, catapults, so useful for targeting a city from the outside, first came into being in 399 BCE, five years after the war had ended.



Map **17.5.10.2**: Map of the Peloponnesian War Alliances at the Start and Contrasting Strategies, 431 BCE (Public Domain; User "Magnus Manske" via Wikimedia Commons)

Modern historians divide the Peloponnesian War into three distinct stages, based on the tactics used in each: the **Archidamian War**, the **Peace of Nicias**, and the **Decelean War**. The first stage, the Archidamian War (431 – 421 BCE), is named after the Spartan king Archidamus, who proposed the strategy of annual invasions of Attica at the beginning of the war. Beginning in late spring and early summer of 431 BCE, Archidamus led the Spartan army to invade Attica in order to devastate the agricultural land around the city. The Spartans thereby hoped to provoke the Athenians to a battle. Pericles however, refused to enter into battle against the Spartans, and instead ordered all inhabitants of Attica to retreat within the city. Pericles' decision was wise, as the Athenians would likely have lost a land battle against the Spartans. His decision, though, had unforeseen repercussions. In 430 BCE, the crowded conditions within Athens resulted in the outbreak of a virulent plague which by some estimates killed as much as twenty-five percent of the city's population over the following three years. Among the dead was none other than Pericles himself.

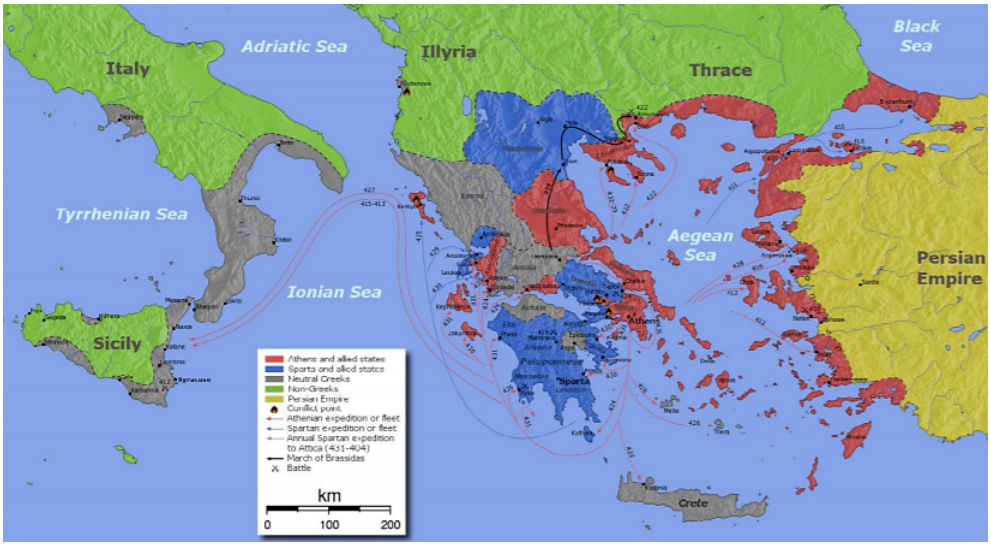
The plague had significant repercussions for Athens during the first phase of the war because of not only the loss of fighting men to disease and the consequent lowered morale in the city, but also the death of Pericles, the moderate leader. The subsequent leaders who emerged, such as Cleon, were known as war-hawks. Meanwhile, the Spartans continued their annual invasions of Attica until 425 BCE, when luck was finally on the Athenians' side.

In 425 BCE, the Athenian fleet faced a new Spartan fleet in the Battle of Pylos in the Peloponnese. The Athenians won the battle and also managed to trap 420 Spartans on the tiny island of Sphacteria, just off the coast of Pylos. Sending shockwaves through the entire Greek world, the Spartans surrendered. By bringing the hostages to Athens, the Athenians put an end to the annual invasions of Attica. Finally, in 421 BCE, with the death of the most pro-war generals on both sides, the Athenians with their allies signed a peace treaty with Spartans and their allies. Named the "Peace of Nicias" after the Athenian general who brokered this treaty, it was supposed to be a fifty years' peace; it allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with a few exceptions. As part of the peace terms, the Spartan hostages from Pylos were finally released.

Despite its ambitious casting as a fifty years' peace, the Peace of Nicias proved to be a short and uneasy time filled with minor battles and skirmishes. One problem with the treaty was that while Athens and all of its allies signed the peace, several key allies of

Sparta, including Corinth and Thebes, refused to do so. Furthermore, Athens made the disastrous decision during this stalemate to launch the **Sicilian Expedition**, a venture that took much of the Athenian fleet to Sicily in 415 BCE.

Syracuse, however, proved to be a difficult target, and the expedition ended in 413 BCE with a complete destruction of the Athenian navy. That same year, the Spartans renewed the fighting, launching the third and final phase of the Peloponnesian War.



Map **17.5.10.3**: Map of the Sicilian Expedition (CC0; User “Kenmyer” via Wikimedia Commons)

In the third stage of the Peloponnesian war, also known as the Decelean War, the Spartans took the war to Attic soil by occupying Decelea, a village in Attica proper, and transforming it into a military fort. This occupation allowed the Spartans to prevent the Athenians from farming their land and cutting off Athens from most supply routes, effectively crippling the Athenian economy for the remainder of the war. Losing the Sicilian Expedition and the challenge of the Decelean War produced a high level of resentment towards the democratic leaders in Athens. Therefore in 411 BCE, an oligarchic coup briefly replaced the democracy with the rule of the Four Hundred. While this oligarchy was quickly overthrown and the democracy restored, this internal instability highlighted the presence of the aristocratic element in the city as well as the dissatisfaction of at least the aristocratic citizens with the long war.

Remarkably, in a testament to the resilience and power of the Athenian state, the Athenians managed to rebuild a navy after the Sicilian Expedition, and even managed to continue to win battles on sea during this final phase of the war. In 405 BCE, however, the Spartan general Lysander defeated Athens in the naval battle of Aegospotami. He proceeded to besiege Athens, and the city finally surrendered in 404 BCE. For the second time in a decade, the Athenian democracy was overthrown, to be replaced this time by the Spartan-sanctioned oligarchy known as the **Tyranny of the Thirty**. The rule of the Thirty proved to be a much more brutal oligarchy than that of the Four Hundred. A year later, an army formed largely of Athenian democrats in exile marched on the city and overthrew the Thirty. The democracy thus was restored in 403 BCE, and the painful process of recovery from the war and the oligarchic rule could begin.

17.5.10.3: Athenian Culture during the Peloponnesian War

Because it drained Athens of manpower and financial resources, the Peloponnesian War proved to be an utter practical disaster for Athens. Nevertheless, the war period was also the pinnacle of Athenian culture, most notably its tragedy, comedy, and philosophy. Tragedy and comedy in Athens were very much popular entertainment, intended to appeal to all citizens. Thus issues considered in these plays were often ones of paramount concern for the city at the time when the plays were written. As one character in a comedy bitterly joked in an address to the audience, more Athenians attended tragic and comic performances than came to vote at assembly meetings. Not surprisingly, war was a common topic of discussion in the plays. Furthermore, war was not portrayed positively, as the playwrights repeatedly emphasized the costs of war for both winners and losers.

Sophocles, one of the two most prominent Athenian tragedians during the Peloponnesian War era, had served his city as a general, albeit at an earlier period; thus, he had direct experience with war. Many of his tragedies that were performed during the war dealt with the darker side of fighting, for both soldiers and generals, and the cities that are affected. By tradition, however, tragedies tackled contemporary issues through integrating them into mythical stories, and the two mythical wars that Sophocles portrayed in

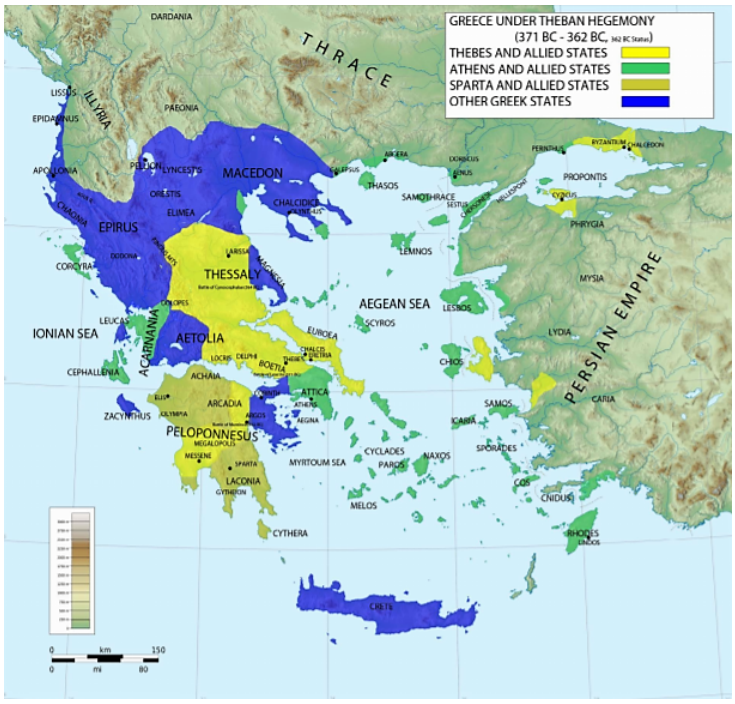
his tragedies were the Trojan War, as in *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, and the aftermath of the war of the Seven against Thebes, in which Polynices, the son of Oedipus, led six other heroes to attack Thebes, a city led by his brother Eteocles, as in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles' plays repeatedly showed the emotional and psychological challenges of war for soldiers and civilians alike; they also emphasized the futility of war, as the heroes of his plays, just as in the original myths on which they were based, died tragic, untimely deaths. Sophocles' younger contemporary, **Euripides**, had a similar interest in depicting the horrors of war and wrote a number of tragedies on the impact of war on the defeated, such as in *Phoenician Women* and *Hecuba*; both of these plays explored the aftermath of the Trojan War from the perspective of the defeated Trojans.

While the tragic playwrights explored the impact of the war on both the fighters and the civilians through narrating mythical events, the comic playwright **Aristophanes** was far less subtle. The anti-war civilian who saves the day and ends the war was a common hero in the Aristophanic comedies. For instance, in the *Acharnians* (425 BCE), the main character is a war-weary farmer who, frustrated with the inefficiency of the Athenian leadership in ending the war, brokers his own personal peace with Sparta. Similarly, in *Peace* (421 BCE), another anti-war farmer fattens up a dung beetle in order to fly to Olympus and beg Zeus to free Peace. Finally, in *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), the wives of all Greek city-states, missing their husbands who are at war, band together in a plot to end the war by going on a sex-strike until their husbands make peace. By the end of the play, their wish comes true. Undeniably funny, the jokes in these comedies, nevertheless, have a bitter edge, akin to the portrayal of war in the tragedies. The overall impression from the war-era drama is that the playwrights, as well as perhaps the Athenians themselves, spent much of the Peloponnesian War dreaming of peace.

While the playwrights were dreaming of the things of this world–most notably war–their contemporary, **Socrates**, was dreaming of difficult questions. One of the most prominent philosophers of the ancient world, Socrates has not left any writings of his own, but thoughts attributed to him survive in dialogues penned by his student, the fourth-century philosopher **Plato**. In Plato's writings, Socrates comes across as someone who loved difficult questions and who was not above confronting any passers-by with such questions as "What is courage?"; "What is moral?"; "What would the ideal city look like?" Using what became known ever since as the "Socratic method," Socrates continued to probe further every definition and answer that his conversation partners provided, guiding them to delve deeper in their reflections on the topics at hand than they had before. As a result of his love of such debates, Socrates was seen as connected to the Sophists, philosophical debate teachers, who (as Aristophanes joked) could teach anyone to convince others of anything at all, regardless of reality or truth. But Socrates radically differed from the Sophists by not charging fees for his teaching. Instead, as he himself is purported to have said, he was a pest-like gadfly that kept disturbing Athens from growing too content and encouraged all with whom he spoke to keep thinking and questioning.

17.5.10.4: The Fourth Century BCE

In 399 BCE, a seventy-year old Athenian was put on trial for impiety and for corrupting the youth, convicted, and speedily sentenced to death. The trial is especially shocking, since the man in question was none other than Socrates, the philosopher who had spent his life wandering the streets of Athens engaging in endless dialogues regarding the meaning of life. Why did the Athenians suddenly turn against this public teacher and judge him worthy of execution? The answer, most likely, is not the openly-stated causes of the trial, but rather the connections that Socrates previously had to oligarchic leaders. In particular, Socrates had taught Critias, who became one of the Thirty in 404 BCE. Fueled by their hatred of all enemies of the democracy and anyone who had associated with the Thirty, the Athenians condemned Socrates to death. This trial shows how deeply the scars went in the collective psyche and how difficult it was for the Athenians to forget the terrible end of the Peloponnesian War. And while, as usual, more information survives about how the Athenians— more than any other *polis*—dealt with the aftermath of the war, it is clear that for the rest of the Greek world, their life in the fourth century BCE was very much the result of the Peloponnesian War.



Map **17.5.10.4**: Map of The Theban Hegemony (Public Domain; User "Megistais" via Wikimedia Commons)

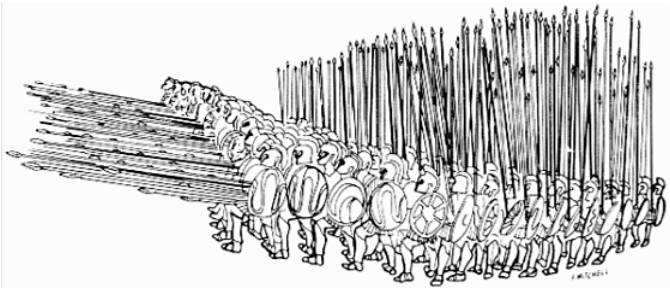


Figure **17.5.10.2**: The Macedonian Phalanx | The wedge formation using the Macedonian sarissa, a spear about eighteen feet in length (Public Domain; User "Alagos" via Wikimedia Commons)

The early fourth century saw a power vacuum emerge in the Greek world for the first time since the early Archaic Period. Defeated in the war, Athens was no longer an Empire, while the winner, Sparta, had suffered a catastrophic decline in its population over the course of the Peloponnesian War. At the same time, Thebes had revamped its military, introducing the first two significant changes to the hoplite phalanx way of fighting since its inception: slightly longer spears, and wedge formation. The final key to the Theban military supremacy was the **Theban Sacred Band**, formed in 378 BCE. An elite core of 300 warriors, the band consisted of 150 couples, based on the assumption that the lovers would fight most bravely in order not to appear to be cowardly to their beloved. In 371 BCE, the Thebans demonstrated the success of their military reforms by defeating the Spartans at the **Battle of Leuctra**. They continued an aggressive program of military expansion over the next decade, a period known as the **Theban Hegemony**.



Map **17.5.10.5**: Map of the Conquests of Philip | The Kingdom of Macedon at the death of Philip II (336 BC) (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Marsyas" via Wikimedia Commons)

Sometime in the 360's BCE, a young Macedonian prince stayed for several years in Thebes as a hostage. While there, he caught the eye of the military reformer, Epaminondas, who took the prince under his wing. Circa 364 BCE, the prince returned to Macedon, and, in 359 BCE, he ascended to the throne as king **Philip II**. Up until that point in Greek history, the Macedonians had largely been known for two things: drinking their wine undiluted, which had marked them as complete and utter barbarians in the eyes of the rest of the Greeks, and being excellent horsemen. With Philip at the helm, this estimation was about to change. As soon as he came to the throne, Philip began transforming the Macedonian military into a more successful image of what he had seen at Thebes. Philip further lengthened the already longer spears used by the Thebans, creating the Macedonian ***sarissa***, a spear of about eighteen feet in length, double that of the traditional Greek hoplite spear.

He retained the Theban wedge formation but also added heavy cavalry to the line, thus incorporating the Macedonians' strongest element into the phalanx. The results spoke for themselves, as over the next twenty years, Philip systematically conquered all of mainland Greece, with the exception of Sparta, which he chose to leave alone. Philip's final great victory, which he shared with his teenage son Alexander, was at the **Battle of Chaeronea** (338 BCE), in which the Macedonian armies defeated the combined forces of Athens and Thebes. Philip's conquest of the entire mainland was the end of an era, as for the first time, the entire territory was united under the rule of a king.



Figure **17.5.10.3**: Alexander the Great | Alexander fighting Darius in the Battle of Issus (333 BCE). Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii. Note Alexander on the left side of the mosaic, fighting on horseback, while Darius, almost at the middle, charges in a chariot. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Berthold Werner" via Wikimedia Commons)

By all accounts, it appears that Philip was not going to stop at just conquering the Greek world. He did not, however, have this choice. In 336 BCE while on his way to a theatrical performance, Philip was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards. His son Alexander, then twenty years old, succeeded and continued his father's ambitious program of conquests. Alexander's first target was the Persian Empire, motivated in part by his love of Homer's *Iliad*, and the perception among the Greeks that this new campaign was the continuation of the original, mythical war against Asia. Moving farther and farther East in his campaigns, Alexander conquered the Balkans, Egypt, and the territories of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel before he achieved a decisive victory over Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE.

Continuing to move eastwards, Alexander invaded India in 327 BCE, planning to conquer the known world and assuming that he was close to this achievement, since the Greeks of his day were not aware of China's existence. His war-weary troops, however, rebelled in 326 BCE and demanded to return home (see Chapter 3). It appears that this mutiny was not the first that occurred in Alexander's army; indeed, over the course of his rule, Alexander had also been the target of a number of failed assassinations. However, this mutiny forced Alexander to give in. Leaving several of his officers behind as satraps, Alexander turned back. In 323 BCE, he and his army reached Babylon, the city that he had hoped to make the new capital of his world empire. There, Alexander fell ill and died at the ripe old age of thirty-three.



Map 17.5.10.6: Map of the campaigns and conquests of Alexander (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "IrakliGuna" via Wikimedia Commons)

While Alexander's rule only lasted thirteen years, his legacy reshaped Greece and the rest of ancient Eurasia for the next several centuries. A charismatic leader, albeit one prone to emotional outbursts, Alexander redefined what it meant to be king and general. His coinage reflects this reinvention. On one coin minted during his lifetime, for instance, appears Alexander dressed as the hero Heracles, while Zeus, whom Alexander alleged to be his real father, appears on the other side.



Figure 17.5.10.4: Silver coin of Alexander as Heracles (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "World Imaging" via Wikimedia Commons)

In addition, by conquering territories that were previously not part of the Greek world, Alexander spread Greek culture farther than had anyone else before him. At the same time, by marrying several non-Greek princesses and encouraging such marriages by his troops, Alexander also encouraged the creation of a "meltingpot" empire; he further cemented this creation by founding new cities named after himself all over his new empire. In particular, Alexandria, the city that he founded in Egypt, became a center of Greek civilization—albeit with an Egyptian twist—was seen as a new Athens well into the Roman Empire. Alexander's brief time in India produced a significant impact as well, as in 321 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya was able to unify India into a single kingdom for the first time, establishing the **Mauryan Empire** (Chapter Three). Finally, in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Greek world, Alexander's generals divided his conquests into several kingdoms that they and their descendants continued to rule until the Romans conquered these respective areas. It appears that Alexander's melting-pot empire, burning up as a phoenix upon his death, actually allowed several new empires and kingdoms to arise from its ashes.

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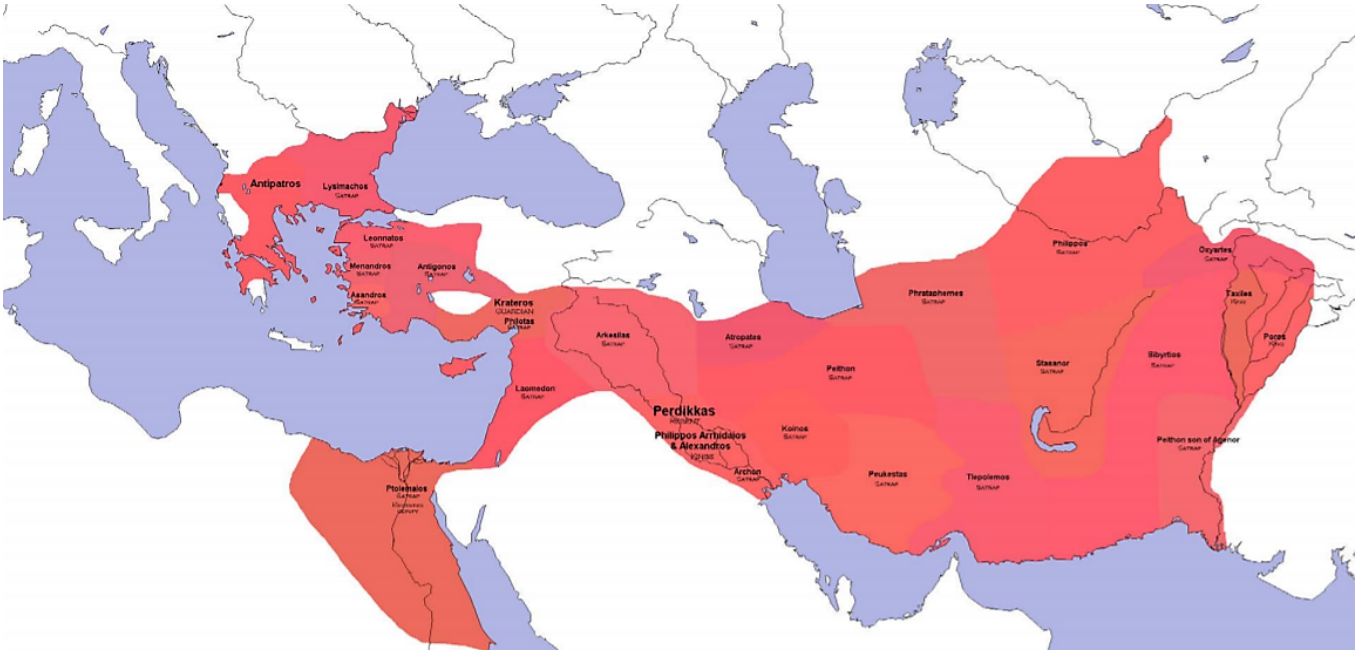
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17.5.11: Hellenistic Period

Historians today consider the death of Alexander to be the end point of the Classical Period and the beginning of the Hellenistic Period. That moment, for historians, also marks the end of the *polis* as the main unit of organization in the Greek world. While city-states continued to exist, the main unit of organization from that point on was the great Hellenistic kingdoms. These kingdoms, encompassing much greater territory than the Greek world had before Alexander, contributed to the thorough Hellenization of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The age of the Hellenistic kingdoms also coincided with the rise of Rome as a military power in the West. Ultimately, the Hellenistic kingdoms were conquered and absorbed by Rome.

17.5.11.1: Hellenistic Kingdoms

Although Alexander had several children from his different wives, he did not leave an heir old enough to take power upon his death. Indeed, his only son, Alexander IV, was only born several months after his father's death. Instead, Alexander's most talented generals turned against each other in a contest for the control of the empire that they had helped create.

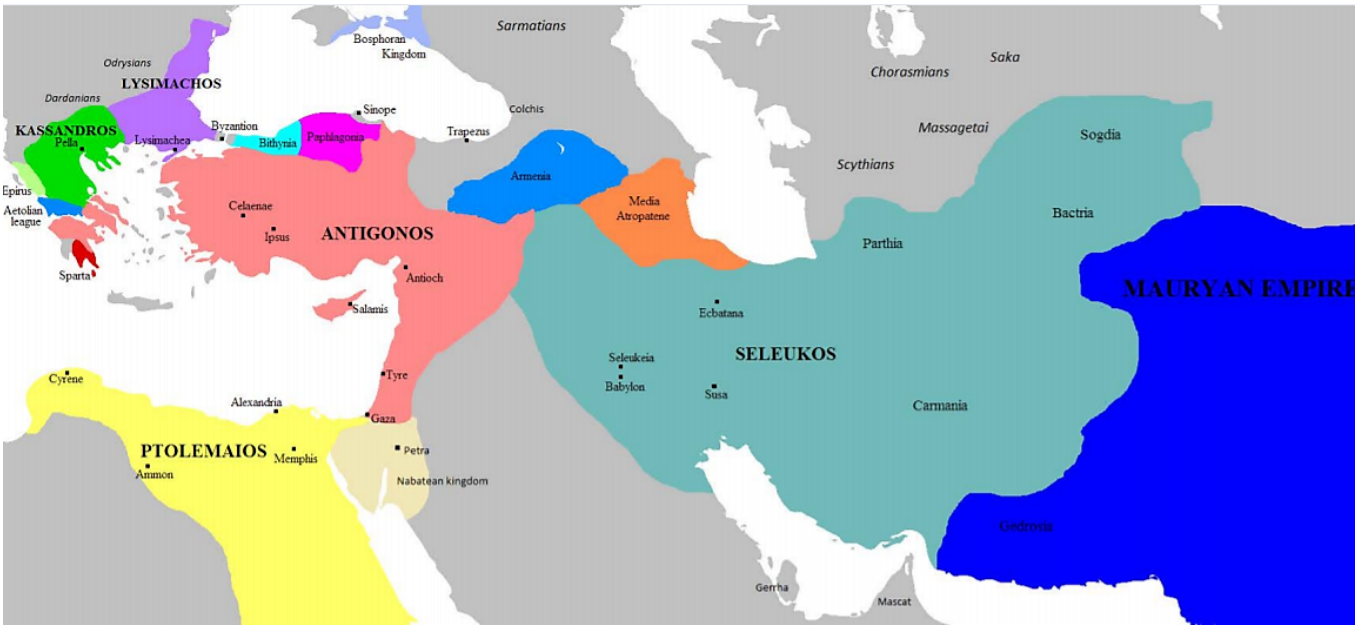


Map **17.5.11.1**: Map of the Initial partition of Alexander's empire, before the Wars of the Diadochi (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Fornadan" via Wikimedia Commons)

These **Wars of the Diadochi**, as they are known in modern scholarship, ended with a partition of Alexander's empire into a number of kingdoms, each ruled by dynasties. Of these, the four most influential dynasties which retained power for the remainder of the Hellenistic Age, were the following: Seleucus, who took control of Syria and the surrounding areas, thus creating the **Seleucid Empire**; Antigonus Monophthalmos, the One-Eyed, who took over the territory of Asia Minor and northern Syria, establishing the **Antigonid Dynasty**; the Attalid Dynasty, which took power over the **Kingdom of Pergamon**, after the death of its initial ruler, Lysimachus, a general of Alexander; and Ptolemy, Alexander's most influential general, who took control over Egypt, establishing the **Ptolemaic Dynasty**.

The most imperialistic of Alexander's successors, Seleucus I Nicator took Syria, swiftly expanding his empire to the east to encompass the entire stretch of territory from Syria to India. At its greatest expanse, this territory's ethnic diversity was similar to that of Alexander's original empire, and Seleucus adopted the same policy of ethnic unity as originally practiced by Alexander; some of Seleucus' later successors, however, attempted to impose Hellenization on some of the peoples under their rule. These successors had difficulties holding on to Seleucus' conquests. A notable exception, Antiochus III, attempted to expand the Empire into Anatolia and Greece in the early second century BCE but was ultimately defeated by the Romans. The empire's story for the remainder of its existence is one of almost constant civil wars and increasingly declining territories. The Seleucids seem to have had a particularly antagonistic relationship with their Jewish subjects, going so far as to outlaw Judaism in 168 BCE. The Jewish holiday **Hannukah** celebrates a miracle that occurred following the historical victory of the Jews, led by Judah Maccabee, over the

Seleucids in 165 BCE. Shortly afterwards, the Seleucids had to allow autonomy to the Jewish state; it achieved full independence from Seleucid rule in 129 BCE. In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey finally conquered the small remnant of the Seleucid Empire, making it into the Roman province of Syria.



Map **17.5.11.2**: Map of the Hellenistic Kingdoms c. 303 BCE (Public Domain; User "Javierfv1212" via Wikimedia Commons)

Antigonus Monophthalmos, Seleucus' neighbor, whose holdings included Macedonia, Asia Minor, and the northwestern portion of Syria, harbored ambitious plans that rivaled those of Seleucus. Antigonus' hopes of reuniting all of Alexander's original empire under his own rule, however, were never realized as Antigonus died in battle in 301 BCE. The greatest threat to the Antigonids, however, came not from the Seleucid Empire, but from Rome with whom they waged three Macedonian Wars between 214 and 168 BCE. The Roman defeat of king Perseus in 168 BCE at the Battle of Pydna marked the end of the **Third Macedonian War**, and the end of an era, as control over Greece was now in Roman hands.

The smallest and least imperialistic of the successor states, the kingdom of Pergamon, was originally part of a very short-lived empire established by Lysimachus, one of Alexander's generals. Lysimachus originally held Macedonia and parts of Asia Minor and Thrace but had lost all of these territories by the time of his death in 281 BCE. One of his officers, Philetaerus, however, took over the city of Pergamon, establishing there the Attalid dynasty that transformed Pergamon into a small and successful kingdom. The final Attalid king, Attalus III, left his kingdom to Rome in his will in 133 BCE.

Lasting from the death of Alexander in 323 BCE to the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE, the Ptolemaic kingdom proved to be the longest lasting and most successful of the kingdoms carved from Alexander's initial empire. Its founder, **Ptolemy I Soter**, was a talented general, as well as an astronomer, philosopher, and historian, who wrote his own histories of Alexander's campaigns. Aiming to make Alexandria the new Athens of the Mediterranean, Ptolemy spared no expense in building the Museaum, an institution of learning and research that included, most famously, the **Great Library**, and worked tirelessly to attract scholars and cultured elite to his city. Subsequent Ptolemies continued these works so that Alexandria held its reputation as a cultural capital into Late Antiquity. One example of a particularly impressive scientific discovery is the work of Eratosthenes, the head librarian at the Great Library in the second half of the third century BCE, who accurately calculated the earth's circumference. But while the Ptolemies brought with them Greek language and culture to Egypt, they were also profoundly influenced by Egyptian customs. Portraying themselves as the new Pharaohs, the Ptolemies even adopted the Egyptian royal custom of brother-sister marriages, a practice that eventually percolated down to the general populace as well. Unfortunately, brother-sister marriages did not prevent strife for power within the royal family. The last of the Ptolemaic rulers, Cleopatra VII, first married and ruled jointly with her brother Ptolemy XIII. After defeating him in a civil war, she then married another brother, Ptolemy XIV, remaining his wife until his death, possibly from sisterly poisoning. Best known for her affairs with Julius Caesar and, after Caesar's death, with Marcus Antonius, Cleopatra teamed with Marcus Antonius in a bid for the Roman Empire. The last surviving ruler who was descended from one of Alexander's generals, she was finally defeated by Octavian, the future Roman emperor Augustus, in 30 BCE.

The history of the successor states that resulted from the carving of Alexander's empire shows the imperialistic drive of Greek generals, while also demonstrating the instability of their empires. Historians do not typically engage in counter-factual speculations, but it is very likely that, had he lived longer, Alexander would have seen his empire unravel, as no structure was really in place to hold it together. At the same time, the clash of cultures that Alexander's empire and the successor states produced resulted in the spread of Greek culture and language further than ever before; simultaneously, it also introduced the Greeks to other peoples, thus bringing foreign customs—such as the brother-sister marriages in Egypt—into the lives of the Greeks living outside the original Greek world.

17.5.11.2: Hellenistic Culture

The Hellenistic kingdoms spread Greek language, culture, and art all over the areas of Alexander's former conquests. Furthermore, many Hellenistic kings, especially the Ptolemies, were patrons of art and ideas. Thus the Hellenistic era saw the flourishing of art and architecture, philosophy, medical and scientific writing, and even translations of texts of other civilizations into Greek. The undisputed center for these advances was Alexandria.

Combining the practical with the ambitious, the **Pharos**, or Lighthouse, of Alexandria was one of the most famous examples of Hellenistic architecture and has remained a symbol of the city to the present day. Constructed in 280 BCE, it was considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and was one of the tallest buildings in the world at the time. While its practical purpose was to guide ships into the harbor at night, it also exemplified the bold advances and experimental spirit of Hellenistic architecture. Indeed, it was located on a man-made mole off the coast of the city. The building comprised three layers, the top one of which housed the furnace that produced the light.



Figure **17.5.11.1**: The Pharos, or Lighthouse, of Alexandria (© Emad Victor SHENOUDA. Used with permission; Emad Victor SHENOUDA via Wikimedia Commons)

The structure of the Pharos shows an interest in straight lines and orderly shapes, while its function symbolized the ability of man to subdue the sea, even by night. Similarly, both the scientific and medical texts from the Hellenistic Period reveal a fascination with an ordered universe and an interest in discovering how it worked. **Herophilus of Chalcedon**, for instance, pioneered dissection in the early third BCE and was especially interested in the human brain and the nervous system. The mathematician Euclid, who lived and worked in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy I (323 – 283 BCE), wrote the *Elements*, an encyclopedic work of mathematics that effectively created the discipline of geometry. Going a step further than Euclid in his research, the third-century BCE scientist and inventor **Archimedes of Syracuse** specialized in applying mathematical concepts to create such devices as a screw pump and a variety of war machines, including the heat ray.

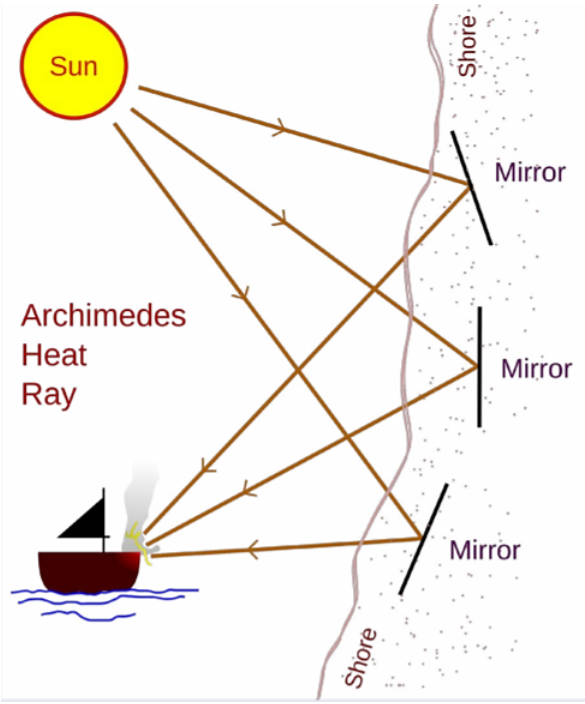


Figure **17.5.11.2**: The Archimedes Heat Ray (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Pbrokos13" via Wikimedia Commons)

The same fascination with studying the order of the universe appears in Hellenistic philosophy and stems ultimately from the philosophy of Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE), considered to be the last Classical Greek philosopher. Aristotle was a prolific polymath, who wrote on political theory, poetry, music, and a variety of sciences, to list just some of his interests. Engrossed in seeing all disciplines as part of a larger world order, Aristotle specifically argued for empiricism, that is, the belief that knowledge is acquired from sensory experiences rather than from intuition. In the sciences, for instance, this approach required experiments and the careful gathering of data. While Aristotle's influence on the Hellenistic philosophers is undeniable, the alternate theories that some of the philosophers developed regarding the structure of the universe and the place of humanity in it differs drastically from Aristotle's view. For instance, **Skepticism**, especially as formulated by Pyrrho in the third century BCE, argued that it was impossible to reach any accurate conclusions about the world and the key to happiness was to stop trying. **Cynic philosophers**, starting in the fourth century BCE, advocated the ascetic life of simplicity and freedom from possessions. A related philosophy, **Stoicism**, argued for letting go of all emotions and developing a self-control that would allow one to live in accordance to nature. On the other hand, the third-century philosophy of **Epicureanism** argued for the absence of pain as the ultimate goal in life and saw the universe as ruled by random chance, separate from the intervention of the gods. All of these philosophies, and many others that co-existed with them, aimed to provide a coherent system that made sense of the world and provided a purpose for human life.

Finally, in a testament to the deep influence of the Hellenistic language culture on the conquered regions, the Hellenistic Period saw the translation of texts of other civilizations into Greek. One particularly influential example was the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. Jews formed a significant minority of the population of **Alexandria**, the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt, as well as other major cities around the Mediterranean, such as Antioch. By the third century BCE, these Jews appear to have largely lost the knowledge of Hebrew; thus, a translation of the sacred texts into Greek was necessary. In addition, as later legend has it, Ptolemy II Philadelphus allegedly commissioned seventy-two scholars to translate the Old Testament into Greek for his Royal Library. Whether indeed solicited by Ptolemy II or not, the translation was likely completed over the course of the third throughfirst centuries BCE. Named after the legendary seventy-two (or, in some versions, seventy) translators, the text was titled the ***Septuagint***. The completion of this translation showed the thorough Hellenization of even the Jews, who had largely kept themselves apart from mainstream culture of the cities in which they lived.

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https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/275742

17.5.12: Conclusion

“Captive Greece has conquered her rude conqueror,” the Roman poet Horace famously wrote in the late first century BCE. This comment about the deep influence of Greek culture on the Roman world, even after the Roman conquest of Greece was complete, continued to be the case well after the days of Horace. Ultimately, the impact of the Hellenization of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which started with Alexander’s conquests, lasted far beyond the Hellenistic kingdoms, as the Greek language continued to be the language of the Eastern Roman Empire and, subsequently, the Byzantine Empire up until the conquest of that territory by the Ottomans in 1453 CE. In some respects, this spread of the Greeks and their civilization ultimately changed what it meant to be Greek–or, rather, it created a more universal Greek identity, which largely replaced the *polis*-specific view of citizenship and identity that existed before Philip’s conquest of Greece. And yet, certain cultural constants persisted."

The first of these was Homer, whose epics continued to be as great an inspiration to the Greeks of the Roman world as they were to their Archaic Age counterparts. For instance, the Homeric values were likely the reason for the minimal advances in military technology in the Greek world, as honor was more important than military success at all cost. The second cultural constant was the work of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, in whose shadows all subsequent philosophers of the Greco-Roman world labored. Even as the Greek-speaking portions of the Roman Empire turned to Christianity, they could not abandon their philosophical roots, resulting, for instance, in the Gnostic heresies. Horace’s cheeky comment thus proved to be true far longer than he could have expected.

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17.5.14: Links of Primary Sources

Ancient History Sourcebook at Fordham University (collection of materials from all periods of Greek history)

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an...t/asbook07.asp

Archimedes' Inventions

archimedesjack.weebly.com/discoveries-and inventions.html

Aristophanes, excerpt from *Clouds*, making fun of Socrates

http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/So...nes-Clouds.htm

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

drama.eserver.org/plays/class...lysistrata.txt

Aristotle on Spartan Women

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an...artanwomen.asp

Athens, photographic archive of archaeological materials

http://web.archive.org/web/200406070...oa.org/athens/

Cyrene, primary sources on founding of the colony

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an.../630cyrene.asp

Euripides, The Phoenician Women

http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~lo...phoenissae.htm

The Gortyn Code, selections

legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/a...450-gortyn.asp

Herodotus, Histories, excerpt on the Battle of Marathon

http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/So...-Marathon.html

History of Greek Philosophy

http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/index.html

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Justin, on the beginning of the reign of Philip II of Macedon

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an...tin-philip.asp

Linear B Writing

www.ancientscripts.com/linearb.html

Plutarch, *Lives*

http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Plutarch.html

Solon, selected fragments from political poems

homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/Dep...sls/Solon.html

Sophocles, *Antigone*

www.stoa.org/diotima/antholog...ntigstruct.htm

Thucydides, Pericles' "Funeral Oration"

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an...eralspeech.asp

Thucydides, “Melian Dialogue” from the *History of the Peloponnesian War*

www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm

Tyrants, primary sources documents

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/a...650tyranny.asp

Xenophon on the Battle of Leuctra

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an...371leuctra.asp

Xenophon on the Spartan Constitution

legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/an...no-sparta1.asp

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.6: The Roman World from 753 BCE to 500 BCE

The story of the Roman world from the foundation of the city of Rome and to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West is, overall, a tale of two different transformations. The first of these is the dramatic transformation in cultural values and beliefs, a glimpse of which is reflected in the two stories above. The second is a similarly dramatic geographical transformation, which also brought about drastic clashes of cultures and a variety of changes throughout the entire Mediterranean world and beyond, that is, the transformation of a small village on the Tiber into one of the largest empires in all of world history, followed by a collapse of a part of that Empire, but a collapse from whose ashes arose what we now know as Europe.

17.6.1: Chronology

17.6.2: Introduction

17.6.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.6.4: Key Terms

17.6.5: Geography and Topography of Rome and the Roman Empire

17.6.6: Basic Chronology and Periods of Roman History

17.6.7: Sources and Problems

17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic

17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic

17.6.10: The Early Empire

17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity

17.6.12: Conclusion- From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages

17.6.13: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.6.14: Links to Primary Sources

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17.6.1: Chronology

753 BCE Founding of Rome

c. 753 – 510 BCE Regal Period

c. 510 BCE – 44 BCE* Roman Republic

264 – 146 BCE The Punic Wars

133 BCE – 44 BCE The Late Republic

44 BCE – 476 CE Roman Empire

44 BCE – 68 CE Julio-Claudian Dynasty

69 CE Year of the Four Emperors

69 CE – 96 CE Flavian Dynasty

96 – 180 CE The Five Good Emperors

235 – 284 CE The Third Century Crisis

395 CE Permanent division of the Empire into East and West

* See, however, explanation about possible dates proposed by scholars for the fall of the Roman Republic

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17.6.2: Introduction

In 458 BCE, facing a military attack from the two neighboring tribes of the Aequi and the Sabines, the Roman Senate took a drastic measure, reserved for the direst of circumstances: they appointed a dictator, who would single-handedly lead the state in this time of trouble. As the Roman historian Livy tells it, **Cincinnatus**, the senator who was appointed dictator, received the news while working on his farm. Abandoning the plow, he immediately rushed to join the army, which he then led to a swift and brilliant victory. Then something astonishing happened: Cincinnatus resigned his extraordinary powers and returned to his farm. For the remainder of the Roman Republic, and well into the Imperial Period, Cincinnatus continued to be seen as the quintessential Roman cultural hero and model of virtue: an aristocratic man who was a talented soldier, general, and politician who put the interests of **Rome** first, above his own. While no other Roman politician displayed Cincinnatus' degree of self-sacrificing humility, the other Roman heroes of the Republic and the Empire were still uniformly male, predominantly aristocratic, and famed for military and political achievements.



Figure **17.6.2.1**: Cincinnatus **leaves the plow to accept the dictatorship** Author: User "Antonius Proximo" Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

But something happened to give rise to a rather different sort of cultural hero by the Late Roman Empire. In 203 CE, a young noblewoman and her slave were executed in Carthage, thrown into the arena with the lions. Their crime? A stubborn faith: the belief that a Jewish man who lived in Judaea a century earlier was the son of God who had died on the cross and rose again. Eager to emulate his suffering in order to win eternal life with their God, the two women, **Perpetua and Felicity**, gave up a life of relative comfort and the chance to raise their babies—indeed, Felicity gave birth in prison mere hours before her execution!—placing their God above all else. They were not the only ones. Stories of martyrs abound in the Later Roman Empire and were told repeatedly by Christians, thus perpetuating the status of these martyrs as the new cultural heroes. But far from repelling others from imitating their example, these stories, rather, encouraged the rise of more willing martyrs to follow their suit. As a result of the spread of Christianity, therefore, the Roman cultural heroes of Late Antiquity were a far cry from Cincinnatus. Instead of aristocratic generals and politicians, they were nursing mothers and even slave-women who chose to die a humiliating and painful death for their faith and its promise of an eternal reward.

The story of the Roman world from the foundation of the city of Rome and to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West is, overall, a tale of two different transformations. The first of these is the dramatic transformation in cultural values and beliefs, a glimpse of which is reflected in the two stories above. The second is a similarly dramatic geographical transformation, which also brought about drastic clashes of cultures and a variety of changes throughout the entire Mediterranean world and beyond, that is, the transformation of a small village on the Tiber into one of the largest empires in all of world history, followed by a collapse of a part of that Empire, but a collapse from whose ashes arose what we now know as Europe.

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17.6.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. In what ways did the geography and topography of Rome and the Roman Empire impact the history of the ancient Roman world?

2. What are the different periods of Roman history, and what are the chief defining characteristics of each period?

3. What primary sources are available for the study of Roman history, and what are the limitations of these sources?

4. What were the stages of Roman expansion?

5. What were the key civic conflicts and civil wars of the Roman Republic? What did each of these conflicts demonstrate about the changing nature of Roman politics?

6. When and why did the Roman Republic fall? What were some key differences between the Roman Republic and the Age of Augustus?

7. What are some of the primary sources about the early Christians? What was revolutionary about early Christianity, from the Roman perspective?

8. What were some of the problems with which areas in the periphery of the Roman Empire had to deal in the second century CE?

9. What were the problems that the Roman Empire faced during the third-century crisis, and how did Diocletian attempt to resolve these?

10. What changes did the Roman Empire experience in the fourth century CE, and what were the causes of these changes?

11. How did the Romans' view of Rome in Late Antiquity differ from their view of Rome in earlier periods?

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17.6.4: Key Terms

- Aedile
- Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*
- *ara pacis*
- *auctoritas*
- Augustine, *City of God*
- Augustus
- Battle of Lake Regillus
- Bithynia
- Caligula
- Carthage
- Catilina
- Cato the Elder, *Origins*
- Censor
- Centuriate Assembly
- Christianity
- Cincinnatus
- Claudius
- Cleopatra
- Conflict of the Orders
- Constantine
- Constantinople
- Consul
- Council of Nicaea
- Crassus
- *cursus honorum*
- *dignitas*
- Diocletian
- Etruscans
- Eusebius
- Five Good Emperors
- Flavian dynasty
- Gaius Gracchus
- *Gravitas*
- Josephus, *Jewish War*
- Julian the Apostate
- Julio-Claudians
- Julius Caesar
- Juno
- Jupiter Optimus Maximus
- Lex Hortensia
- Licinian-Sextian law
- Livy
- Lucretia
- Macedonian Wars
- Magna Graecia
- manipular legion and legion of cohorts
- Marcus Antonius
- Marius

- Mars
- Minerva
- *mos maiorum*
- Nero
- New Testament
- Numa Pompilius
- *Optimates*
- Ostia
- *paterfamilias*
- Patricians
- Paul
- *pax deorum*
- *Pax Romana*
- Perpetua and Felicity
- Plebeian Council
- Plebeians
- Plebeian tribune
- Pliny the Younger
- Plutarch
- Polybius
- Pompeii
- Pompey
- *Populares*
- Praetor
- Proscriptions
- Punic Wars
- Pyrrhus
- Quaestor
- *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*
- Roman Empire (period)
- Roman Republic (period)
- Rome
- Romulus and Remus
- Romulus Augustulus
- Samnite Wars
- Senate
- Social War
- Suetonius
- Sulla
- Tacitus
- Tarquin the Proud
- Tetrarchy
- Theodosius
- Third-Century Crisis
- Tiber
- Tiberius (emperor)
- Tiberius Gracchus
- Trajan
- Triumvirate (First and Second)
- Twelve Tables

- Veii
- Venus
- Vergil, *Aeneid*
- Vespasian
- Year of the Four Emperors (69 CE)

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17.6.5: Geography and Topography of Rome and the Roman Empire

As the title of one recent textbook of Roman history puts it, Roman history is, in a nutshell, the story of Rome's transformation "from village to empire."[1] The geography and topography of Rome, Italy, and the Mediterranean world as a whole played a key role in the expansion of the empire but also placed challenges in the Romans' path, challenges which further shaped their history.

Before it became the capital of a major empire, Rome was a village built on seven hills sprawling around the river **Tiber**. Set sixteen miles inland, the original settlement had distinct strategic advantages: it was immune to attacks from the sea, and the seven hills on which the city was built were easy to fortify. The Tiber, although marshy and prone to flooding, furthermore, provided the ability to trade with the neighboring city-states. By the mid-Republic, requiring access to the sea, the Romans built a harbor at **Ostia**, which grew to become a full-fledged commercial arm of Rome as a result. Wheeled vehicles were prohibited inside the city of Rome during the day, in order to protect the heavy pedestrian traffic. Thus at night, carts from Ostia poured into Rome, delivering food and other goods for sale from all over Italy and the Empire.

One of the most surprising aspects of the history of early Rome is that, despite constant threats from its more powerful neighbors, it was never swallowed by them. The **Etruscans** dominated much of northern Italy down to Rome, while the southern half of Italy was so heavily colonized by the Greeks as to earn the nickname "**Magna Graecia**," meaning "Great Greece." In addition, several smaller tribes hemmed the early Romans, mainly, the Latins, the Aequi, and the Sabines.



Map 17.6.5.1: Map of the Seven Hills of Rome (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Renata3" via Wikimedia Commons)

The topography of Rome—the advantage of the hills and the river—likely was a boon in the city's struggles against all of its neighbors. Likewise, the topography of Italy proper, with the Alps and the Appenines providing natural defenses in the north, hampered invasions from the outside. Indeed, the most famous example of an invasion from the north, that of Hannibal during the Second Punic War, is a case in point: he selected that challenging route through the Alps in order to surprise the Romans, and it proved even more destructive for his forces than he had anticipated.

As Rome built a Mediterranean empire, the city itself grew increasingly larger, reaching a population of one million by 100 CE. While Italy boasted fertile farmlands, feeding the city of Rome became a challenge that required the resources of the larger empire, and Egypt in particular became known as the breadbasket of Rome. As a result, emperors were especially cautious to control access to Egypt by prominent senators and other politicians, for fear of losing control over this key area of the Empire.



Map **17.6.5.2**: Map of Italy in 400 BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Enok” via Wikimedia Commons)

During the rule of the emperor Trajan in the early second century CE, the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent, stretching to Britain in the west, slightly beyond the Rhine and Danube river in the north, and including much of the Near East and north Africa.

Topography, however, played a role in the Romans’ ultimately unsuccessful struggle to hold on to these territories after Trajan’s death. The natural frontier offered by the Rhine and Danube rivers made it difficult for the Romans to maintain control over the territories on the other side of them. Struggling to fight off the warrior tribes in northern Britain, two second-century CE emperors — Hadrian, and later on Antoninus Pius—built successive walls, which attempted to separate the un-Romanized tribes from the territory under Roman control. Finally, a persisting challenge for Roman emperors was that of the location of the empire’s capital. When the Roman Empire consisted of Italy alone, the location of Rome in the middle of the Italian peninsula was the ideal location for the capital. Once, however, the empire became a Mediterranean empire that controlled areas far in all directions, the location of Rome was a great distance from all the problem frontiers. As a result, emperors over the course of the second and third centuries spent increasingly less time in Rome. Finally, Diocletian’s split of the Empire in 293 CE into four administrative regions, each with a regional capital, left Rome out, and in 330 CE, the emperor Constantine permanently moved the capital of the empire to his new city of Constantinople, built at the site of the older Greek city of Byzantium.



Map **17.6.5.3**: Map of the Roman Empire at its Greatest Extent, 117 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Tataryn" via Wikimedia Commons)

The large area encompassed by the empire required a sophisticated infrastructure of roads and sea routes, and the Romans provided both. By the first century CE, these roads and routes connected the center of the empire (Rome) to the periphery, providing ways for armies, politicians, traders, tourists, and students to travel with greater security and speed than ever before. As primary sources reveal, travel was never a fully safe undertaking, as bandits lurked on roads and pirates on seas, greedy locals were always eager to fleece unsuspecting tourists, and shipwrecks were an unfortunately common reality. Still, the empire created an unprecedented degree of networks and connections that allowed anyone in one part of the empire to be able to travel to any other part, provided he was wealthy enough to be able to afford the journey.

1 Mary Boatwright, Daniel Gargola, Noel Lenski, and Richard Talbert. *The Romans: From Village to Empire: A History of Rome from Earliest Times to the End of the Western Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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17.6.6: Basic Chronology and Periods of Roman History

According to Roman tradition, Rome was founded as a monarchy. That monarchy, however, was not long-lived, and its history is overshadowed by myth and legend. Historians of Rome have most often divided its history into two major periods, based on the type of government that Rome had at the time: the **Republic** (from the late sixth century BCE to the late first century BCE) and the **Empire** (from the late first century BCE to the fall of the Western half of the empire in the late fifth century CE). Indeed, as seen in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, already as early as the late first century CE, Romans themselves thought of their history in terms of those two periods. The basic difference between the two periods is quite simple. During the period of the Republic, Rome was ruled by a Republican government, which distributed power, in theory, among all Roman citizens. In practice, this was really an aristocratic oligarchy. By contrast, under the Empire, Rome was under one ruler, the Emperor.

Recent research, however, has challenged the over-simplification of Roman history that can be implied by thinking of it as comprising just two periods. The work of Harriet Flower has shown that the Roman Republic is best conceived of as a series of Republics, each with distinct features. The work of Peter Brown, furthermore, has challenged the myth of the "decline and fall" of the Roman Empire, first popularized by Edward Gibbon, a nineteenth-century British historian of Rome. Brown has shown that as a result of the Christianization of the Roman world, Roman culture in the Late Empire was quite different from that in the earlier periods, yet it was very much a flourishing culture.

This chapter proceeds chronologically, sub-dividing both the Republic and the Empire into early and late periods, while also devoting some attention to certain thematic topics that are key to understanding each period.

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17.6.7: Sources and Problems

One of the greatest challenges to modern historians of Rome is the Romans' own seeming lack of interest in writing their own history for their first 600 years. While, according to Roman legend, Rome was founded in 753 BCE, the first Roman history in Latin, ***Origins***, composed by the Republican politician **Cato the Elder**, was not published until 149 BCE. A few senators had written about Roman history in Greek earlier on, and some aristocrats kept family histories, but Cato's work was truly the first Roman history on a large scale, as it narrated events from the foundation of the city to Cato's own death. Only fragments of Cato's history survive; they reveal that Cato's approach to the writing of history was rather unusual. Instead of referring to any individuals throughout Roman history by name, Cato referred to them by title or political position. As a result, his history was truly focused on Rome and aimed to glorify the accomplishments of Rome rather than individual Romans. Thankfully for modern historians, Cato's experiment of nameless history did not catch on with subsequent Roman historians. Modern historians are able to reconstruct the story of the Romans from a variety of written and archaeological sources, but some of these sources present problems of which the historian must be aware. Similarly to the challenges modern historians face when studying Greek history, historians of Rome must at times engage in educated guessing when attempting to reconstruct a picture of Rome and Romans based on the limited evidence that is available.

Because the genre of historical writing started so late in Rome, few histories survive from the period of the Republic. Of these, the most famous (and the most voluminous) is the work of **Livy**, who wrote his *Ab Urbe Condita* (From the Foundation of the City) in the late first century BCE. Livy was very much an "armchair historian," but he appears to have had access to a number of sources that are now lost, such as family histories from a number of aristocratic families. As the title indicates, Livy began his work with the legends about the founding of Rome. He continued his narrative down to his time, the age of Augustus, and the last known events in his work covered the year 9 BCE. Although Livy's work consisted of 142 books, only about a quarter survives, including the first ten books, covering the regal period and the early republic and the narrative of the first two Punic Wars. Other prominent historians of the Republic whose works survive include Sallust, a contemporary of Caesar who turned to writing moralistic history after a frustrating political career, and Caesar himself, who wrote two books about his own campaigns: the *Gallic Wars*, about his conquest of Gaul in the 50's BCE, and the *Civil War*, about his civil war against Pompey in 49 – 45 BCE.

The works of two prominent historians survive from the period of the Roman Empire. **Tacitus**, another politician-turned-historian, wrote in the early second century CE two works about the history of the Roman Empire in its first century of existence. The *Annals* covered the rule of the emperors Tiberius through Nero, while the *Histories* continued the narrative to the rule of the emperor Domitian. Significant portions of both works survive. Ammianus Marcellinus, a military officer writing in the late fourth century CE, saw himself as a successor of Tacitus, and composed a massive history of the Roman Empire from the end of Tacitus' work to his own day. In addition, the sensationalizing biographer **Suetonius**, a contemporary of Tacitus, composed tabloid-style biographies of the first twelve emperors (from Caesar to Domitian). The anonymous *Historia Augusta*, composed sometime in the late Empire, provides similarly sensationalizing biographies of Roman emperors and some usurpers from Hadrian in the early second century CE to Carinus in the late third century CE.

In addition to these Roman historians and biographers, a number of historical works in Greek survive from the late Republic and the Empire that cover topics related to Roman history. To mention just a few examples, in the late first century BCE, Diodorus of Sicily wrote a massive universal history that includes key events of Roman history, alongside Greek history and mythology. The Greek biographer **Plutarch**, writing in the first century CE, paired for the sake of comparison biographies of famous Greeks and Romans; one exemplary such pairing is that of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. **Josephus**, a Jewish rebel leader turned Roman citizen, wrote the ***Jewish War***, a detailed account of the disastrous Jewish revolt against Rome in the 60's CE.

Works of history, however, are only one type of source that modern historians of Rome use. Other written sources include poems, novels, letters of politicians and other prominent figures, military and farming manuals, cookbooks, etc. For instance, one of the best sources for the political ideology of the Augustan age is **Vergil**'s epic poem ***Aeneid***, which tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas and his struggle to reach Italy after the fall of Troy to found Rome. Arguably the single best source for everyday life in the Roman provinces under the Empire is **Apuleius**' novel ***Metamorphoses***, better known under the title *Golden Ass*. The novel is a fictional account of a man accidentally turned into a donkey, who tells the narrative of his travels through the Roman Empire in the late second century CE. And one of the best sources for the government of Roman provinces is the correspondence of Pliny the

Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia on the shores of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE, with the emperor Trajan. To say the least, the job of the provincial governor, based on these letters, appears to have been decidedly unglamorous.

Early Christianity is one area of Roman history that has been especially well documented from its inception. The New Testament is an invaluable source, as it presents sources by early Christians about their own faith and its spread throughout the Roman Empire. A variety of popular heretical texts from the second and third centuries also survives and allows historians to reconstruct some of the dissenting views held in the early church. Writings in Greek and Latin by a number of influential figures in the early church, dubbed the Church Fathers, document the theological debates that resulted ultimately in the Nicene Creed. Starting in the second century CE, martyrdom accounts and saints' lives provide admittedly semi-fictional and stylized biographies of individual believers. Finally, two prominent theologians in the Late Empire attempted to write (or re-write) Roman history specifically through a Christian lens. **Eusebius**, the Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century CE, wrote the *History of the Church*, focusing on the history of Christianity from its beginnings to his day. Then in the early fifth century CE, **Augustine**, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the *City of God*, a massive work covering history and legends of Rome from its beginnings to his day, in an attempt to show that Rome's previous successes were due not to adherence to the pagan gods, but instead always to the Christian God's mercy.



Figure **17.6.7.1**: Reconstructed Roman Tombstone | Reconstructed Copy of a Tombstone for a Roman Soldier Stationed in Britain in the first century CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Chestertouristcom" via Wikimedia Commons)

In addition to written sources of various kinds, archaeological sources provide further insight into Roman life in different periods. Examples of sources that survive include inscriptions, especially gravestones; traded goods, such as lamps or bricks, which allow historians to reconstruct the movement of goods across the empire; and a number of Roman towns and military camps.

One example of the random nature of how some sources were able to survive is the ancient site of **Pompeii**. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE caused volcanic ash to rain down on the resort Roman town of Pompeii and the nearby town of Herculaneum, effectively burying both towns and preserving them completely for modern archaeologists. The tragedy for the Roman residents of the two towns at the time proved to be a modern archaeologist's dream.



Figure 17.6.7.2: Ruins of Pompeii | Ruins of Pompeii from above, with Vesuvius in the background (CC BY-SA 4.0; User “ElfQrin” via Wikimedia Commons)

While, as the above summary shows, abundant sources of different types survive from different periods of Roman history, certain perspectives are difficult to reconstruct from our sources. For instance, slaves in the Roman world were as archaeologically invisible as in the Greek world. Likewise, very little evidence documents women’s lives before the rise of Christianity, and their voices are largely left out from Roman history. Other than epitaphs on their gravestones, most average Romans, in general, left no record of their lives, so our evidence is dominated by the history of the aristocracy. Still, the careful historian can gain at least some insight into these lesser-documented perspectives by gathering all references to them in sources that survive.

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17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic

The period from the founding of Rome to the end of the Punic Wars is less documented than subsequent Roman history. Nevertheless, this period was the formative time during which Rome grew from a village on the Tiber to a pan-Mediterranean empire.



Map 17.6.8.1: Map of the Roman Conquest of Italy | Stages of Early Roman Expansion from 500 BCE to 218 BCE. (Public Domain; User "Javierfv1212" via Wikimedia Commons)

The process was as fascinating to consider for later Romans as for outsiders. The Greek politician-turned-historian **Polybius**, who spent seventeen years as a hostage in Rome and became quite a fan of the Roman military and political machine, put it simply in the prologue to his *Histories*, in which he documented the meteoric conquest of the Mediterranean world by the Romans:

> For who is so worthless or lazy as not to wish to know by what means and under what system of government the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjugating nearly the entire known world to their rule, an achievement unprecedented in history? (Polybius 1.1.5)

Polybius' question pointed to the answer that he subsequently proposed: part of the reason for the Romans' success was their adoption of the Republican government as replacement for their original monarchy. Polybius became increasingly convinced during his stay in Rome that the Romans' government was superior to all others in the Mediterranean at the time.

17.6.8.1: 6.8.1: From Monarchy to Republic: Some Myths and Legends

"In the beginning, kings held Rome." Thus the late first-century CE Roman historian Tacitus opened his *Annals*, a history of the Empire under the rule of the emperors from Tiberius to Nero. Early Roman history is shrouded in myth and legend, but the beliefs of later Romans about their own past are important to consider, as these beliefs, whether truly grounded in reality or not, determined subsequent decisions and actions of the historical Romans later on. This tendency is especially true of the Romans' myths about the foundation of their city in 753 BCE and the kings who ruled it until the establishment of the Republic in 510 BCE.

According to myth, Rome received its name from its founder **Romulus**, the son of the war god Mars, and a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas. By linking themselves to the Trojans, the Romans were able to boast an ancient, reputable lineage, rivaling

that of the Greeks, and a prominent place in the Greek heroic epic, Homer's *Iliad*. Furthermore, when embarking on a conquest of Greece later on, the Romans could claim to be seeking revenge for their Trojan ancestors' defeat and destruction by the Greeks during the Trojan War. Several generations removed from their heroic ancestor Aeneas, Romulus and his twin brother **Remus** were famously abandoned as infants and then nursed by a she-wolf, the sacred animal of their father Mars.

The sweetness of the story ends there, however. While Romulus was building Rome, Remus insulted the new city, and his brother killed him to avenge its honor. Later, after Romulus had completed the building of the new city with his band of soldiers, he realized the lack of women in the city, so Romulus and his supporters raided the neighboring tribe, the Sabines, and kidnapped their women.

It is telling that later Romans believed that their city was founded on fraternal bloodshed, as well as on rape and kidnapping. The stories of Romulus' accomplishments, while not laudatory, show an important Roman belief: the greatness of Rome sometimes required morally reprehensible actions. In other words, Rome came first, and if the good of the city required the sacrifice of one's brother, or required force against others, then the gods were still on the side of the Romans and ordained these actions.



Figure **17.6.8.2**: She-Wolf Suckles Romulus and Remus | You can see a replica of this statue in Rome, Georgia. (Public Domain; User "Nyenyec" via Wikimedia Commons)

Romans believed that, altogether, their city was ruled by seven different kings in succession. After Romulus, king **Numa Pompilius** regulated Roman religion and created many of the priestly colleges and positions that continued to exist thereafter. The seventh and final king, however, **Tarquin the Proud**, was known for his and his family's brutality. The final straw appears of have been the rape of a nobleman's wife, **Lucretia**, by the king's son. An aristocratic revolution ensued, which appears to have been largely bloodless, if Livy's account is to be trusted. The royal family was expelled from the city, and two consuls were immediately elected to govern the newly formed Republic. Or so, again, Livy tells us, based on Roman legend. The reality is likely to have been more complicated. Assuming there truly were seven kings who ruled the city, and assuming that the last of them was driven out by an aristocratic revolution, it appears that a period of transition ensued, as the Romans experimented with a variety of short-term solutions before arriving at the model of the Republican government that we know in the historical period. Furthermore, apparently what guided that gradual evolution of the government was the growing dissatisfaction of the plebeians, the lower socio-economic majority of the city, with their exclusion from the political process.

17.6.8.2: 6.8.2: Early Republic: Conflict of Orders, the Twelve Tables, and Key Legislations

Roman sources from all periods, beginning already in the early Republic, reveal certain common values that all Romans held dear and considered to be foundational for their state. First, Romans had a strong respect for the past and were averse to change. Indeed, reformers had a difficult time passing their proposals in all periods of Roman history. The term for this reverence for the past, ***mos maiorum***, "custom of ancestors" or "custom of elders," is telling. While innovation is a revered value in the modern world, Romans believed that innovation amounted to disrespect for their ancestors. Ancestral custom, which had first made Rome great, had to be respected, and successful reformers, such as the emperor Augustus, managed to phrase their reforms as a return to something old, rather than as something new. Three additional values that are key to understanding the Romans are ***auctoritas***, "power" or "authority;" ***dignitas***, roughly meaning "dignity;" and ***gravitas***, "seriousness." Each citizen in the state had a degree of

auctoritas, that intangible quality that made others obey him, but the degree of *auctoritas* varied, depending on one's social and political standing. Augustus, Rome's first emperor, would later describe his position in the state as having more *auctoritas* than anyone else. The other two qualities, *dignitas* and *gravitas*, were connected and reflected one's bearing and behavior as a true Roman. Jocularity was not valued, but seriousness reflected a particularly Roman conduct and determination. It is striking that Romans never smiled in portraits. The austere facial expression, instead, conveyed their power and superiority to others, whom they had conquered.

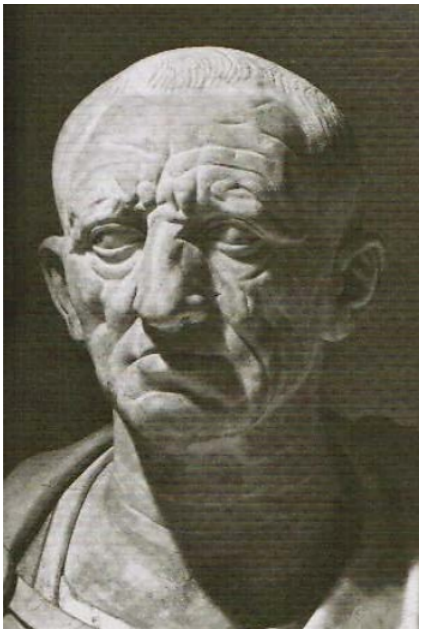


Figure 17.6.8.3: Bust of an austere Roman, possibly Cato the Elder (Public Domain; User "Shakko" via Wikimedia Commons)

While sharing common values, Romans were also deeply aware of social divisions between themselves. From its earliest time, Roman citizen population was divided into two orders: the **patricians**, defined as the descendants from the first one hundred senators appointed to the Roman aristocratic Senate by king Romulus, and the **plebeians**, that is, everyone who was not a patrician. The plebeians had their own political assembly, the **Plebeian Council**, while all Roman citizens also belonged to the **Centuriate Assembly**, which was responsible for annual elections for top political offices. The period of the early Republic, following the expulsion of the kings, was a time of conflict for the two orders, as patricians tried to establish a government that reserved all political power to themselves, whereas the plebeians fought for the opportunity to hold political and religious offices. Although they did not wield any political power at first, they discovered in the early fifth century that their most powerful weapon was secession, that is, departure en masse from the city, until the patricians acquiesced to a demand. While much about the **Conflict of the Orders**—just as anything else about the history of the early Republic—is shrouded in legend, it is possible to track its progress through the evidence of legislations that the Romans passed.

In 494 BCE, following the first plebeian secession, the Roman Senate allowed the plebeians to elect plebeian tribunes. An office that eventually was reserved for senators, it was originally merely an opportunity for plebeians to elect officers in the Plebeian Council, the assembly of all plebeian citizens, who would advocate for them. Plebeians next appear to have advocated for a public display of the laws, in order to protect the poor during lawsuits. The result was the first Roman legal code, the **Twelve Tables**, which was inscribed on twelve tables c. 450 BCE and displayed in public. One of the laws included was a ban on intermarriage between plebeians and patricians, showing a clear commitment on the part of the patricians to maintain the separation of the orders. It is important to note, however, that with the gradual decline in the number of patrician families over the course of the Roman Republic, most began to intermarry with prominent plebeian families.

The highest political office in the Republic, that of the consul, continued to be reserved solely for patricians until 367 BCE, when two senators sponsored the **Licinian-Sextian** law. The law required that one of the two consuls elected each year had to be plebeian. The phrasing of the law was significant, as it allowed the possibility that both consuls elected in a particular year could be plebeian, although this event did not happen in reality until 215 BCE. Finally, the legislation that modern historians have

considered to have ended the early Republican Conflict of the Orders is the **Lex Hortensia** of 287 BCE. This law made all legislations passed by the Plebeian Council binding on all Romans, patricians and plebeians alike.

As historians connect the dots in the story of the Conflict of the Orders through these legislations, one trend that emerges is the gradual weakening of the patricians along with the growing influence of the plebeians on Roman government. Indeed, by the third century, a number of plebeian families were as wealthy and successful as patrician families, whereas some old patrician families had fallen on hard times.

17.6.8.3: 6.8.3: Cursus Honorum and Roman Religion

The debate over plebeian access to political offices in general, and to the consulship in particular, resulted in the creation of a rigid ***cursus honorum***, a sequence or ladder of political offices. The ultimate dream of every Roman who entered politics was to become a consul, but the narrowing pyramid that was the *cursus honorum* stood in his path. All offices were held for the term of one year, and, in order to prevent any one individual from amassing too much power, candidates had to wait ten years between consulships. Finally, each office had a minimum age requirement, with a special privilege for patricians to subtract two years from that minimum.

The prerequisite for holding any political office was ten years of military service. Thus, aspiring Roman politicians normally entered the army around eighteen years of age. Following ten years of distinguished service, candidates who were at least thirty years of age were allowed to run for the first office in the *cursus*: the **quaestorship**. The number of quaestors each year rose over time to twenty by the late Republic. Each quaestor was assigned to a particular duty for his year in office, varying from supervising the coin mint in Rome to serving as an assistant to a provincial governor or a consul in charge of a war.

While not officially part of the required *cursus honorum*, most ex-quaestors next ran for the office of the **plebeian tribune**, if they were plebeian, or an aedile. Ten plebeian tribunes were elected each year and were supposed to advocate for the benefit of the plebeians during Senatorial debates. Aediles—a term derived from the Latin “aedes,” meaning “building” or “temple”—were in charge of public building projects and often also sponsored public entertainment.

The next step in the *cursus* was the praetorship. Similarly to the quaestors, the number of **praetors** rose over time, until topping at eight in the late Republic. Praetors could hold *imperium*, the right to command an army; thus, they often served in military roles or in administrative capacity by governing a province. Finally, one praetor each year, the *praetor urbanus*, was in charge of administering justice in the city of Rome and keeping track of legal cases and important decisions, which he issued at the end of the year as the Praetor’s Edict.

Upon reaching the age of forty, candidates who had successfully held the praetorship ultimately could run for the consulship. Two **consuls** were elected annually, and this position change to “office” was the pinnacle of the Roman political career. Aristocratic families kept for centuries on display in their homes the ancestor masks of members of the family who had been consuls. Since ten years were required to elapse between successive consulships, very few individuals ever held more than one consulship, until several politicians in the late Republic broke the rules altogether. Last but not least, one additional office existed, for which ex-consuls could run: every five years, two **censors** were elected for a period of eighteen months for the purpose of conducting the census of citizens. While this structure of annually-elected offices was designed to prevent any one individual from usurping all political power in the state, the Senate also realized that, on rare occasions, concentrating all power in one set of hands was needed. Thus the Senate could appoint a dictator for a non-renewable period of six months in times of serious military emergency, such as in the already-mentioned case of Cincinnatus.

The *cursus honorum* is best visualized as a pyramid with a wide base and narrowing each step on the way up. While twenty men each year were elected to the quaestorship, only a fraction of them could ever achieve the praetorship, and a yet smaller fraction could rise to the consulship. Still, election to the quaestorship secured life-long membership in the Senate, the governing body of roughly 300 politicians—doubled in the first century BCE to 600—who effectively governed Rome under the Republic. The question remains, nevertheless: how did some men achieve political advancement while others never made it past the quaestorship? Part of the key to success, it appears, lay outside of politics proper, belonging instead to the realm of religion.

Roman religion, similarly to Greek, was traditionally polytheistic, with many myths and gods aligned to the Greek counterparts. Zeus, Greek king of the gods, became Jupiter, and was a patron god of Rome under the title Jupiter Optimus Maximus, or Jupiter the Best and the Greatest.



Figure **17.6.8.4**: The Capitoline Triad | Jupiter Optimus Maximus, with Juno and Minerva (known together as the Capitoline Triad). Note Juno's sacred goose at her foot, and Minerva's sacred owl next to her. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Luiclemens" via Wikimedia Commons)

His consort, Hera, became the Roman goddess **Juno** and was the patron goddess of marriage. The Greek Athena became Roman **Minerva** and was the patron divinity of women's crafts. In addition, both **Venus**, the goddess of love, and **Mars**, the god of war, had mythical family connections to Rome's human founders. Countless other divinities abounded as well; even the Roman sewer system, Cloaca Maxima, had its own patron goddess, Cloacina.

While Romans were expected to worship some of the gods in private, often making vows to them and promising gifts if the gods fulfilled a request, Roman religion also had a significant public component that was reserved for the priestly colleges. Although not limited to politicians, membership in these colleges was at times key for political advancement. One example of this phenomenon in action is the career of Julius Caesar, whose political career took off after his appointment to the religious office of ***pontifex maximus***, head of Roman religion. Ultimately, both public and private religion aimed at the same goal: keeping the ***pax deorum***, peace with the gods, upon which the success of their state rested, as the Romans believed. Put simply, as long as Romans maintained a respectful peace with their gods, they ensured Rome's success. Whenever any disasters befell the state, however, Romans typically assumed that *pax deorum* had been violated in some way. The gods then had to be appeased in order to end the disaster and prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

17.6.8.4: 6.8.4: Roman Expansion to the End of the Punic Wars

While the legends about the kings of Rome suggest that they had significant military responsibilities, it appears that their military actions were largely defensive. Just a decade or so after the expulsion of the kings, shortly after 500 BCE, however, Roman expansion began in earnest. It is important to note here several key features of the early Roman military. First, until the late Republic, Rome did not maintain a standing army. Rather, a new army was raised for each campaign, and campaigns were typically launched in the spring and ended in the fall. The festival of the October Horse, one of the religious festivals the Romans celebrated each year, involved a ritual purification of the cavalry and originally was likely designed as the end point of the campaign season. Also, similarly to the Greek world, the Romans had minimum wealth requirements for military service, since soldiers supplied their own equipment. Finally, one significant trend to note in early Republican military history is the repeated nature of Roman conflicts with the same enemies, such as the three **Samnite Wars**, the three **Punic Wars**, and the four **Macedonian Wars**. This repetition suggests that, for whatever reason, the Romans did not aim to annihilate their opponents, unless absolutely pressed to do so.

It appears that the Roman expansion in the 490s BCE began as a defensive measure. In either 499 BCE or 496 BCE, the expelled seventh king of Rome, Tarquin the Proud, joined forces with the Latin League, a group of about thirty city-states around the area of Rome, and led them to attack the Romans. The result was the **Battle of Lake Regillus**, a decisive victory for Rome. The Romans signed an uneasy peace treaty with the Latins, but war broke out again in 340 – 338 BCE. The Roman victory this time resulted in the absorption of the Latin city-states into Rome as partial citizens.

The Latins were not the only enemies the nascent Roman Republic had to face. Romans fought and gradually conquered the Etruscan city-states to the north. One especially significant victory was over the powerful Etruscan city of **Veii** in 396 BCE. A

legend preserved by Livy states that Romans were only able to conquer Veii after they performed the ceremony of *evocation*, "calling out." Fearing that their siege of Veii was not going well because Juno, the patron goddess of Veii, was not on their side, the Romans called Juno out of Veii; they promised her a nice new temple in Rome if she would switch sides. Shortly thereafter, the city fell to the Romans. When the Roman soldiers were packing up the cult statue of Juno from her temple in Veii for transportation to Rome, a cheeky Roman soldier asked Juno if she wanted to come to Rome. The statue enthusiastically nodded her head. Livy's history is full of similar tales of divine providence intervening on the side of the Romans. These legends show the Romans' own belief that throughout the process of expansion, the gods had protected them and guided them to success.



Figure 17.6.8.5: Two Roman Infantrymen and a Cavalryman, second century BCE (Public Domain; User "ColderEel" via Wikimedia Commons)

While still fighting the Latins, the Romans embarked upon what turned out to be a series of three wars with their neighbors to the east, the Samnites. Each of these wars, the last of which ended in 290 BCE, resulted in Roman territorial gains; by the end of the Third Samnite War, Rome controlled all of central Italy. It also appears that, at some point during the Samnite Wars, the Romans switched from fighting in the Greek hoplite phalanx fashion to a system of their own making, the **manipular legion**. This new system apparently allowed more flexibility in the arrangement of the troops on the battlefield; it also allowed using both heavy and light infantry as needed, instead of keeping them in a static formation for the duration of a battle. While not much else is known about the manipular legion, it appears to have been an effective system for the Romans for much of the Republican period.



Map 17.6.8.2: Roman Territories at the End of the Second Punic War | Interactive Map Showing Stages of Roman Expansion in the Republic and Empire Legend: R R E oman Republic: 510 BC - 40 BC oman Empire: 20 CE - 360 CE astern Roman Empire: 405 CE - 1453 CE Western Roman Empire: 405 CE - 480 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0 NOTE: Interactive map requires Adobe Flash. Click the following link to view graphic on original website. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/F...Empire_map.gif; User "Semhur" via Wikimedia Commons)

It is striking to consider that the Romans spent eighty of the hundred years in the third century BCE at war. They did not seem to have had the ambition to conquer the Greek city-states who were their neighbors in southern Italy; in 280 – 275 BCE, Rome nevertheless became embroiled in a war with **Pyrrhus**, king of Epirus in northern Greece, after providing help to Thurii in its dispute with Tarentum. Tarentum requested Pyrrhus' help, and he proceeded to invade Italy. The Romans fought three major battles against Pyrrhus, the first two of which he won at great cost to his army. Indeed, the term "Pyrrhic victory" in modern English refers to a victory that is so costly as to be truly a loss. The Romans finally defeated Pyrrhus at their third battle against him in 275 BCE, showing the superiority of the new Roman manipular legion even against the phalanx of the Macedonians, military descendants of Alexander the Great himself. This victory united most of Italy, except for the very northern portion, under Roman rule.

The war with Pyrrhus was the Romans' first serious conflict with the Greek world, but it was far from their last. The Romans' proximity to northern Greece, in particular, ensured an intersection of spheres of interest, thus also providing cause for continued conflict. Between 214 and 148 BCE, Rome fought four separate Macedonian Wars. During roughly the same period, from 264 and 146 BCE, the Romans also fought three Punic Wars against **Carthage**, originally a Phoenician colony that became a leading maritime power. Culminating with the Roman destruction of both Carthage and Corinth in 146 BCE, the eventual victory of the Romans over both powers allowed the Romans to gain full control over them and their previous land holdings. Their victory effectively put the entire Mediterranean world under Roman rule.

In 146 BCE, when the Romans found themselves in control of a Mediterranean empire, they appeared to foresee little of the consequences of such a rapid expansion on internal stability in Rome proper. A critical question nevertheless faced them: how would the Republic, whose system of government was designed for a small city-state, adapt to ruling a large empire? The preliminary answer on which the Romans settled was to divide the conquered territories into provinces, to which senatorial governors were assigned for terms that varied from one to five years. The system continued, with minor variations, into the Empire.



Map **17.6.8.3**: Roman Provinces in the Late First Century BCE and Early First Century CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Cristino64” via Wikimedia Commons)

The new availability of governor positions, however, only made the political competition in the Republic even stiffer than before. Senators competed for the most desirable positions; typically, these were provinces in which military action was on-going—since this provided the potential for winning military glory—or provinces that were wealthy, with the potential opportunity in governing them to acquire wealth.

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17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic

The victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War allowed Rome to "close" the circle of the Mediterranean almost completely, acquiring control over all territories that had previously belonged to Carthage. The destruction of Carthage in the Third Punic War, while largely a symbolic gesture, further cemented Rome's control over the entire Mediterranean. The late Republican historian Sallust, though, grimly saw the Roman victory in the Punic Wars as the beginning of the end of the Republic. As Sallust and some other conservative politicians of his day believed, this victory corrupted the noble Roman character, traditionally steeled by privation. More importantly, the abundance of resources that flowed in following the victories over Carthage raised the question of distribution of this new wealth and land. The disagreements over this question dominated the politics of the Late Republic, creating two new political factions: the ***Populares***, or those who protected the interests of the people, and the ***Optimates***, or those who protected the interests of the best element of the populace—namely, themselves.

17.6.9.1: The Gracchi and the Beginning of Political Violence

It is striking to consider that political violence was minimal in the Roman Republic until 133 BCE. Indeed, if the legends are true, even the expulsion of the kings in 510 BCE was a bloodless event. Starting with 133 BCE, however, the final century of the Roman Republic was defined by political violence and civil wars.

In 133 BCE, **Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus**, a scion on his mother's side of one of the oldest and most respected families in Rome, the Cornelii Scipiones, was one of the ten annually elected plebeian tribunes. Alarmed that the lands acquired through recent Roman conquests had largely been taken over by rich landowners at the expense of poorer Romans, Gracchus proposed a land distribution law, known as the *Lex Sempronia Agraria*. Gracchus argued that the advantages of such land redistribution would have benefited the state, since land-ownership was a pre-requisite for military service. Aware that the Senate's Optimates faction opposed his proposal, Gracchus took his law directly to the Plebeian Council, which passed it. This measure resulted in escalating conflict between Gracchus and the rest of the Senate. At a meeting of the Senate, the *pontifex maximus*, who was Tiberius Gracchus' own cousin Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica, ultimately argued that Gracchus had attempted to make himself king; thus, he had to be stopped. Since weapons were banned inside the Senate building, enraged Senators grabbed whatever was on hand, including chair and table legs, and clubbed Gracchus to death. As the biographer Plutarch states, this was the first instance of civic strife of this kind in ancient Rome.

The death of Tiberius Gracchus also meant the death of his proposed law. Ten years later, however, Gracchus' proposed reforms gained a second life in the hands of his younger brother, **Gaius Gracchus**, who was elected plebeian tribune in 123 BCE and served a second term in that office in 122 BCE. Gaius Gracchus' revived agrarian reform proposal was even more ambitious than his brother's a decade earlier. Especially controversial was Gaius Gracchus' proposal of granting full Roman citizenship to Rome's Italian allies. Finally, in 121 BCE, alarmed at Gaius Gracchus' popularity with the people, the consul Lucius Opimius proposed a new measure in the Senate: a *senatus consultum ultimum*, or the final decree of the Senate, which amounted to allowing the consuls to do whatever was necessary to safeguard the state. Realizing that the passing of this law amounted to his death sentence, Gaius Gracchus committed suicide.

The proposed reforms of Gaius Gracchus were overturned after his death, but the legacy of the Gracchi for the remainder of the history of the Roman Republic cannot be underestimated. First, their proposed laws showed the growing conflict between the rich and the poor in the Roman state. Second, the willingness on the part of prominent Senators to resort to violence to resolve matters set a dangerous precedent for the remainder of the Republic and fundamentally changed the nature of Roman politics. Finally, the support that the Gracchi received from the Roman people, as well as the residents of Italian cities who were not full citizens, showed that the causes that the Gracchi adopted were not going to go away permanently after their death. Indeed, Rome's Italian allies went to war against Rome in 90 – 88 BCE; the result of this **Social War**, after "socii," meaning "allies," was the grant of full Roman citizenship rights to Italians.

17.6.9.2: The Civil War of Marius and Sulla, and the Conspiracy of Catilina

The affair of the Gracchi was the first clear instance in the late Republic of Populares and Optimates in a violent conflict. Forty years later, a conflict between two politicians, representing different sides in this debate, resulted in a full-fledged civil war.

In 107 BCE, impatient over the prolonged and challenging war against the Numidian king Jugurtha, the Romans elected as consul Gaius **Marius**.

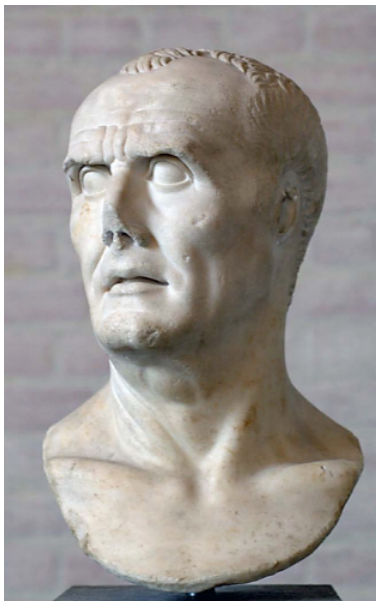


Figure **17.6.9.1**: Bust of Gaius Marius (Public Domain; User "Direktor" via Wikimedia Commons)

While Marius had already enjoyed a distinguished military career, he was a *novus homo*, or "new man," a term the Romans used to refer to newcomers to Roman politics, meaning individuals who have not had any family members elected to political office. Even more shockingly, Marius was not even from Rome proper, but from the town of Arpinum, located sixty miles south of Rome. Marius benefited from the sense of frustration in Rome over the length of the war and the perceived corruption of the aristocratic leaders abroad. Once elected, he took over the command in the war and passed the most comprehensive reforms to the Roman military since the Romans switched to the manipular legion. First, Marius abolished the property requirement for military service, allowing landless Romans to serve in the army for the first time in Roman history. A second and related change was the new commitment on the part of the Roman state to arm its troops and also pay them for service. Henceforth, the military became a profession, rather than a seasonal occupation for farmers. Finally, Marius changed the tactics of the legionary organization on the battlefield, changing the legion of maniples into a **legion of cohorts**.



Figure **17.6.9.2**: Roman Soldiers with Aquilifer Signifer Centurio | The Cohortal Legion after Marius. Re-enactors Portraying Legion XV Appollinaris in the First Century CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "MatthaisKabel" via Wikimedia Commons)

Marius' reforms, while controversial, proved immensely successful, and he swiftly was able to defeat Jugurtha, ending the war in 104 BCE. As a result of his victories, Marius had gained unprecedented popularity in Rome and was elected to five more successive consulships in 104 – 100 BCE. While a law existed requiring ten years between successive consulships, Marius'

popularity and military success, in conjunction with the Romans' fear of on-going foreign wars, elevated him above the law. While Marius began his military career fighting for Rome, though, he ended it by causing the worst civil war Rome had seen to that point.

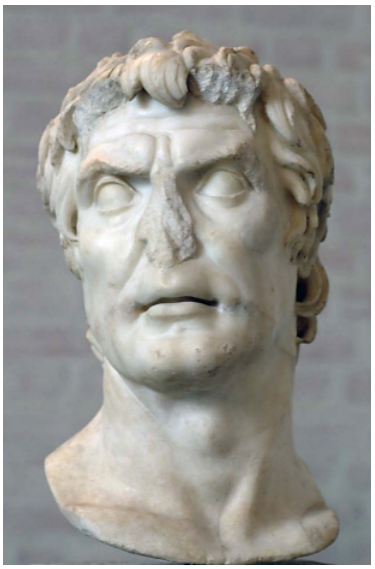


Figure **17.6.9.3**: Bust of Lucius Cornelius Sulla (Public Domain; User "Direktor" via Wikimedia Commons)

In 88 BCE, the Roman Senate was facing a war against Mithridates, king of Pontus, who had long been a thorn in Rome's side in the Eastern provinces of the empire. Sensing that Marius was too old to undertake the war, the Senate appointed instead Lucius Cornelius **Sulla**, a distinguished general who had started his career as Marius' quaestor in the Jugurthine War and was now a consul himself. Marius, however, had another trick up his sleeve. Summoning the Plebeian Council, Marius overturned the decision of the Senate and drove Sulla out of Rome. Instead of going lightly into exile, however, Sulla gathered an army and marched on Rome—the first time in Roman history that a Roman general led a Roman army against Rome!

Sulla took over Rome, swiftly had himself declared commander of the war on Mithridates, and departed for the Black Sea. In 86 BCE, Marius was elected consul for the seventh and final time in his career then promptly died of natural causes, just seventeen days after taking office. The civil war that he started with Sulla, though, was still far from over.

In 83 BCE, victorious over Mithridates but facing a hostile reception from the Senate, Sulla marched on Rome for the second time. This time, he truly meant business. Declaring himself dictator for reforming the Roman constitution, Sulla ruled Rome as a dictator for the next three years. His reforms aimed to prevent the rise of another Marius so significantly curtailed the powers of the plebeian tribunes. In addition, he established the **proscriptions**—a list of enemies of the state, whom anyone could kill on sight, and whose property was confiscated. Incidentally, one name on Sulla's list was the young **Julius Caesar**, whose aunt had been married to Gaius Marius. While Caesar obviously survived the proscription, and went on to become a prominent politician himself, the confiscation of his property by Sulla ensured that he remained painfully strapped financially and in debt for the rest of his life.

After enacting his reforms, Sulla just as suddenly resigned from politics, retiring to a family estate outside of Rome in 79 BCE, where he appears to have drunk himself into an early grave— based on Plutarch's description of his death, the symptoms appear to fit with cirrhosis of the liver. Over the next several decades, some of Sulla's reforms were overturned, such as those pertaining to the plebeian tribunes. Most historians of the Republic agree, however, that the Republican constitution never afterward reverted to its old state. The Republic after Sulla was a different Republic than before him.

The civil war of Marius and Sulla showed the increasingly greater degree of competition in the Republic as well as the lengths to which some Roman politicians were willing to go to get power and hold on to it. Furthermore, it demonstrated one dangerous side effect of Marius' military reforms: before Marius, Roman farmer-soldiers did not feel a personal affinity for their generals. After Marius' reforms, however, because soldiers were paid by their generals, their loyalty was to their generals, as much or more than to the Roman state. Finally, Marius' incredible political success—election to a record-setting and law-breaking seven consulships over the course of his life—showed that military ability had somewhat leveled the playing field between old patrician families such as Sulla's—that had dominated the consulship for centuries—and the newcomers to Roman politics. This challenge by the newcomers to the old Roman political families was an especially bitter pill to swallow for some.

In 63 BCE, Lucius Sergius **Catilina**, a patrician who had unsuccessfully run for consulship and who was defeated that very year by another newcomer from Arpinum, Marcus Tullius Cicero, banded with other frustrated Senators to plan a conspiracy to assassinate the consuls and take over the state. Catilina's conspiracy failed, and modern historians can read Cicero's own reports to the Senate and the people about how he discovered and stopped this conspiracy. Catilina's frustration, just like that of Sulla twenty years earlier, nevertheless shows how difficult it was for Roman "oldschool" political families to accept that their competition for the consulship now was not just against each other. Catilina's plan to resort to violence to achieve power also shows just how quickly political violence became the "normal" solution to problems in Roman Republican politics after the Gracchi.

17.6.9.3: The First Triumvirate, and the Civil War of Caesar and Pompey

The political careers of Marius and Sulla, as well as Catilina, show the increased level of competition in the late Republic and the ruthlessness with which some Roman politicians in the period attempted to gain the consulship. In 60 BCE, however, a group of three politicians tried to achieve its goals by doing something atypical of Roman politicians who had largely only looked out for themselves: the three formed an alliance in order to help each other. Spectacularly, their alliance even transcended the usual division of Populares and Optimates, showing that, for these three men at least, the thirst for political power was more important than any other personal convictions.

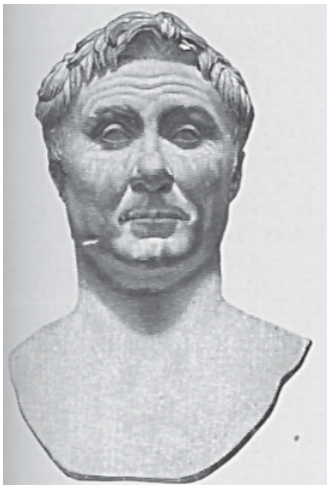


Figure **17.6.9.4**: **Bust of Pompey the Great** | Pompey the Great with Alexander the Great's Hairstyle (Public Domain; User "Robbot" via Wikimedia Commons)

Marcus Licinius **Crassus** was the wealthiest man in Rome, son of a consul, and consul himself in 70 BCE. His colleague in the consulship in 70 BCE, Gnaeus **Pompey**, achieved military fame in his youth, earning him the nickname "Magnus," or "the Great," from Sulla himself.

By 60 BCE, however, both Crassus and Pompey felt frustrated with their political careers so joined forces with a relative newcomer to the world of politics, Gaius Julius Caesar. The three men formed their alliance, secret at first, an alliance which Cicero later dubbed the **Triumvirate**. To cement the alliance, Caesar's daughter, Julia, married Pompey. Together, they lobbied to help each other rise again to the consulship and achieve desirable military commands.

The alliance paid immediate dividends for Caesar, who was promptly elected consul for 59 BCE and was then awarded Gaul as his province for five years after the consulship. Crassus and Pompey, in the meanwhile, were re-elected consuls for 55 BCE, and, in the same year, Caesar's command in Gaul was renewed for another five years. One modern historian has called it "the worst piece of legislation in Roman history," since the renewal did not specify whether the five-year clock started afresh in 55 BCE—in which case, Caesar's command was to end in 50 BCE—or if the five years were added to the original five-year term—in which case, Caesar's command would have ended in 48 BCE.

A talented writer, as well as skilled general, Caesar made sure to publish an account of his Gallic campaigns in installments during his time in Gaul. As a result, Romans were continually aware of Caesar's successes, and his popularity actually grew in his absence. His rising popularity was a source of frustration for the other two triumvirs. Finally, the already uneasy alliance disintegrated in 53 BCE. First, Julia died in childbirth, and her baby died with her. In the same year, Crassus was killed at the Battle

of Carrhae, fighting the Parthians. With the death of both Julia and Crassus, no links were left connecting Caesar and Pompey; the two former family relations, albeit by marriage, swiftly became official enemies.

Late in 50 BCE, the Senate, under the leadership of Pompey, informed Caesar that his command had expired and demanded that he surrender his army. Caesar, however, refused to return to Rome as a private citizen, demanding to be allowed to stand for the consulship *in absentia*. When his demands were refused, on January 10th of 49 BCE, Caesar and his army crossed the Rubicon, a river which marked the border of his province. By leaving his province with his army against the wishes of the Senate, Caesar committed an act of treason, as defined in Roman law; the civil war began.

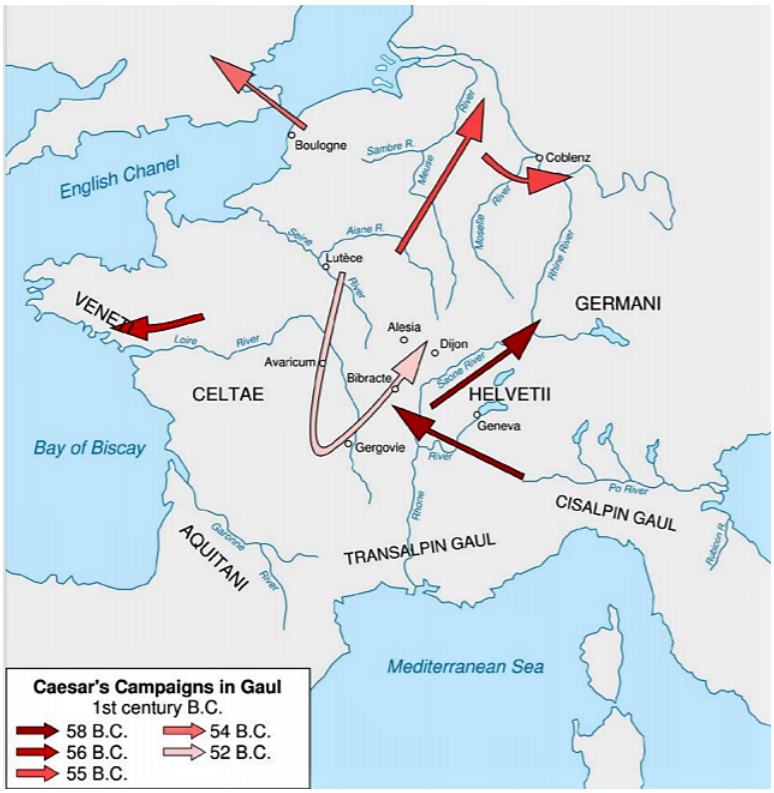


Figure **17.6.9.5**: Bust of Cleopatra VII (Public Domain; User "Louis le Grand" via Wikimedia Commons)

While most of the Senate was on Pompey's side, Caesar started the war with a distinct advantage: his troops had just spent a larger part of a decade fighting with him in Gaul; many of Pompey's army, on the other hand, was disorganized. As a result, for much of 49 BCE, Pompey retreated to the south of Italy, with Caesar in pursuit. Finally, in late 48 BCE, the two fought a decisive battle at Pharsalus in northern Greece. There, Caesar's army managed to defeat Pompey's much larger forces. After the defeat, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated by order of Ptolemy XIII, who had hoped to win Caesar's favor by this action. When he arrived in Egypt in pursuit of Pompey, Caesar, however, sided with Ptolemy's sister **Cleopatra VII** and appears to have fathered a son with her, Caesarion.



Map of Caesar's Campaigns in Gaul (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Semhur" via Wikimedia Commons)



Map of Caesar's Final Campaigns During the Civil War (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "historicair" via Wikimedia Commons)

With Pompey's death, the civil war was largely over, although Caesar still fought a number of battles across the Roman world with the remnants of the senatorial army. It is indeed striking to look at a map of Caesar's military career. While his military actions on

behalf of Rome were largely limited to Gaul, with a couple of forays into Britain, his civil war against Pompey and his allies took Caesar all over the Roman world from 49 to 45 BCE.

17.6.9.4: Aftermath of the Civil War, the Second Triumvirate, and the Age of Augustus

Victorious in the civil war against Pompey and his supporters, Caesar was faced with the challenging question of what to do next. Clearly, he was planning to hold on to power in some way. Based on previous history, there were two options available to him: the Marius model of rule, meaning election to successive consulships, and the Sulla model, meaning dictatorship. Initially, Caesar followed the first model, holding the consulship first with a colleague in 47 BCE and 46 BCE then serving as sole consul in 45 BCE. By early 44 BCE, however, Caesar appears to have decided to adopt the Sulla model instead. In February of 44 BCE, he took the title of ***dictator perpetuo***, or "dictator for life," and had coins minted with his image and new title. His was the first instance in Roman history of a living individual's placing his likeness on coinage.



Figure **17.6.9.6**: Coin of Caesar from 44 BCE | Note Caesar's Image on One Side, and Venus on the reverse. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Medium69" via Wikimedia Commons)

This new title appears to have been the final straw for a group of about sixty senators who feared that Caesar aimed to make himself a king. On the Ides of March (March 15th) of 44 BCE, the conspirators rushed Caesar during a Senate meeting and stabbed him to death. But if the conspirators had thought that by assassinating Caesar they were going to restore the Republic, they turned out to be sorely mistaken. Caesar's will, in which he left money to each resident of the city of Rome and donated his gardens for use by the public, only further increased his popularity among the people, and popular rioting ensued throughout the city. Since Caesar did not have legitimate sons who could inherit— Caesarion, his son with Cleopatra, was illegitimate—he adopted an heir in his will, a common Roman practice. The heir in question was his grand-nephew Gaius Octavius, whose name after the adoption became Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (or Octavian, in English). It is interesting to note that Caesar's will also named a back-up heir, in case the main heir would have died before inheriting. The back-up heir was none other than Brutus, one of Caesar's assassins.



Figure **17.6.9.7**: Statue of Augustus from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Soerfm" via Wikimedia Commons)

At the time of his adoption as Caesar's heir, Octavian was nineteen years old; thus, he was too young to have had much military or political experience. Quickly, though, he showed political acumen, initially using an alliance with two much more experienced former allies of Caesar: **Marcus Antonius** and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. Forming what became known as the **Second Triumvirate**, the three men renewed the proscriptions in 43 BCE, aggressively pursuing the enemies of Caesar and also fighting a small-scale civil war with Caesar's assassins. The triumvirs defeated Caesar's assassins at the Battle of Philippi in northern Greece in 42 BCE; they then carved out the Roman world into regions to be ruled by each. Marcus Antonius, who claimed Egypt, although it was not yet a Roman province, proceeded to marry Cleopatra and rule Egypt with her over the following decade. Ultimately, however, another civil war resulted between Antonius and Octavian, with the latter winning a decisive victory in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. From that moment until his death in 14 CE, Octavian—soon to be named **Augustus** in 27 BCE, the name he subsequently used—ruled what henceforth was known as the Roman Empire, and is considered by modern historians of Rome to have been the first emperor.

While modern historians refer to Augustus as the first emperor of Rome, that is not the title that he himself had, nor would he have said that he was inaugurating a new form of government in Rome. Rather, throughout his time in power, Augustus claimed to have restored the Roman Republic, and, with the exception of a few elected offices, he did not have any official position. How did he manage to rule the Roman Empire for over forty years without any official position? Some answers can be found in the ***Res Gestae Divi Augusti***, an autobiography that Augustus himself composed in the year before he died and which he ordered to be posted on his Mausoleum in Rome, with copies also posted in all major cities throughout the Empire.

Reflecting on his forty-year rule in this document, Augustus described himself as the first citizen, or *princeps*, of the Roman state, superior to others in his *auctoritas*. In addition, he was especially proud of the title of "Pater Patriae," or "Father of the Fatherland," voted to him by the Senate and reflecting his status as the patron of all citizens. It is striking to consider that other than these honorary titles and positions, Augustus did not have an official position as a ruler. Indeed, having learned from Caesar's example,

he avoided accepting any titles that might have smacked of a desire for kingship. Instead, he brilliantly created for himself new titles and powers, thoroughly grounded in previous, Republican tradition. In addition, he proved to be a master diplomat, who shared power with the Senate in a way beneficial to himself, and by all of these actions seamlessly married the entire Republican political structure with one-man rule.

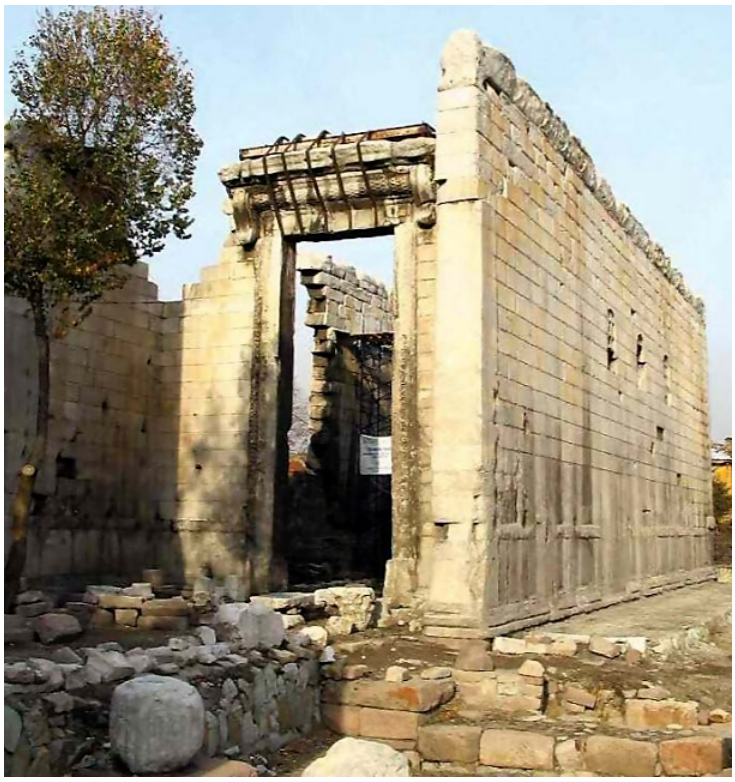


Figure **17.6.9.8**: Copy of the Res Gestae in Modern Ankara, Turkey (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Soerfm" via Wikimedia Commons)

The question remains: when did the Roman Republic actually fall? Different historians have proposed several possible answers. One minority position is that the Republic had fallen with the dictatorship of Sulla, since it fundamentally altered the nature of the Republican government and permanently destabilized it. Another possible answer is the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE, since afterwards, the Republic was never quite the same as it had been before the civil war of Pompey and Caesar. Another possible answer is 27 BCE, when the Senate granted Octavian the title of Augustus, recognizing his albeit unofficial consolidation of power. Finally, yet another possible answer is the death of Augustus in 14 CE. Overall, all of these possible dates and events show the instability of the Roman state in the late first century BCE.

17.6.9.5: Roman Culture of the Late Republic and the Augustan Age

While the political structure of the Roman Republic in its final century of existence was becoming increasingly unstable, the period from the end of the Second Punic War on was actually one of increasing flourishing of entertainment culture and literary arts in Rome. Although much of Roman literary culture was based on Greek literature, the Romans adapted what they borrowed to make it distinctly their own. Thus, while adapting Greek tragedies and comedies and, in some cases, apparently translating them wholesale, Romans still injected Roman values into them, thus making them relatable to Roman Republican audiences. For example, in one fragment from a Roman tragedy, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, adapted by the Roman poet Ennius from the Greek tragedian Euripides' play by the same name, the chorus of frustrated Greek soldiers debates the merits of *otium*, or leisure, and *negotium*, or business (a specifically Roman concept). Similarly, while Roman philosophy and rhetoric of the Republic were heavily based on their Greek counterparts, their writers thoroughly Romanized the concepts discussed, as well as the presentation. For instance, Cicero, a preeminent rhetorician and philosopher of the late Republic, adapted the model of the Socratic dialogue in several of his philosophical treatises to make dialogues between prominent Romans of the Middle Republic. His *De Republica*, a work expressly modeled on Plato's *Republic*, features Scipio Aemilianus, the victor over Carthage in the Third Punic War.

While the late Republic was a period of growth for Roman literary arts, with much of the writing done by politicians, the age of Augustus saw an even greater flourishing of Roman literature. This increase was due in large part to Augustus' own investment in sponsoring prominent poets to write about the greatness of Rome. The three most prominent poets of the Augustan age, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, all wrote poetry glorifying Augustan Rome. Virgil's *Aeneid*, finished in 19 BCE, aimed to be the Roman national epic and indeed achieved that goal. The epic, intended to be the Roman version of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, told about the travels of the Trojan prince Aeneas who, by will of the gods, became the founder of Rome. Clearly connecting the Roman to the Greek heroic tradition, the epic also includes a myth explaining the origins of the Punic Wars: during his travels, before he arrived in Italy, Aeneas was ship-wrecked and landed in Carthage. Dido, the queen of Carthage, fell in love with him and wanted him to stay with her, but the gods ordered Aeneas to sail on to Italy. After Aeneas abandoned her, Dido committed suicide and cursed the future Romans to be at war with her people.

The works of Horace and Ovid were more humorous at times, but they still included significant elements from early Roman myths. They thus served to showcase the *pax deorum* that caused Rome to flourish in the past and, again now, in the age of Augustus. Ovid appears to have pushed the envelope beyond acceptable limits, whether in his poetry or in his personal conduct. Therefore, Augustus exiled him in 8 CE to the city of Tomis on the Black Sea, where Ovid spent the remainder of his life writing mournful poetry and begging unsuccessfully to be recalled back to Rome.



Figure **17.6.9.9**: The Ara Pacis (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Manfred Heyde" via Wikimedia Commons)

In addition to sponsoring literature, the age of Augustus was a time of building and rebuilding around Rome. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus includes a very long list of temples that he had restored or built. Among some new building projects that he undertook to stand as symbols of renewal and prosperity ordained by the gods themselves, none is as famous as the ***Ara Pacis***, or Altar of Peace, in Rome. The altar features a number of mythological scenes and processions of gods; it also integrates scenes of the imperial family, including Augustus himself making a sacrifice to the gods, while flanked by his grandsons Gaius and Lucius.

The message of these building projects, as well as the other arts that Augustus sponsored is, overall, simple: Augustus wanted to show that his rule was a new Golden Age of Roman history, a time when peace was restored and Rome flourished, truly blessed by the gods.

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17.6.10: The Early Empire

The period from the consolidation of power by Augustus in 27 BCE to the death of the emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE was one of relative peace and prosperity throughout the Roman Empire. For this reason, the Romans themselves referred to this time as the ***Pax Romana***, or Roman peace. During this period, the Empire became increasingly more of a smoothly run bureaucratic machine when commerce prospered, and the overall territory grew to its largest extent in the early second century CE. Of course, some of the Roman subjects did not feel quite as happy with this peace and what it brought to them. The Roman historian Tacitus narrates a speech of a British tribal rebel leader, Calgacus, to his men before they fought—and were defeated by—the Romans in 85 CE: "they (the Romans) make a desert, and call it peace." Other evidence from the territories in the periphery of the Empire also shows that Romanization was not absolute, as some remote rural areas in provinces far from Italy did not really feel the impact of the Empire. Finally, the period of the early Empire witnessed the rise of a new religion, **Christianity**. This new religion did not have a profound impact on the state yet at this point, but the seeds planted in this period allowed for fundamental changes to occur centuries later. This is, after all, one of the marvels of history. It can take centuries to see the long-term impact of events that seem so small and insignificant at first.

17.6.10.1: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

The historian Tacitus describes in detail the emotions in the Roman Senate upon the death of Augustus. Some Senators were hoping for the return of the Republic, while others assumed that Augustus' stepson would inherit his nebulous yet amazingly powerful position. The scales were heavily weighed in favor of the latter option: as Tacitus points out, most Senators by 14 CE—fifty years after Caesar's assassination—had never lived under a Republic; thus, they did not really know what a true Republic looked like. Still, the question that all were pondering in 14 CE was: how do you pass on something that does not exist? After all, Augustus did not have any official position. The first succession was a test case to see if the imperial system of government would become the new normal for Rome or if Augustus would prove to have been an exception.

Augustus himself seems to have been worried about appointing a successor for his entire time in power. Because of untimely deaths of all other possible candidates, Augustus eventually settled on adopting his stepson **Tiberius Claudius Nero** (not to be confused with the later emperor Nero), son of his wife Livia from her first marriage. Over the final years of his life, Augustus gradually shared more of his unofficial powers with Tiberius, in order to smooth the process of succession. Augustus' plan appears to have worked, as after a brief conversation in the Senate, as Tacitus reports, the Senators conferred upon Tiberius all of Augustus' previous powers. Tiberius' succession is the reason for which historians refer to the first Roman imperial dynasty as the **Julio-Claudians**.



Figure **17.6.10.1**: Bust of the Emperor Tiberius (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Manfred Heyde" via Wikimedia Commons)

Tiberius, a decorated military general in his youth, appears in our sources as a sullen and possibly cruel individual, whose temperament made Augustus himself feel sorry for the Romans for leaving such a ruler in his stead—or so Suetonius tells us.

He also appears to have been a rather reluctant emperor, who much preferred life out of the public eye. Finally, in 26 CE, Tiberius retired to Capri for the final eleven years of his rule. It is a testament to the spectacular bureaucratic system that was the Roman Empire that the eleven-year absence of the emperor was hardly felt, one exception being a foiled plot against Tiberius by his chief trusted advisor in Rome, Sejanus.

Similarly to Augustus, Tiberius had a difficult time selecting a successor, as repeatedly, each relative who was identified as a candidate died an untimely death. Ultimately, Tiberius adopted as his successor his grandnephew Gaius **Caligula**, or "little boot," son of the popular military hero Germanicus, who died young.



Figure 17.6.10.2: Bust of the Emperor Caligula (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Manfred Heyde" via Wikimedia Commons)

While Caligula began his power with full support of both the people and the Senate, and with an unprecedented degree of popularity, he swiftly proved to be mentally unstable and bankrupted the state in his short rule of just under four years. In 41 CE, he was assassinated by three disgruntled officers in the Praetorian Guard, which ironically was the body formed by Augustus in order to protect the emperor.

Caligula's assassination left Rome in disarray. The biographer Suetonius reports that, while the confused Senate was meeting and planning to declare the restoration of the Roman Republic, the Praetorian Guard proclaimed as the next emperor **Claudius**, uncle of Caligula and the brother of Germanicus.



Figure **17.6.10.3**: Bust of the Emperor Claudius (CC BY-SA 2.5; User “Direktor” via Wikimedia Commons)

While Claudius was a member of the imperial family, he was never considered a candidate for succession before. He had a speech impediment; as a result, Augustus considered him an embarrassment to the imperial family. Claudius proved to be a productive emperor, but his downfall appears to have been pretty women of bad character, as he repeatedly weathered plots against his life by first one wife and then the next. Finally, in 54 CE, Claudius died and was widely believed to have been poisoned by his wife, Agrippina the Younger. Since the cause, as Suetonius tells us, was mushrooms, a popular joke thereafter in Rome was that mushrooms were the food of the gods—a reference to the deification of most emperors after their death.

Although Claudius had a biological son from an earlier marriage, that son was poisoned soon after his death. His successor instead became **Nero**, his stepson, who was only sixteen years old when he gained power.

Showing the danger of inexperience for an emperor, Nero gradually alienated the Senate, the people, and the army over the course of his fourteen-year rule. He destroyed his own reputation by performing on stage—behavior that was considered disgraceful in Roman society. Furthermore, Nero is believed in 64 CE to have caused the great fire of Rome in order to free up space in the middle of the city for his ambitious new palace, the Domus Aurea, or Golden House.

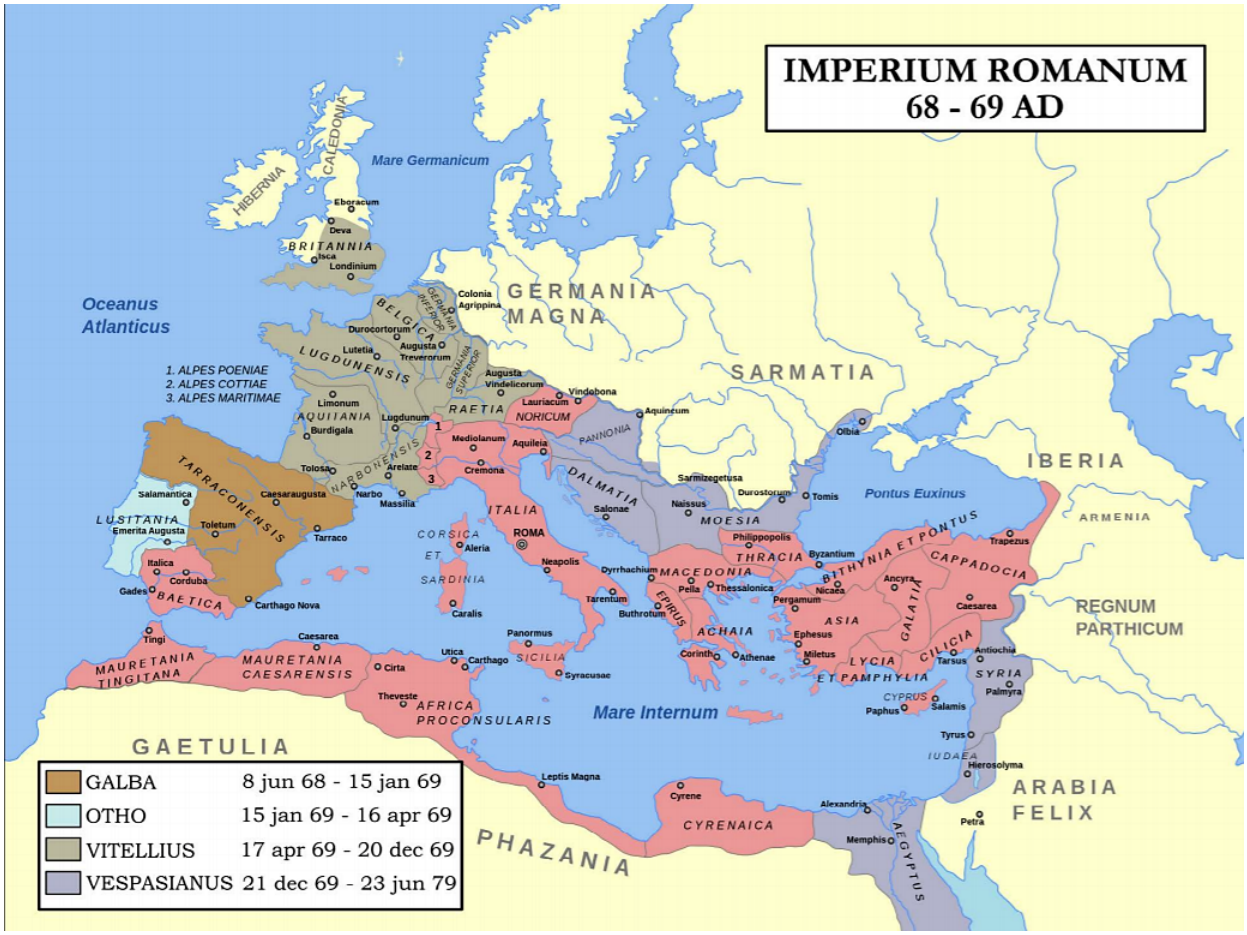


Figure 17.6.10.4: Sketch of an Ancient Graffito of the Emperor Nero (Public Domain; User “Shakko” via Wikimedia Commons)

The last years of Nero’s reign seem to have been characterized by provincial rebellions, as a revolt broke out in Judea in 66 CE, and then the governor of Gaul, Gaius Julius Vindex, also rebelled against Nero. The revolt of Vindex ultimately proved to be the end of Nero, since Vindex convinced the governor of Spain, Servius Sulpicius Galba, to join the rebellion and, furthermore, proclaim himself emperor. While the rebellion of Vindex was quickly squashed, and Vindex himself committed suicide, popular support for Galba grew just as quickly. Finally, terrified by rumors of Galba marching to Rome, Nero committed suicide in June of 68 CE. His death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

17.6.10.2: The Year of the Four Emperors, the Flavian Dynasty, and the Five Good Emperors

The year and a half after Nero’s death saw more civil war and instability throughout the empire than any other period since the late Republic. In particular, the year 69 CE became known as the year of the four emperors, as four emperors in succession came to power: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Each challenged his predecessor to a civil war, and each was as swiftly defeated by the next challenger.



Map **17.6.10.1**: Map of the Roman Empire 68-69 CE | Year of the Four Emperors (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Fulvio314" via Wikimedia Commons)

In the process, as the historian Tacitus later noted, the year of the four emperors revealed two key secrets that continued to be a factor in subsequent history of the Empire. First, emperors could now be made outside of Rome, as seen, for example, with Galba's proclamation as emperor in Spain. Second, the army could make emperors; indeed, each of the four emperors in 69 CE was proclaimed emperor by his troops. These two *arcana imperii*, or "secrets of empire," as Tacitus dubbed them, continued to play a strong role in subsequent history of the Roman Empire. Their unveiling showed the declining importance of Rome as the center of political power and the concomitant decline in the importance of the Senate, once an advisory body to the entire empire, but now increasingly confined in its authority to Rome proper alone.



Figure **17.6.10.5**: Arch of Titus | Arch of Titus, celebrating his victory over Judaea, and featuring images of war spoils on the inside. (CC0 1.0; User "Jebulon" via Wikimedia Commons)

Several reasons caused **Vespasian**, a mere son of a tax-collector, to be the only successful emperor of 69 CE and the founder of the **Flavian dynasty**. First, a talented military commander, Vespasian proved to be already in command of a major military force in 69 CE, since he had been working on subduing the Jewish Revolt since 67 CE. Ironically, Nero had originally appointed him to command the Jewish War because of Vespasian's humble family origins—which to Nero meant that he was not a political threat. Second, Vespasian was the only one of the four emperors of 69 CE who had grown sons, and thus obvious successors. Furthermore, his older son, Titus, was already a popular military commander in his own right and cemented his reputation even further by his conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE.



Map **17.6.10.2**: Map of Roman Trade Routes | This map of Roman trade routes c. 180 CE shows the economic prosperity in the urban centers. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Adhavoc" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Flavian dynasty did not last long, however, as it ended in 96 CE with the assassination of Emperor Domitian, Vespasian's younger son. The period from 96 CE to 180 CE saw a different experiment in determining imperial succession, instead of establishing traditional dynasties in which sons succeeded their fathers. Known as the period of the "**Five Good Emperors**," the trend in the second century CE was for each emperor to adopt a talented leader with potential as his successor. The result was what Edward Gibbon, the nineteenth-century British historian of Rome, called "the happiest age" of mankind. But was life everywhere

in the Roman Empire in the second century equally happy for all? The evidence suggests that while Rome and other major urban centers flourished, life in the periphery could be a very different experience.

17.6.10.3: Center Versus Periphery in the Roman Empire: the Evidence of Pliny and Apuleius

Much of extant evidence from the Roman Empire comes from Rome and Italy. As is so often the case with empires, though, life in Rome was not representative of everyday life in the empire. The problems with which residents of Rome had to contend were a far cry from those with which residents of distant provinces had to deal. Careful examination of two sources from the second century CE reveals that the relationship of the Roman Empire to the provinces in the periphery was often uneasy. Writing about two different provinces within a half-century of each other, the two sources, Pliny the Younger and Apuleius, show the complicated blessings of living in a province far away from Rome that was yet under Roman rule.

It is shocking to consider today that most Roman governors setting out for the job received just one type of personnel to assist them with their duties: a flute-player, whose job was to play during sacrifice ceremonies. Since military forces were expensive to maintain and needed for emergencies in those areas of the Empire considered to be the most at risk for rebellion or outside attack, most governors did not have a legion stationed in their province. So how did governors resolve problems, and what resources did they find when they arrived? The single best sources of information about Roman provincial government is the prolific letter-writer Pliny the Younger, who served as governor of the province of **Bithynia** on the shore of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE. Pliny was a cautious and conscientious governor, and thus believed in consulting the emperor **Trajan** on every single issue that he encountered in his province. Luckily for us, their correspondence survives.

Pliny's letters reveal a myriad of problems that the governor was expected to solve: staffing personnel for prisons (is it acceptable to use slaves as prison guards?), building repairs and water supply, abandoned infants and their legal status (should they be considered slave-born or free?), fire brigades (are they a potential security risk to the Empire?) and, most famously, what to do with Christians in the province. The emperor Trajan patiently responded to each letter that he received from Pliny and appears to have placed stability and peace in the province foremost in his concerns. Thus, for instance, with regard to the issue of Christians in Bithynia, Trajan recommends that Pliny not worry about tracking down Christians in his province, as they were not a threat.

Another perspective from the periphery comes from the novel *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass*, written by the North African intellectual Apuleius sometime in the later part of the second century CE. The protagonist of the novel, Lucius, is a curious intellectual who is traveling through Greece and, through a magic experiment gone wrong, accidentally is turned into a donkey. For the remainder of the novel, Lucius, in his donkey form, is repeatedly stolen, traded, beaten, and abused, until finally being rescued at the end of the novel by the Egyptian goddess Isis, whose service he then enters as a priest. Throughout his travels, though, Lucius' observations reveal the limits of Romanization in the remote parts of Greece. Law and order are largely absent, highway robbery is simply a normal part of life, and on the one occasion when a poor farmer runs into a Roman soldier on the road, the soldier forcibly requisitions the farmer's sole possession: his donkey. Overall, the picture that Apuleius paints reveals the dark side of the *Pax Romana*. Yes, the Empire was at peace, and few attacks were happening on the frontiers. Yet life in the provinces was anything but truly peaceful.

17.6.10.4: Early Christianity in the Context of the Roman Empire

One of the problems that arose in Bithynia during Pliny's time as governor in 111 – 113 CE involved procedural questions on how to treat Christians in the province. Pliny does not seem to have much knowledge about them but is struck by what he describes as their stubbornness in clinging to their faith even when threatened with death. As he points out in his letter on the subject to Trajan, he has judged this stubbornness alone sufficient to merit punishment, presumably because it showed a dangerous level of disrespect towards Roman rule. Pliny's perspective is one of the earliest non-Christian sources about the new religion and shows how quickly it had spread over the Empire. But how and why did the new religion spread so rapidly over the Empire, and why was it so attractive to different populations? After all, quite a number of different cults and self-proclaimed prophets periodically appeared in the Roman world, yet none had the long-term impact of Christianity, which just two centuries after Pliny's day became the religion of the Roman emperor himself.

Early Christianity is, in some ways, an ancient historian's dream: for few other topics in Roman history do we have so many primary sources from both the perspective of insiders and outsiders, beginning with the earliest days of the movement. The **New Testament**, in particular, is a collection of primary sources by early Christians about their movement, with some of the letters

composed merely twenty-five years after Jesus' crucifixion. It is a remarkably open document, collecting theological beliefs and stories about Jesus on which the faith was built. At the same time, however, the New Testament does not "white-wash" the early churches; rather, it documents their failings and short-comings with remarkable frankness, allowing the historian to consider the challenges that the early Christians faced from not only the outside but also within the movement.

The story of the origins of the faith is explained more plainly in the four Gospels, placed at the beginning of the New Testament. While different emphases are present in each of the four Gospels, the basic story is as follows: God himself came to earth as a human baby, lived a life among the Jews, performed a number of miracles that hinted at his true identity, but ultimately was crucified, died, and rose again on the third day. His resurrection proved to contemporary witnesses that his teachings were true and inspired many of those who originally rejected him to follow him. While the movement originated as a movement within Judaism, it ultimately floundered in Judea but quickly spread throughout the Greek-speaking world—due to the work of such early missionaries as **Paul**. (Visit the following link to view a map of Paul's missionary journeys: www.allaboutturkey.com/highre...sjourneys.jpg.)

It would be no exaggeration to call the early Christian movement revolutionary. In a variety of respects, it went completely against every foundational aspect of Roman (and, really, Greek) society. First, the Christian view of God was very different from the pagan conceptions of gods throughout the ancient Mediterranean. While in traditional Roman paganism the gods had petty concerns and could treat humans unfairly, if they so wished, Christianity by contrast presented the message that God himself became man and dwelt with men as an equal. This concept of God incarnate had revolutionary implications for social relations in a Christian worldview. For early Christians, their God's willingness to take on humanity and then sacrifice himself for the sins of the world served as the greatest equalizer: since God had suffered for all of them, they were all equally important to him, and their social positions in the Roman world had no significance in God's eyes. Finally, early Christianity was an apocalyptic religion. Many early Christians believed that Jesus was coming back soon, and they eagerly awaited his arrival, which would erase all inequality and social distinctions.



Figure **17.6.10.6**: Christ as the Good Shepherd in a Third-Century CE Catacomb Painting (Public Domain; User "Wafflws9761" via Wikimedia Commons)

By contrast, traditional Roman society, as the conflict of the orders in the early Republic showed, was extremely stratified. While the conflict of the orders was resolved by the mid-Republic, sharp divisions between the rich and poor remained. While social

mobility was possible—for instance, slaves could be freed, and within a generation, their descendants could be Senators—extreme mobility was the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, gender roles in Roman society were extremely rigid, as all women were subject to male authority. Indeed, the ***paterfamilias***, or head of the household, had the power of life or death over all living under his roof, including in some cases adult sons, who had their own families. Christianity challenged all of these traditional relationships, nullifying any social differences, and treating the slave and the free the same way. Furthermore, Christianity provided a greater degree of freedom than women had previously known in the ancient world, with only the Stoics coming anywhere close in their view on gender roles. Christianity allowed women to serve in the church and remain unmarried, if they so chose, and even to become heroes of the faith by virtue of their lives or deaths, as in the case of the early martyrs. Indeed, the *Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, which documents the two women's martyrdom in Carthage in 203 CE, shows all of these reversals of Roman tradition in practice.

The *Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity* was compiled by an editor shortly after the fact and includes Perpetua's own prison diary, as she awaited execution. The inclusion of a woman's writings already makes the text unusual, as virtually all surviving texts from the Roman world are by men. In addition, Perpetua was a noblewoman, yet she was imprisoned and martyred together with her slave, Felicity. The two women, as the text shows, saw each other as equals, despite their obvious social distinction. Furthermore, Perpetua challenged her father's authority as *paterfamilias* by refusing to obey his command to renounce her faith and thus secure freedom. Such outright disobedience would have been shocking to Roman audiences. Finally, both Perpetua and Felicity placed their role as mothers beneath their Christian identity, as both gave up their babies in order to be able to be martyred. Their story, as those of other martyrs, was truly shocking in their rebellion against Roman values, but their extraordinary faith in the face of death proved to be contagious. As recent research shows, conversion in the Roman Empire sped up over the course of the second and third centuries CE, despite periodic persecutions by such emperors as Septimius Severus, who issued an edict in 203 CE forbidding any conversions to Judaism and Christianity. That edict led to the execution of Perpetua and Felicity.

Most of the early Christians lived less eventful (and less painful) lives than Perpetua and Felicity, but the reversals to tradition inherent in Christianity appear clearly in their lives as well. First, the evidence of the New Testament, portions of which were written as early as the 60s CE, shows that the earliest Christians were from all walks of life; Paul, for instance, was a tent-maker. Some other professions of Christians and new converts that are mentioned in the New Testament include prison guards, Roman military officials of varying ranks, and merchants. Some, like Paul, were Roman citizens, with all the perks inherent in that position, including the right of appeal to the Emperor and the right to be tried in Rome. Others were non-citizen free males of varying provinces, women, and slaves. Stories preserved in *Acts* and in the epistles of Paul that are part of the New Testament reveal ways—the good, the bad, and the ugly—in which these very different people tried to come together and treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of the struggles that these early churches faced included sexual scandal (the Corinthian church witnessed the affair of a stepmother with her stepson), unnecessary quarrelling and litigation between members, and the challenge of figuring out the appropriate relationship between the requirements of Judaism and Christianity (to circumcise or not to circumcise? That was the question. And then there were the strict Jewish dietary laws). It is important to note that early Christianity appears to have been predominantly an urban religion and spread most quickly throughout urban centers. Thus Paul's letters address the churches in different cities throughout the Greek-speaking world and show the existence of a network of relationships between the early churches, despite the physical distance between them. Through that network, the churches were able to carry out group projects, such as fundraising for areas in distress, and could also assist Christian missionaries in their work. By the early second century CE, urban churches were led by bishops, who functioned as overseers for spiritual and practical matters of the church in their region.

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17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity

While the second century CE was a time when the Empire flourished, the third century was a time of crisis, defined by political instability and civil wars, which ultimately demonstrated that the Empire had become too large to be effectively controlled by one ruler. Furthermore, the increasing pressures on the frontiers, which required emperors to spend much of their time on campaigns, resulted in the decline of the importance of the city of Rome. By the end of the third century, an experiment with dividing the empire showed a different model of rule, one which lasted, albeit with some interludes, until the last Western emperor, **Romulus Augustulus**, was deposed in 476 CE. While the political narrative of the third century and Late Antiquity could be described as a story of decline and fall of the Roman Empire (as the British historian Gibbon famously called it), nevertheless, it was a period in which culture, and especially Christian culture, flourished and replaced the traditional Roman pagan mode of thinking. Far from being culturally a time of "decline and fall," Late Antiquity, rather, was looking forward to the world of the Middle Ages. It was also the period of Roman history that produced some of its most influential leaders, most notably, Constantine.

17.6.11.1: The Third-Century Crisis and Diocletian

Although composed during a time of prosperity in the Empire, Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses* showed tensions in the provinces, indicative of the failure of Empire to govern all portions equally effectively. While not visible in the larger urban centers until the third century CE, these tensions manifested themselves clearly during the third-century crisis, a period of almost fifty years (235 – 284 CE) that was characterized by unprecedented political, social, and economic upheaval across the Empire. In effect, the **third-century crisis** was the year 69 CE repeated, but this time it stretched over half a century. The same secrets of power that 69 CE revealed for the first time— that armies could make emperors and that emperors could be made outside of Rome—were now on display yet again.

235 CE, the emperor Severus Alexander was assassinated by his troops on campaign, who then proclaimed as emperor their general Maximinus Thrax. Over the subsequent half-century, twenty-six emperors were officially recognized by the Roman Senate, and a number of others were proclaimed emperors but did not live long enough to consolidate power and be officially accepted as emperors by the Senate. Most of these new emperors were military generals who were proclaimed by their troops on campaign. Most of them did not have any previous political experience and thus had no clear program for ruling the empire. The competing claims resulted in the temporary breaking away from the Roman Empire of regions to the East and the Northwest.

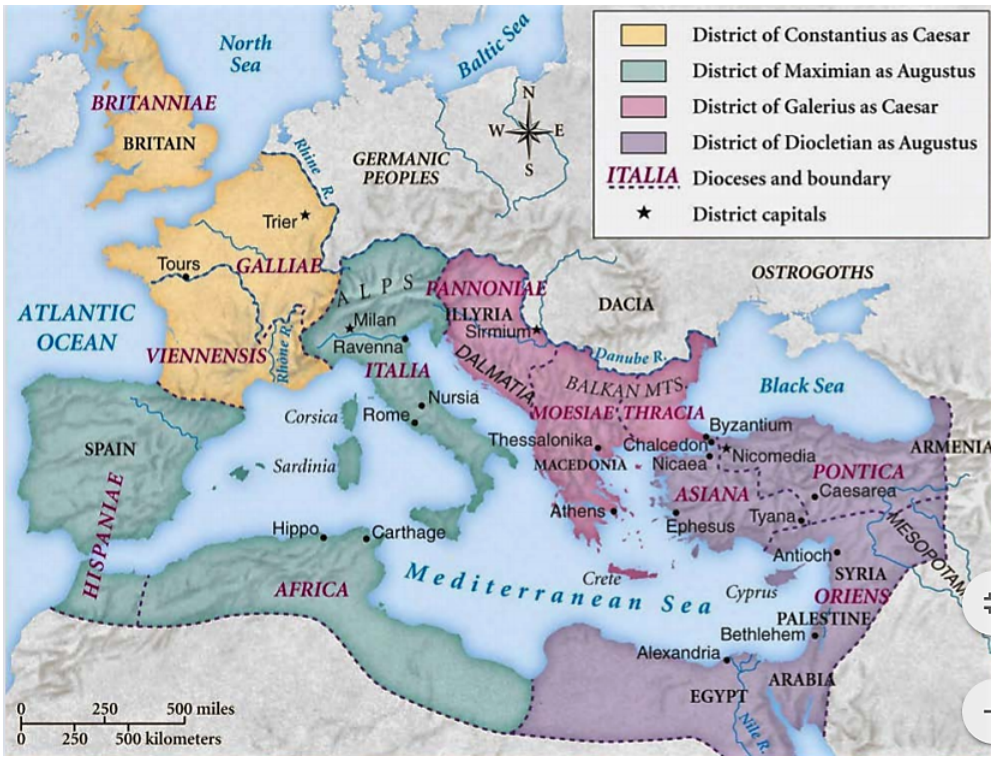


Map **17.6.11.1**: Map of the Roman Empire during the Third-Century Crisis (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Wanwa" via Wikimedia Commons)

The political instability that resulted was not, however, the only problem with which the Empire had to contend. In addition to political upheaval and near-constant civil wars, the Empire was also dealing with increasing pressures on the frontiers, a plague that devastated the population, a famine, and rampant inflation. Roman emperors, starting with Nero, had been debasing the Roman coinage, but not until the third-century crisis did the inflation hit in full force.

The third-century crisis showed that a single emperor stationed in Rome was no longer equipped to deal with the challenges of ruling such a vast territory. And, indeed, so recognized the man who ended the crisis: the emperor **Diocletian**Born to a socially insignificant family in the province of Dalmatia, Diocletian had a successful military career. Proclaimed emperor by his troops in 284 CE, Diocletian promptly displayed a political acumen that none of his predecessors in the third century possessed. Realizing that, as the third-century crisis showed, a single emperor in charge of the entire empire was a "sitting duck," whose assassination would throw the entire empire into yet another civil war, Diocletian established a new system of rule: the **Tetrarchy**, or the rule of four. He divided the empire into four regions, each with its own capital.

It is important to note that Rome was not the capital of its region. Diocletian clearly wanted to select as capitals cities with strategic importance, taking into account such factors as proximity to problematic frontiers. Of course, as a Dalmatian of low birth, Diocletian also lacked the emotional connection to Rome that the earliest emperors possessed. Two of the regions of the Tetrarchy were ruled by senior emperors, named Augusti ("Augustus" in the singular), and two were ruled by junior emperors, named Caesares ("Caesar" in the singular). One of the Augusti was Diocletian himself, with Maximian as the second Augustus. The two men's sons-in-law, Galerius and Constantus Chlorus, became the two Caesares. Finally, it is important to note that in addition to reforming imperial rule, Diocletian attempted to address other major problems, such as inflation, by passing the Edict of Maximum Prices. This edict set a maximum price that could be charged on basic goods and services in the Empire. He also significantly increased the imperial bureaucracy. In a nutshell, as some modern historians have described him, Diocletian was the most significant Roman reformer since Augustus.



Map **17.6.11.2**: Map of the Roman Empire under the Tetrarchy (CC BY-SA 3.0; Coppermine Photo Gallery via Wikimedia Commons)

Diocletian's political experiment was most clearly successful in achieving one goal: ending the third-century crisis. The four men were able to rule the empire and restore a degree of political stability. A statue column of the Tetrarchs together displays their message of unity in rule: the four men are portrayed identically, so it is impossible to tell them apart. Showing their predominantly military roles, they are dressed in military garb, rather than the toga, the garb of politicians and citizens, and each holds one hand on the hilt of his sword and hugs one of the other Tetrarchs with the other.



Figure 17.6.11.1: State Column of the Tetrarchs (CC BY-SA 3.0; Nino Barbieri via Wikimedia Commons)

While it succeeded in restoring stability to the Empire, inherent within the Tetrarchy was the question of succession, which turned out to be a much greater problem than Diocletian had anticipated. Hoping to provide for a smooth transition of power, Diocletian abdicated in 305 CE and required Maximian to do the same. The two Caesares, junior emperors, were promptly promoted to Augusti, and two new Caesares were appointed. The following year, however, Constantius Chlorus, a newly minted Augustus, died. His death resulted in a series of wars for succession, which ended Diocletian's experiment of the Tetrarchy. The wars ended with Constantius' son, **Constantine**, reuniting the entire Roman Empire under his rule in 324 CE. In the process, Constantine also brought about a major religious shift in the Empire.

17.6.11.2: From Constantine to the Last Pagans of Rome

While traditional Roman religion was the ultimate melting pot, organically incorporating a broad variety of new cults and movements from the earliest periods of Roman expansion, Christianity's monotheistic exclusivity challenged traditional Roman religion and transformed Roman ways of thinking about religion in late antiquity.By the early fourth century CE, historians estimate that about ten percent of those living in the Roman Empire were Christians. With Constantine, however, this changed, and the previously largely underground faith grew exponentially because of the emperor's endorsement. The emperor's conversion must have seemed nothing short of miraculous to contemporaries, and a miracle is told to explain it in contemporary sources. Before a major battle in 312 CE, Constantine reportedly had a dream or a vision in which Christ himself told Constantine to place the Greek letters X and P (Chi, Rho, the first two letters of Christ's name in the Greek alphabet) on his soldiers' shields in order to assure victory.



Figure 17.6.11.2: Constantine's Military Standard | Reconstruction of Constantine's Military Standard, Incorporating the Chi Rho letters (Public Domain; Nordisk Familjebok via Wikimedia Commons)

Grateful for his subsequent victory, Constantine proceeded to play a major role in the government of the church over the course of his rule, although he was not baptized himself until he was on his deathbed. Constantine, for instance, summoned the **First Council of Nicaea** in 325 CE, which gathered major bishops from all over the Empire. The Council settled, among other issues, the question of the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, declaring them to have been one being from the creation of the world, thus affirming the doctrine of the Trinity. The Council set a significant precedent for communication of bishops in the Empire. It ended up being merely the first of seven major ecumenical councils, the last of them being the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. The councils allowed the increasingly different churches of the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire to work together on key doctrines and beliefs of the church.

Last but not least, Constantine's rule marked the end of the city of Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire. Upon reuniting the Empire in 324 CE, Constantine established his capital at the old location of the Greek city of Byzantium, but renamed it **Constantinople** (the location of Byzantium appears on Map 17.6.11.2). The location had strategic advantages for the Empire at that stage. First, it had an excellent harbor. Second, it was close to the Persian frontier, as well as the Danube frontier, a trouble area that required attention from the emperor. Finally, building this new city, to which he also referred as "New Rome," allowed Constantine to send the message that his rule was a new beginning of sorts for the Roman Empire, which was now to be a Christian empire.

With the Emperor's backing, Christianity seems to have grown exponentially over the course of the fourth century CE, much to the chagrin of **Julian the Apostate**, Rome's final pagan emperor, who tried hard to restore traditional Roman paganism during his brief rule (361 – 363 CE). Finally, the Emperor **Theodosius** gradually banned paganism altogether by 395 CE. Thus a mere eighty-three years after Constantine's initial expression of support for Christianity, it became the official religion of Rome. Paganism continued to limp on for another century or so, but without state support, it slowly died out.

17.6.11.3: The Decline of the Empire—Looking Forward while Looking Back with Augustine and the Last Pagans of Rome

Imagine that you are a citizen of the greatest empire on earth. In fact, you reside in the greatest city of the greatest empire on earth. You feel protected by the pact that was made between the founders of your state and the traditional gods. The *pax deorum*, or peace with the gods, struck a clear bargain: as long as you and your state worshipped the gods and maintained peace with them, they would make it prosper. And prosper it did! Starting out as a tiny village on the marshes of the Tiber, the Roman Empire at its height encircled the entire Mediterranean, extending to Britain and the Rhine and Danube frontiers to the north, and including a wide strip of North Africa in its southern half. But something went so terribly wrong along the way, testing the gods' patience with Rome. A new sect started out in Judaea in the first century CE, one which followed a crucified Messiah. Spreading outward like a wildfire to all parts of the empire, this sect challenged and gradually replaced the worship of the traditional gods, bringing even the emperors into its fold, starting with Constantine in the early fourth century CE. This outright violation of the thousand-year old pact between the Romans and their gods could have only one outcome: the ultimate punishment would come from the gods upon this rebellious state. And come it did; in 410 CE, the unthinkable happened. The city of Rome, untouched by foreign foe since the early days of the Republic, was sacked by the Goths, a Germanic tribe, led by the fearsome Alaric. How could something so terrible happen? And how could the Roman Empire recover from it? Such was the thought process of the typical Roman pagan, and especially the

pagan aristocrat, as few of those as were left by 410 CE. And it was in response to these questions that Augustine, veteran theologian, philosopher, and bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the final *magnum opus* of his career, the monumental twenty-two-book effort that he appropriately titled *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos*, or **On the City of God** against the Pagans.



Figure **17.6.11.3**: Fresco Painting of Augustine, Sixth Century **CE** (Public Domain; User "Mladifilozof" via Wikimedia Commons)

It is no coincidence that Peter Brown, the scholar credited with creating the academic field of study of Late Antiquity, began his career as a researcher by writing a biography of Augustine. Indeed, no other figure exemplifies so clearly the different culture that emerged in Late Antiquity, a culture of rethinking the Roman past, with an eye to a future in which Rome no longer existed as the capital of the Roman Empire. Born in North Africa in 354 CE, Augustine was educated in Rome and Milan, and, after a wild youth —about which he tells us in his Confessions— he rose to the post of the Bishop of Hippo in 396 CE. A famous figure by 410 CE, he was ideally suited to address the tragedy of the sack of Rome and the concerns that this event inspired in Christians and pagans alike.

In his book, Augustine presented an argument that challenged the core of Roman traditional beliefs about the state. Challenging the fundamental Roman pagan belief that Roman success was the result of the *pax deorum*, Augustine effectively argued that there was nothing special about Rome. It only prospered in its earlier history because God allowed it to do so. Furthermore, argued Augustine, obsession with Rome, emblematic of obsession with the earthly kingdom and way of life, was the wrong place for turning one's attention. The City of God was the only place that mattered, and the City of God was most definitely not Rome. By turning away from this world and focusing on the next, one could find true happiness and identity as a citizen of God's kingdom, which is the only city that is everlasting and free from threat of invasion or destruction.

Augustine's message would have made the Republican hero Cincinnatus weep. For Cincinnatus, nothing was more valuable than Rome. For Augustine, however, nothing was less valuable than Rome.

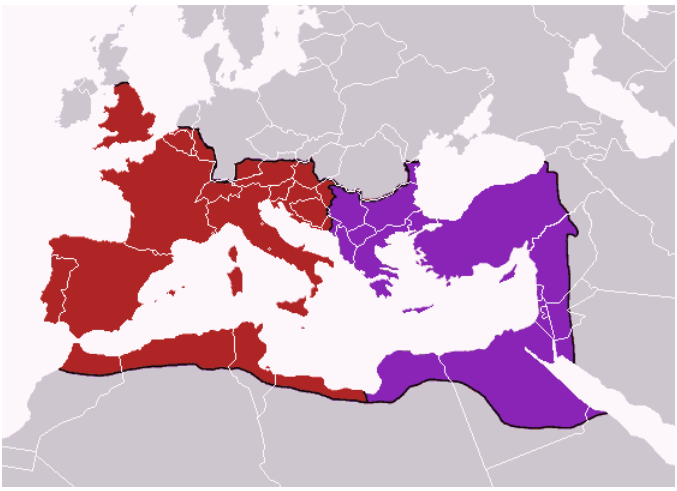
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17.6.12: Conclusion- From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages

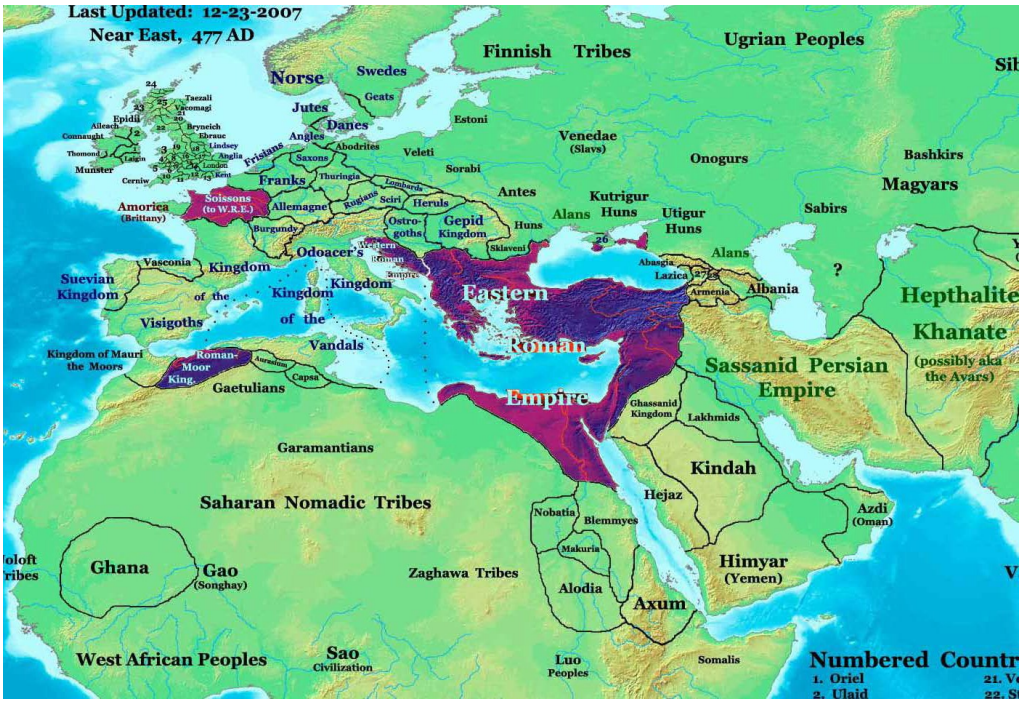
After the death of the Emperor Theodosius in 395 CE, the Roman Empire became permanently divided into Eastern and Western Empires, with instability and pressures on the frontiers continuing, especially in the West.

The sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 CE, which so shocked Augustine's contemporaries, was followed by an equally destructive sack of Carthage by the Vandals in 439 CE, as well as continuing raids of Roman territories by the Huns, a nomadic tribe from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region, and south-eastern China. The Huns experienced an especially prolific period of conquest in the 440s and early 450s CE under the leadership of Attila. While they were not able to hold on to their conquests after Attila's death in 453 CE, their attacks further destabilized an already weakened Western Roman Empire. Finally, the deposition of the Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476 CE marked the end of the Roman Empire in the West, although the Eastern half of the Empire continued to flourish for another thousand years.



Map **17.6.12.1**: The Eastern and Western Roman Empires in 395 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; Geuiwogbil via Wikimedia Commons)

The fall of the Roman Empire in the West, however, was not really as clear and dramatic a fall as might seem. A number of tribes carved out territories, each for its own control. Over the next five hundred years, led by ambitious tribal chiefs, these territories coalesced into actual kingdoms. Rome was gone, yet its specter loomed large over these tribes and their leaders, who spoke forms of Latin (albeit increasingly barbaric versions of it), believed in the Christian faith, and dreamed of the title of Roman Emperor.



Map 17.6.12.1: Map of the Roman Empire in 477 CE. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Thomas Lessman via Wikimedia Commons)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.7: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE

Ever since the fifteenth century, historians of Europe have referred to the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance (which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) as the Middle Ages. The term has problems, but it is still useful because it demonstrates that Europe was undergoing a transitional period: it stood between, in the middle of, those times that we call “modern” (after 1500 CE) and what we call the ancient world (up to around 500 CE). This Middle Age would see a new culture grow up that combined elements of Germanic culture, Christianity, and remnants of Rome. It is to the political remnants of Rome that we first turn.

17.7.1: Chronology

17.7.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE

17.7.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.7.4: Key Terms

17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire

17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian

17.7.7: Perspectives - Post-Roman East and West

17.7.8: The British Isles - Europe's Periphery

17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery

17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks

17.7.11: Global Context

17.7.12: Daily Life in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empires

17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse

17.7.14: The Tenth-Century Church

17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors

17.7.16: Conclusion and Global Perspectives

17.7.17: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.7.18: Links to Primary Sources

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17.7.1: Chronology

410 CE Roman army abandons Britain

476 CE The general Odavacar deposes last Western Roman Emperor

496 CE The Frankish king Clovis converts to Christianity

500s CE Anglo-Saxons gradually take over Britain

533 CE Byzantine Empire conquers the Vandal kingdom in North Africa

535 – 554 CE Byzantine Empire conquers the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy

560s CE Lombard invasions of Italy begin

580s CE The Franks cease keeping tax registers

597 CE Christian missionaries dispatched from Rome arrive in Britain

610 – 641 CE Heraclius is Byzantine emperor

636 CE Arab Muslims defeat the Byzantine army at the Battle of Yarmouk

670s CE Byzantine Empire begins to lose control of the Balkans to Avars, Bulgars, and Slavs

674 – 678 CE Arabs lay siege to Constantinople but are unsuccessful

711 CE Muslims from North Africa conquer Spain, end of the Visigothic kingdom

717 – 718 CE Arabs lay siege to Constantinople but are unsuccessful

717 CE Leo III becomes Byzantine emperor. Under his rule, the Iconoclast Controversy begins.

732 CE King Charles Martel of the Franks defeats a Muslim invasion of the kingdom at the Battle of Tours

751 CE The Byzantine city of Ravenna falls to the Lombards; Pepin the Short of the Franks deposes the last Merovingian king and becomes king of the Franks; King Pepin will later conquer Central Italy and donate it to the pope

750s CE Duke of Naples ceases to acknowledge the authority of the Byzantine emperor

770s CE Effective control of the city of Rome passes from Byzantium to the papacy

c. 780 – 840 CE The Carolingian Renaissance

782 CE Charlemagne crushes a Saxon rebellion

787 CE Second Council of Nicaea authorizes the use of icons in worship

793 CE Viking raids begin

800 CE Charlemagne crowned Roman emperor by Pope Leo III

830 CE Abbasid caliph Al-Mamun founds the House of Wisdom in Baghdad

843 CE In the Treaty of Verdun, Charlemagne's three sons, Lothar, Louis, and Charles the Bald, divide his empire among themselves

843 CE Final resolution of the Iconoclast Controversy under Empress Theodora

846 CE Muslim raiders from Aghlabid North Africa sack the city of Rome

c. 843 – 900 CE Macedonian Renaissance

Mid-800s: CE Cyril and Methodius preach Christianity to the Slavic peoples

864 CE Conversion of the Bulgars to Christianity

867 CE Basil I murders the reigning Byzantine emperor and seizes control of the Empire

871 – 899 CE Alfred the Great is king of England. He defeats Norse raiders and creates a consolidated kingdom.

899 CE Defeated by the Pechenegs, the Magyars begin moving into Central Europe

955 CE Otto the Great, king of East Francia, defeats the Magyars in battle

976 – 1025 CE Basil II is Byzantine Emperor

988 CE Vladimir, Grand Prince of Kiev, converts to Christianity

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17.7.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 500-1000 CE

It was Christmas day in Rome in the year 800 CE. The cavernous interior of St. Peter's Church smelled faintly of incense. Marble columns lined the open space of the nave, which was packed with the people of Rome. At the eastern end of the church, which was the most prestigious in Western Europe, King Charles of the Franks knelt before the pope. A tall man when standing, the Frankish king had an imposing presence even on his knees. He wore the dress of a Roman patrician: a tunic of multi-colored silk, embroidered trousers, and a richly embroidered cloak clasped with a golden brooch at his shoulder. As King Charles knelt, the pope placed a golden crown, set with pearls and precious stones of blue, green, and red, on the king's head. He stood to his full height of six feet and the people gathered in the church cried out, "Hail Charles, Emperor of Rome!" The inside of the church filled with cheers. For the first time in three centuries, the city of Rome had an emperor.

Outside of the church, the city of Rome itself told a different story. The great circuit of walls built in the third century by the emperor Aurelian still stood as a mighty bulwark against attackers. Much of the land within those walls, however, lay empty. Although churches of all sorts could be found throughout the city, pigs, goats, and other livestock roamed through the open fields and streets of a city retaining only the faintest echo of its earlier dominance of the whole of the Mediterranean world. Where once the Roman forum had been a bustling market, filled with merchants from as far away as India, now the crumbling columns of long-abandoned temples looked out over a broad, grassy field where shepherds grazed their flocks.

The fountains that had once given drinking water to millions of inhabitants now went unused and choked with weeds. The once great baths that had echoed with the lively conversation of thousands of bathers stood only as tumbled down piles of stone that served as quarries for the men and women who looked to repair their modest homes. The Coliseum, the great amphitheater that had rung with the cries of Rome's bloodthirsty mobs, was now honeycombed with houses built into the tunnels that had once admitted crowds to the games in the arena.

And yet within this city of ruins, a new Rome sprouted from the ruins of the old. Just outside the city walls and across the Tiber River, St. Peter's Basilica rose as the symbol of Peter, prince of the Apostles. The golden-domed Pantheon still stood, now a church of the Triune God rather than a temple of the gods of the old world. And, indeed, all across Western Europe, a new order had arisen on the wreck of the Roman state. Although this new order in many ways shared the universal ideals of Rome, its claims were even grander, for it rested upon the foundations of the Christian faith, which claimed the allegiance of all people. How this post-Roman world had come about is the subject to which we shall turn.

Ever since the fifteenth century, historians of Europe have referred to the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance (which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) as the Middle Ages. The term has problems, but it is still useful because it demonstrates that Europe was undergoing a transitional period: it stood between, in the middle of, those times that we call "modern" (after 1500 CE) and what we call the ancient world (up to around 500 CE). This Middle Age would see a new culture grow up that combined elements of Germanic culture, Christianity, and remnants of Rome. It is to the political remnants of Rome that we first turn.

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17.7.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. How did the Germanic peoples of Western Europe relate to the former Roman territories over which they had taken control?
2. Which of Justinian's policies had the longest-lasting effects?
3. What crises did the Byzantine Empire face during the reign of Heraclius?
4. What was a way that the Byzantine state reorganized itself to face the challenges of seventhand eighth-century invasions?
5. Why did the Iconoclast emperors believe that using images in worship was wrong?
6. How did the Church provide a sense of legitimacy to the kings of the Franks?
7. How did the majority of people in Europe and the Byzantine Empire live in the Early Middle Ages (i.e., c. 500 to 1000 C.E.)?
8. How did East Francia and England respond to Viking attacks?

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17.7.4: Key Terms

- Al-Andalus
- Alcuin of York
- Anglo-Saxons
- Avars
- Balkans
- Battle of Tours
- Body of Civil Law/Justinian Code
- Bulgars
- Byzantine Empire/Byzantium
- Capitularies
- Carolingians
- Carolingian Renaissance
- Cathedral Church
- Charlemagne
- Charles Martel
- Constantinople
- Cyrillic
- Demonetization
- Dependent farmers
- Donation of Constantine
- Eastern Orthodox
- Exarch
- Hagia Sophia
- Iconoclast Controversy
- Iconoclasts
- Iconophiles
- Idolatry
- Kievan Rus
- Lateran
- Lombards
- Macedonian Dynasty
- Magnaura
- Mayor of the Palace/Major Domo
- Merovingians
- Ostrogoths
- Papal States
- Pillage and Gift
- Pope
- Romance Languages
- Ruralization
- Rus
- Scriptorium
- Slavs
- Slavonic
- Tagmata
- Themes
- Vandals
- Vikings

- Visigoths

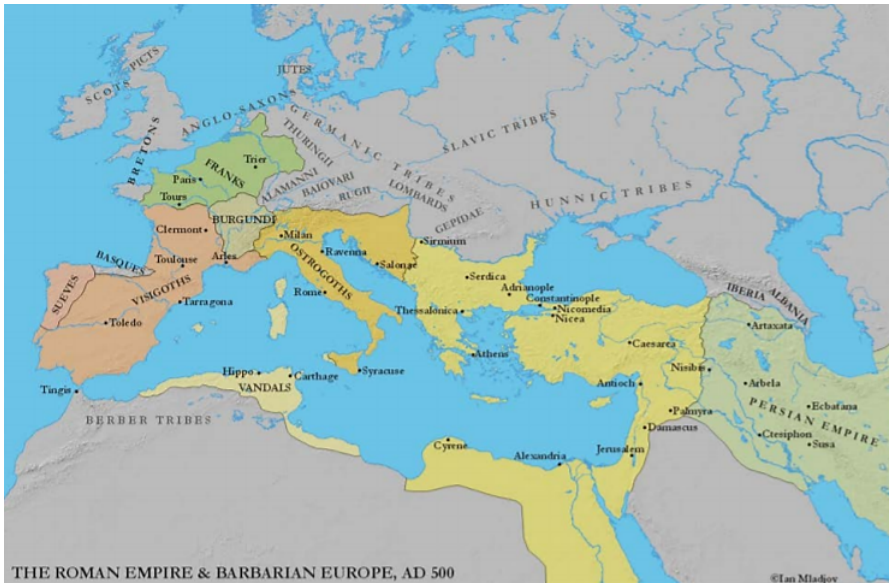
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17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire

The Germanic peoples who had invaded the Roman Empire over the course of the fifth century had, by the early 500s, established a set of kingdoms in what had been the Western Empire. The **Vandals** ruled North Africa in a kingdom centered on Carthage, a kingdom whose pirates threatened the Mediterranean for nearly eighty years. The **Visigoths** ruled Spain in a kingdom that preserved many elements of Roman culture. In Italy, the Roman general Odavacar had established his own kingdom in 476 before being murdered by the **Ostrogoth** king Theodoric, who established a kingdom for his people in Italy, which he ruled from 493 to his death in 526. Vandal, Visigoth, and Ostrogoth peoples all had cultures that had been heavily influenced over decades or even centuries of contact with Rome. Most of them were Christians, but, crucially, they were not Catholic Christians, who believed in the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is one God but three distinct persons of the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. They were rather Arians, who believed that Jesus was lesser than God the Father (see Chapter Six). Most of their subjects, however, were Catholics.

The Catholic Church increasingly looked to the bishop of Rome for leadership. Over the fifth century, the bishop of Rome had gradually come to take on an increasing level of prestige among other bishops. Rome had been the city where Peter, whom tradition regarded as the chief of Christ's disciples, had ended his life as a martyr. Moreover, even though the power of the Western Roman Empire crumbled over the course of the 400s, the city of Rome itself remained prestigious. As such, by the fourth and fifth centuries, the bishops of Rome were often given the title of *papa*, Latin for "father," a term that we translate into **pope**. Gradually, the popes came to be seen as having a role of leadership within the wider Church, although they did not have the monarchial authority that later popes would claim.



Map 17.7.5.1: The Roman Empire and Barbarian Europe 500 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

In the region of Gaul, the Franks were a Germanic people who had fought as mercenaries in the later Roman Empire and then, with the disintegration of the Western Empire, had established their own kingdom. One key reason for the Frankish kingdom's success was that its kings received their legitimacy from the Church. In the same way that the Christian Church had endorsed the Roman Emperors since Constantine and, in return, these emperors supported the Church, the Frankish kings took up a similar relation with the Christian religion. King Clovis (r. 481 – 509) united the Franks into a kingdom, and, in 496, converted to Christianity. More importantly, he converted to the Catholic Christianity of his subjects in post-Roman Gaul. This would put the Franks in sharp contrast with the Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths, all of whom were Arians.

In none of these kingdoms, Visigothic, Ostrogothic, Frankish, or Vandal, did the Germanic peoples who ruled them seek to destroy Roman society—far from it. Rather, they sought homelands and to live as the elites of the Roman Empire had done before them. Theodoric, the king of the Ostrogoths (r. 493 – 526), had told his people to "obey Roman customs… [and] clothe [them] selves in the morals of the toga."[1] Indeed, in the generations after the end of the Western Empire in the late 400s, an urban, literate culture

continued to flourish in Spain, Italy, and parts of Gaul. The Germanic peoples often took up a place as elites in the society of what had been Roman provinces, living in rural villas with large estates. Local elites shifted their allegiances from the vanished Roman Empire to their new rulers. In many ways, the situation of Western Europe was analogous to that of the successor states of the Han Dynasty such as Northern Wei, in which an invader took up a position as the society's new warrior aristocracy (see Chapter Four).

But even though the Germanic kings of Western Europe had sought to simply rule in the place of (or along with) their Roman predecessors, many of the features that had characterized Western Europe under the Romans—populous cities; a large, literate population; a complex infrastructure of roads and aqueducts; and the complex bureaucracy of a centralized state—vanished over the course of the sixth century. Cities shrank drastically, and in those regions of Gaul north of the Loire River, they nearly all vanished in a process that we call **ruralization**. As Europe ruralized and elite values came to reflect warfare rather than literature, schools gradually vanished, leaving the Church as the only real institution providing education. So too did the tax-collecting apparatus of the Roman state gradually wither in the Germanic kingdoms. The Europe of 500 may have looked a lot like the Europe of 400, but the Europe of 600 was one that was poorer, more rural, and less literate.

1 Cassiodorus, Variae, trans. Thomas Hodgkin, in The Medieval Record: Sources of Medieval History, ed. Alfred J. Andrea (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 58.

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17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian

An observer of early sixth-century Italy would have thought that its Ostrogothic kingdom was the best poised to carry forward with a new state that, in spite of its smaller size than the Roman Empire, nevertheless had most of the same features. But the Ostrogothic kingdom would only last a few decades before meeting its violent end. That end came at the hands of the Eastern Roman Empire, the half of the Roman Empire that had continued after the end of the Empire in the West. We usually refer to that empire as the **Byzantine Empire** or **Byzantium.**

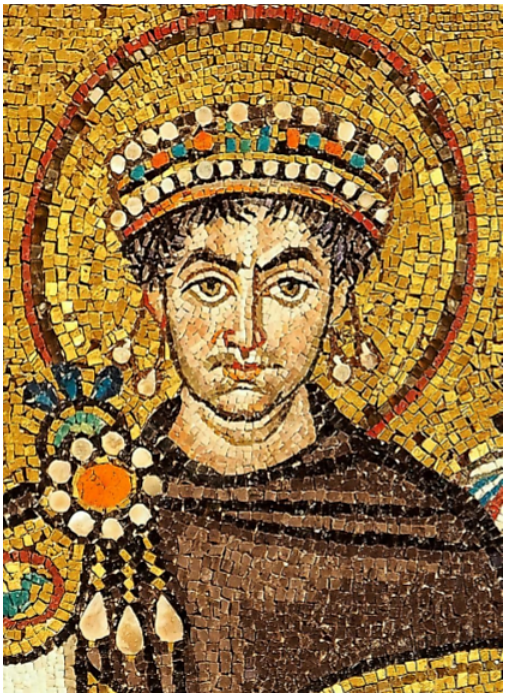


Figure **17.7.6.1**: Mosaic of Justinianus I from the Basilica San Vitale Author: Petar Milosevic Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

The inhabitants and rulers of this Empire did not call themselves Byzantines, but rather referred to themselves as Romans. Their empire, after all, was a continuation of the Roman state. Modern historians call it the Byzantine Empire in order to distinguish it from the Roman Empire that dominated the Mediterranean world from the first through fifth centuries. The Byzantine Empire or Byzantium is called such by historians because Byzantium had been an earlier name for its capital, **Constantinople**.

By the beginning of the sixth century, the Byzantine Army was the most lethal army to be found outside of China. In the late fifth century, the Byzantine emperors had built up an army capable of dealing with the threat of both Hunnic invaders and the Sassanids, a dynasty of aggressively expansionist kings who had seized control of Persia in the third century. Soon this army would turn against the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy.

The man who would destroy the Ostrogrothic as well as the Vandal kingdom was the emperor Justinian (r. 527 – 565). Justinian had come from the ranks not of the aristocracy of the Eastern Roman Empire, but rather from the Army. Even before the death of his uncle, the emperor Justin I (r. 518 – 527), Justinian was taking part in the rule of the Empire. Upon his accession to the imperial throne, he carried out a set of policies designed to emphasize his own greatness and that of his empire.

He did so in the domain of art and architecture, sponsoring the construction of numerous buildings both sacred and secular. The centerpiece of his building campaign was the church called **Hagia Sophia**, Greek for “Divine Wisdom.” His architects placed this church in the central position of the city of Constantinople, adjacent to the imperial palace. This placement was meant to demonstrate the close relationship between the Byzantine state and the Church that legitimated that state. The Hagia Sophia would be the principle church of the Eastern Empire for the next thousand years, and it would go on to inspire countless imitations.

This Church was the largest building in Europe. Its domed roof was one hundred and sixty feet in height, and, supported by four arches one hundred and twenty feet high, it seemed to float in the diffuse light that came in through its windows. The interior of the church was burnished with gold, gems, and marble, so that observers in the church were said to have claimed that they could not tell if they were on earth or in heaven. Even a work as magnificent as the Hagia Sophia, though, showed a changed world: it was produced with mortar rather than concrete, the technology for the making of which had already been forgotten.



Figure **17.7.6.2**: Haga Sophia Interior (Public Domain; Andreas Wanhra via Wikimedia Commons)

While Justinian's building showed his authority and right to rule which came from his close relations with the Church, his efforts as a lawmaker showed the secular side of his authority. Under his direction, the jurist Tribonian took the previous 900 years' worth of Roman Law and systematized it into a text known as the ***Body of Civil Law*** or the **Justinian Code**. This law code, based on the already-sophisticated system of Roman law, would go on to serve as the foundation of European law, and thus of much of the world's law as well.

Although the Justinian Code was based on the previous nine centuries of gathered law, Roman Law itself had changed over the course of the fifth century with the Christianization of the Empire. By the time of Justinian's law code, Jews had lost civil rights to the extent that the law forbade them from testifying in court against Christians. Jews would further lose civil rights in those Germanic kingdoms whose law was influenced by Roman law as well. The reason for this lack of Jewish civil rights was that many Christians blamed Jews for the execution of Jesus and also believed that Jews refused out of stubbornness to believe that Jesus had been the messiah. A Christian Empire was thus one that was often extremely unfriendly to Jews.

As Byzantine emperor (and thus Roman emperor), Justinian would have regarded his rule as universal, so he sought to re-establish the authority of the Empire in Western Europe. The emperor had other reasons as well for seeking to re-establish imperial power in the West. Both Vandal Carthage and Ostrogoth Italy were ruled by peoples who were Arians, regarded as heretics by a Catholic emperor like Justinian.

During a dispute over the throne in the Vandal kingdom, the reigning monarch was overthrown and had fled to the Eastern Empire for help and protection. This event gave Justinian his chance. In 533, he sent his commander Belisarius to the west, and, in less than a year, this able and capable general had defeated the Vandals, destroyed their kingdom, and brought North Africa back into the Roman Empire. Justinian then turned his sights on a greater prize: Italy, home of the city of Rome itself, which, although no longer under the Empire's sway, still held a place of honor and prestige.

In 535, the Roman general Belisarius crossed into Italy to return it to the Roman Empire. Unfortunately for the peninsula's inhabitants, the Ostrogothic kingdom put up a more robust fight than had the Vandals in North Africa. It took the Byzantine army

nearly two decades to destroy the Ostrogothic kingdom and return Italy to the rule of the Roman Empire. In that time, however, Italy itself was irrevocably damaged. The city of Rome had suffered through numerous sieges and sacks. By the time it was fully in the hands of Justinian's troops, the fountains that had provided drinking water for a city of millions were choked with rubble, the aqueducts that had supplied them smashed. The great architecture of the city lay in ruins, and the population had shrunk drastically from what it had been even in the days of Theodoric (r. 493 – 526).



Map **17.7.6.1**: Map of The Roman Empire and Barbarian Europe 565 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

17.7.6.1: The Aftermath of Justinian

Justinian's reconquest of Italy would prove to be short-lived. Less than a decade after restoring Italy to Roman rule, the **Lombards,** another Germanic people, invaded Italy. Although the city of Rome itself and the southern part of the peninsula remained under the rule of the Byzantine Empire, much of northern and central Italy was ruled either by Lombard kings or other petty nobles.

But war was only one catastrophe to trouble Western Europe. For reasons that are poorly understood even today, the long-range trade networks across the Mediterranean Sea gradually shrank over the sixth and seventh centuries. Instead of traveling across the Mediterranean, wine, grain, and pottery were increasingly sold in local markets. Only luxury goods—always a tiny minority of most trade—remained traded over long distances.

Nor was even the heartland of Justinian's empire safe from external threat. The emperor Heraclius (r. 610 – 641) came to power in the midst of an invasion of the Empire by the Sassanid Persians, who, under their king Khusrau (see Chapter Eight), threatened the Empire's very existence, his armies coming within striking range of Constantinople itself. Moreover, Persian armies had seized control of Egypt and the Levant, which they would hold for over a decade. Heraclius thwarted the invasion only by launching a counter-attack into the heart of the Persian Empire that resulted, in the end, in a Byzantine victory. No sooner had the Empire repelled one threat than another appeared that would threaten the Empire with consequences far more severe.

Under the influence of the Prophet Muhammad, the tribes of the Arabian deserts had been united under first the guidance of the Prophet and then his successors, the caliphs and the religion founded by Muhammad, Islam (see Chapter Eight). Under the vigorous leadership of the first caliphs, Arab Muslim armies invaded both Sassanid Persia and the Byzantine Empire. At the Battle of Yarmouk in 636, although the Byzantines and Arabs were evenly matched, the Byzantine field army was badly beaten. In the aftermath, first Syria and Palestine and then Egypt fell from Christian Byzantine rule to the cultural and political influence of Islam.

The seventh century also saw invasions by various semi-nomadic peoples into the **Balkans**, the region between the Greek Peloponnese and the Danube River. Among these peoples were the Turkic **Bulgars**, the **Avars** (who historians think might have been Turkic), as well as various peoples known as **Slavs**. The Avars remained nomads on the plains of central Europe, but both Bulgars and Slavs settled in Balkan territories that no longer fell under the rule of the Byzantine state. Within a generation, the Empire had lost control of the Balkans as well as Egypt, territory comprising an immense source of wealth in both agriculture and trade. By the end of the seventh century, the Empire was a shadow of its former self.

Indeed, the Byzantine Empire faced many of the social and cultural challenges that Western Europe did, although continuity with the Roman state remained. In many cases, the cities of the Byzantine Empire shrank nearly as drastically as did the cities of Western Europe. Under the threat of invasion, many communities moved to smaller settlements on more easily defended hilltops. The great metropolises of Constantinople and Thessalonica remained centers of urban life and activity, but throughout much of the Empire, life became overwhelmingly rural.

Even more basic elements of a complex society, such as literacy and a cash economy, went into decline, although they did not cease. The Byzantine state issued less money and, indeed, most transactions ceased to be in cash at this time. The economy was **demonetized**. Even literacy rates shrank. Although churchmen and other elites would often still have an education, the days of the Roman state in which a large literate reading public would buy readily-available literature were gone. As in the west, literacy increasingly became the preserve of the religious.



Map 17.7.6.2: Map of The Roman Empire and Barbarian Europe 750 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

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17.7.7: Perspectives - Post-Roman East and West

In many ways, the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms of Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire shared a similar fate. Both saw a sharp ruralization, that is, a decline in the number of inhabited cities and the size of those cities that were inhabited. Both saw plunges in literacy. And both saw a state that was less competent—even at tax collection. Moreover, the entire Mediterranean Sea and its environs showed a steady decline in high-volume trade across the ocean, a decline that lasted for nearly two and a half centuries. By around the year 700, almost all trade was local.

But there remained profound differences between Byzantium and the Germanic kingdoms of Western Europe. In the first place, although its reach had shrunk dramatically from the days of Augustus, the imperial state remained. Although the state collected less in taxes and issued less money than in earlier years, even in the period of the empires' greatest crisis, it continued to mint some coins and the apparatus of the state continued to function. In Western Europe, by contrast, the Germanic kingdoms gradually lost the ability to collect taxes (except for the Visigoths in Spain). Likewise, they gradually ceased to mint gold coins. In Britain, cities had all but vanished, with an island inhabited by peoples living in small villages, the remnants of Rome's imperial might standing as silent ruins.

The post-Roman world stands in contrast to post-Han China. Although the imperial state collapsed as it had in Rome, in China, literacy never declined as drastically as it had done in the Roman Empire, and the apparatus of tax collection and other features of a functional state remained in the Han successor states to an extent that they did not in either Rome or Byzantium.

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17.7.8: The British Isles - Europe's Periphery

[2]In many of the lands that had been part of the Roman Empire, the Germanic peoples who had taken over western Europe built kingdoms. Although not as sophisticated as the Roman state, they were still recognizable as states. This situation stood in sharp contrast to Britain. To the northwest of Europe, the Roman Army had abandoned the island of Britain in 410. The urban infrastructure brought about by the Roman state began to decay almost immediately, with towns gradually emptying out as people returned to rural lifeways that had existed prior to Rome's arrival.



Figure **17.7.8.1**: Manuscript of Bede's History of the English Church and People (Public Domain; User "Apex infinity" via Wikimedia Commons)

At nearly the same time that the Roman Army withdrew from Britain, a group of Germanic peoples known as the Anglo-Saxons were moving into the island from the forests of Central Europe that lay to the east, across the ocean. Unlike the Franks, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths, each of whom had kingdoms, the social organization of the Anglo-Saxons was comparatively unsophisticated. They were divided up among chiefs and kings who might have only had a few hundred to a few thousand subjects each.

Over the period between about 410 and 600, the Anglo-Saxons gradually settled in and conquered much of southeastern Britain, replacing the Celtic-speaking peoples and their language. The island of Britain was one that was completely rural. All that remained of the state-building of the Romans was the ruins of abandoned cities.

And yet, it would be England (called England because the name is derived from the word AngloSaxon) and the island of Ireland to its west that would lead to an increase of schools and literacy across Western Europe. In the fifth century, Christian missionaries traveled to Ireland and converted many of its peoples. In the early 600s, Pope Gregory the Great sent missionaries to the island of Britain. The English peoples adopted Christianity (usually under the initiative of their kings) over the course of the next several decades, which in turn led to the founding of monasteries. These monasteries would usually have attached schools so that those seeking to live as monks could have access to the texts of the Bible, the **liturgy**, and the writings of other churchmen. English churchmen like Benedict Biscop (c. 628 – 690) traveled south to Rome and returned to England with cartloads of books. English and Irish monks would often copy these books in their own monasteries.

Indeed, England saw not only the copying of older books, but also the composition of original literature, which was rare elsewhere in Western Europe of this time. The English churchman Bede (672 – 735) composed a history of England's people. He wrote this history to show how the Anglo-Saxons had adopted Christianity. Within a few decades of the island's peoples converting to Christianity, English and Irish monks were traveling to Western Europe, either to establish monasteries in lands already Christian or to serve as missionaries to those still-pagan peoples in the forests of central Europe.

17.7.8.1: Endnotes

2 Although the British Isles were peripheral to global affairs and even those of Western Europe, people at the time did regard these islands as part of the world that people of the Middle East and Mediterranean regarded as “civilized” (if only as its westernmost periphery). The ninth-century Arabic writer Harun ibn Yahya said of the British that “They are the last of the lands of the Greeks, and there is no civilization beyond them,” quoted in Caitlin R. Green, “Britain, the Byzantine Empire, and the concept of an Anglo-Saxon ‘Heptarchy’: Harun ibn Yahya’s ninth-century Arabic description of Britain,” The Personal Website and Blog of Dr. Caitlin R. Green, http://www.caitlingreen.org/2016/04/...ibn-yahya.html (accessed 26 June 2016).

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17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery

Although the Byzantine Empire was a remnant of the Roman state, by the eighth century it was much weaker than the Roman Empire under Augustus or even than the Eastern Empire under Justinian. After their conquest of Egypt, the forces of the caliphate had built a navy and used it to sail up and lay siege to Constantinople itself in two sieges lasting from 674 to 678 and from 717 to 718. On land, to the northwest, the Empire faced the threat of the Bulgars, Slavs, and Avars. The Avars, a nomadic people, in particular demanded that the Byzantine state pay them a hefty tribute to avoid raids. At the very moment that the Empire was in greatest need of military strength, it was a poorer empire than it had ever been.

The solution was a reorganization of the military. Instead of having a military that was paid out of a central treasury, the emperors divided the Empire up into regions called **themes**. Each theme would then equip and pay soldiers, using its agricultural resources to do so. Themes in coastal regions were responsible for the navy. In many ways, the **theme** was similar to the way that other states would raise soldiers in the absence of a strong bureaucratic apparatus. One might liken it to what we call feudalism in Zhou China, Heian Japan, and later Medieval Europe.

The greatest crisis faced by the Byzantine Empire in these years of crisis was the so-called **Iconoclast Controversy**. From the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians living in the Eastern Mediterranean region had used **icons** to aid in worship. An icon is a highly stylized painting of Christ, the Virgin Mary (his mother), or the saints. Often icons appeared in churches, with the ceiling painted with a picture of Christ or with an emblem of Christ above the entrance of a church.

Other Christians opposed this use of images. In the Old Testament (the term Christians use to refer to the Hebrew Bible), the Ten Commandments forbid the making of “graven images” and using them in worship (Exodus 20:4-5). Certain Christians at the time believed that to make an image even of Jesus Christ and his mother violated that commandment, arguing that to paint such pictures and use them in worship was **idolatry**, that is, worshiping something other than God. Muslims leveled similar critiques at the Christian use of icons, claiming that it showed Christians had fallen from the correct worship of God into idolatry.



Figure **17.7.9.1**: Icon of the Virgin Mary (Public Domain; User “Myrabella” via Wikimedia Commons)

Emperor Leo III (r. 717 – 41) accepted these arguments; consequently, in his reign he began to order icons removed (or painted over) first from churches and then from monasteries as well as other places of public display. His successors took further action, ordering the destruction of icons. These acts by Leo led to nearly a century of controversy over whether the use of icons in worship was permissible to Christians. The **iconophiles** argued that to use a picture of Christ and the saints in worship was in line with the

Christian scriptures so long as the worshiper worshiped God with the icon as a guide, while the **icolonoclasts** proclaimed that any use of images in Christian worship was forbidden.

In general, monks and civilian elites were iconophiles, while iconoclasm was popular with the army. In Rome, which was slipping out from under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine emperors, the popes strongly rejected iconoclasm. Some historians have argued that Leo and his successors attacked icon worship for reasons other than religious convictions alone, including the fact that monks who venerated icons had built up their own power base; more importantly, in confiscating the wealth of iconophile monasteries, the emperor would be able to better fund his armed forces.

The iconophile empress Irene, ruling on behalf of her infant son Constantine V (r. 780 – 797), convoked a new church council to bring an end to the controversy. At the 787 Second Council of Nicaea, the Church decreed that icons could be used in worship. Final resolution of the Iconoclast Controversy, however, would have to wait until 843, when the empress Theodora at last overturned iconoclastic policies for good upon the death of her husband, the emperor Theophilus (r. 829 – 843). From this point forward, historians usually refer to the Greek-speaking churches of the eastern Mediterranean and those churches following those same patterns of worship as **Eastern Orthodox**. [3]

Although the iconoclast emperors had made enemies in the Church, they were often effective military commanders, and they managed to stabilize the frontiers with Arabs, Slavs, and Bulgars. In spite of the fact that the Byzantine armies of the eighth century would have some successes against Arabs and Slavs, it was during the eighth century that Byzantium increasingly lost control of Italy. While a Byzantine **exarch**, or governor, in Ravenna (in northeastern Italy) would rule the city of Rome, even these Italian territories were gradually lost. Ravenna fell to the Lombards in 751; the duke of Naples ceased to acknowledge the authority of the emperor in Constantinople in the 750s; and the popes in Rome, long the de facto governors of the city, became effectively independent from Byzantium in the 770s. The popes in particular would increasingly look to another power to secure their city: the Franks.

3 Modern historians use this label for convenience. At the time, both Churches in the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean and those following the pope would have said that they were part of the Catholic Church (the word catholic comes from a Greek word for “universal”). The churches in the eastern Mediterranean and Eastern Europe were coming to differ enough in terms of practice, worship, and thought that we can refer to them as distinct from the Catholic Church of Western Europe.

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17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks

At the west end of the Mediterranean and in northern Europe, the kingdom of the Franks would become the dominant power of the Christian kingdoms. Justinian's armies had destroyed the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy in the sixth-century Gothic War. A century and a half later, in 711, Arab Muslim invaders from North Africa conquered the Visigoth kingdom in Spain and established Muslim rule. From that time on, we refer to Muslim-ruled Spain of the early Middle Ages as **al-Andalus.** The destruction of these two kingdoms left the Franks as the dominant power of Western Europe. They were already the premier power in northern Gaul, but as the seventh century went on, they established themselves in southern Gaul as well, gradually subordinating other Germanic peoples to their rule.

The first dynasty of Frankish kings was known as the **Merovingians**, so named for Merovech, a possibly legendary ancestor of Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks. The Franks' power grew in Western Europe for several reasons. In the first place, the Frankish monarchy had fewer civil wars than did that of the Visigoths. The Frankish kingdom did face the weakness that it was sometimes divided among a king's sons at his death (since Germanic peoples often looked at a kingdom as the king's personal property), with warfare resulting within the divided kingdom. Nevertheless, although the kingdom might be split by inheritance and later reunited, there existed in general a strong sense of legitimate dynastic succession. In addition, the Catholic Church provided the Frankish monarchs with a sense of legitimacy as it had since the days of Clovis.

But as the Frankish kingdom expanded, many elements of what had characterized the Roman state continued to wither. One reason for this decline was that the nature of warfare had changed in Western Europe. Soldiers were no longer paid out of a government treasury; instead, they were rewarded with lands whose surplus they would use to outfit themselves with military equipment. The soldiers thus served as a warrior aristocracy. Even those families who had been Roman elites took up a military lifestyle in order to prosper in the new order. In addition, the Frankish kings increasingly made use of a **pillage and gift** system. In a pillage and gift system, a king or other war leader rewards his loyal soldiers by granting them gifts that came from the plunder of defeated enemies. With armies financed either by pillage and gift or by the wealth of an individual aristocrat's lands, the Frankish kingdom had little reason for maintaining taxation. Moreover, the kingdom's great landowners who supported the monarchy had a strong interest in seeing that they were not taxed efficiently; by the 580s, the Frankish government had simply ceased to update the old Roman tax registers.

One particular role that would gain prominence among the Frankish monarchy was that of the **Major Domo**, or **Mayor of the Palace**. The Mayor of the Palace was a noble who would grant out lands and gifts on behalf of the king and who would, in many cases, command the army. Gradually, one family of these Mayors of the Palace would rise to prominence above all other noble families in the Frankish kingdom: the **Carolingians**.

This dominant family's more prominent members were named Charles, which in Latin is Carolus, hence the name Carolingians. By the mid-seventh century, the Carolingians had come to hold the position of Mayor of the Palace as a hereditary one. Over the early eighth century, the Carolingian Mayors of the Palace had become the actual rulers of the Frankish realm, while the Merovingian kings had little or no actual power. The earliest significant Carolingian major domo to dominate the Carolingian court was C**harles Martel** (r. 715 – 741). He was an able and effective military commander who—even though he rewarded his troops with lands taken from the Church—was able to show himself a defender of the Christian religion by defeating a Muslim attack on Gaul from al-Andalus in 732 at the **Battle of Tours** and by defeating the Saxons, who were at this point still largely pagans living in the forests to the northeast of the Frankish kingdom, in 738. These victories over both pagan and Muslim allowed for Martel to present his family as defenders of the Church and of the Christian religion in general.

Martel's successor, Pepin the Short (r. 741 – 68), would take the final step towards wresting power away from the Merovingians and making his family the kings of the Franks. He followed in Martel's footsteps in using the Church to shore up his legitimacy. He wrote to Pope Zachary I (r. 741 – 752), asking whether one who exercised the power of a king should have that power, or if instead the person with the name of king should have that power. Pope Zachary answered that kingship should rest with the person exercising its power—because a king ruled the earth on behalf of God, so a king who was not properly ruling was not doing his God-given duty. Thus the last Merovingian king was deposed by the combined powers of the Carolingian Mayors of the Palace and the popes. This close cooperation between Church and crown would go on to be a defining feature of the Frankish monarchy.

The relationship between the papacy and the Carolingians not only involved the popes legitimating Pepin's coup d'état, but also included the Carolingian monarchs providing military assistance to the popes. Shortly after Zachary's letter allowing Pepin to seize power, Pepin marched south to Italy to give the pope military assistance against the Lombards. He took control of several cities and their surrounding hinterlands and gave these cities as a gift to the papacy. The popes would thus rule a set of territories in central Italy known as the **Papal States** from Pepin's day until the mid-nineteenth century.

The greatest of the Carolingians was the figure we refer to as **Charlemagne**, whose name means Charles the Great. As king of the Franks, he spent nearly the entirety of his reign leading his army in battle. To the southeast, he destroyed the khanate of the Avars, the nomadic people who had lived by raiding the Byzantine Empire. To the northeast of his realm, he subjugated the Saxons of Central Europe and had them converted to Christianity—a sometimes brutal process. When the Saxons rebelled in 782, he had 4,000 men executed in one day for having returned to their old religion. To the south in Italy, Charlemagne militarily conquered the Lombard kingdom and made himself its king. The only area in which he was less successful was in his invasion of al-Andalus. Although his forces seized control of several cities and fortresses in northeastern Spain (to include places like Barcelona), he was, on the whole, less successful against Spain's Umayyad emirs. One reason for this lack of success was that, compared to Charlemagne's other foes, al-Andalus was organized into a sophisticated state, and so better able to resist him.



Figure 17.7.10.1: Painting of Charlemagne | Charlemagne as imagined by Albrecht Dürer in the fifteenth century. (Public Domain; Albrecht Dürer via Wikimedia Commons)

By the end of the eighth century, Charlemagne ruled nearly all of Western Europe. Indeed, he ruled more of Western Europe than anyone since the Roman emperors of four centuries before. In the winter of 800, a mob expelled Pope Leo III from Rome. Charlemagne took his troops south of the Alps and restored the pope to his position in the **Lateran** palace, the palace complex to the northeast of Rome where the popes both lived and conducted most of their business.

On Christmas Day in 800, Charlemagne was attending worship at St. Peter's Church. During that ceremony, the pope placed a crown upon Charlemagne's head and declared him to be Roman emperor. Historians are not sure whether Charlemagne had planned this coronation or had simply gone up to the pope for a blessing and was surprised by this crown. The question of who had planned this coronation is controversial because the pope's crowning the emperor could have been interpreted to mean that the crown was the pope's to confer.

Indeed, it was around this time that a document known as the **Donation of Constantine** appeared in Western Europe. This document was a forgery—to this day, scholars do not know who forged it—that claimed to have been written by the Roman emperor Constantine (see Chapter Six). According to this forged document, the emperor Constantine had been cured of leprosy by Pope Sylvester I and, in thanks, had given the popes authority over all of the Western Empire. Although false, this document would go on to provide the popes with a claim to rule not just central Italy, but Western Europe as a whole.

Charlemagne's coronation by the pope marked the culmination of the creation of a new society built on the wreck of the Western Roman Empire. This new society would be Christian and based on close cooperation of Church and State—although each would regard the others' sphere of influence as separate.


CAROLINGIAN EUROPE IN 814
Map by Ian Mladjov
PICTS
DANES
MERCIA
SAXONY
FRISIA
Wilzi
Obodrites
Pomeranians
Polanians
Masovians
Dregovians
Slavonians
Lithuanians
Prussians
Aestii
Rugians
Veleti
Milzeni
Sorbs
Hwicce
Wessex
Aachen
Metz
Worms
Speyer
Regensburg
Salzburg
Augsburg
Ulm
Constance
Chur
Trent
Verona
Mantua
Modena
Parma
Cremona
Milan
Pavia
Genoa
Turin
Vercelli
Novara
Asti
Tortona
Ivrea
Aosta
Susa
Maurienne
Tarentaise
Grenoble
Vienne
Lyon
Autun
Besançon
Langres
Troyes
Sens
Auxerre
Orléans
Tours
Le Mans
Chartres
Paris
Meaux
Soissons
Reims
Laon
Cambrai
Arras
Thérouanne
Noyon
Amiens
Beauvais
Rouen
Evreux
Bayeux
Coutances
Avranches
Dol
Rennes
Nantes
Vannes
Quimper
Le Mans
Angers
Tours
Poitiers
Saintes
Périgueux
Limoges
Clermont
Bourges
Nevers
Auxerre
Sens
Troyes
Langres
Besançon
Basel
Strasbourg
Speyer
Worms
Mainz
Trier
Metz
Toul
Verdun
Reims
Soissons

17.7.11: Global Context

Although Charlemagne possessed one of the most powerful armies in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, his empire was hardly a state compared to Tang China, the Abbasid Caliphate, or the Byzantine Empire. Compared to the armies of the Byzantine Emperors, the Abbasid Caliphs, and above all, the Tang emperors, Charlemagne's army was merely a very large war band, financed not by a state with a working system of taxation and treasury, but rather by the plunder of defeated enemies. Although he issued decrees known as **capitularies** through the agencies of Church and state, the realm had little in the way of either bureaucracy or infrastructure, save for the decaying network of the Roman Empire's roads. Indeed, although Charlemagne had sought to have a canal dug between the Rhine and Danube rivers, this project failed—a fitting illustration of the gap between the ambitions of Charlemagne and the reality.

17.7.11.1: The Carolingian Renaissance

In those territories that had been part of the Western Roman Empire, most of the people had spoken Latin, and Latin was the language of literature. By the time of the Carolingians, Latin was starting to change into the languages that would eventually become French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, languages that we call **Romance** because they are descended from Latin, the language of the Romans. The Bible, the liturgy, and writings of theology and on saints, however, were still in Latin, although the skill in reading and writing Latin possessed by what few people remained literate had decreased, and in a less literate society, there were fewer books of Roman literature available in Western Europe. The copying of books had gradually dwindled with literacy.



Figure **17.7.11.1**: The Chapel of Charlemagne's Palace at Aachen (CC BY-SA 3.0; CEphoto, Uwe Aranas via Wikimedia Commons)

The Carolingians were known not only for their conquests and attempted revival of the Roman Empire, but also for their efforts to improve the state of learning in the Carolingian Empire, particularly with respect to the Bible, theology, and literature of Ancient Rome. They also sought to increase the number of schools and books in the realm. Historians refer to this effort as the **Carolingian Renaissance**. Historians call it the Carolingian Renaissance in order to distinguish it from the later Italian Renaissance, an effort by northern Italian intellectuals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to restore teaching and learning of the literature of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Charlemagne and his successors sponsored an increase in learning by the Church in order to promote moral reform. Charlemagne, like his predecessors and successors, considered himself a defender and protector of the Christian religion. As such, he wanted to make sure that the Church was promoting a reform of morality. Moral reform would need to start with clergy, and these clergy would need to be able to adequately read the text of the Bible and of the writings of other churchmen (and –women).

Charlemagne's efforts would be centered on schools and centers of book production, what scholars of medieval Europe call **scriptoria** (singular **scriptorium**). He had help in that there were already many high quality schools attached to monasteries that had been founded in his empire by English and Irish monks. The main school of his empire was the school in his palace at Aachen. His palace itself was based on Roman and Byzantine architecture, as a demonstration that he possessed the same sort of legitimacy as the Roman Emperors. He then invited some of the best scholars of Western Europe to his court—including **Alcuin of York** (735 – 804), a monk from England—in order both to supervise his own court school and to direct the Church of the Frankish Empire to improve learning.

This improvement of learning included the establishment of new cathedral schools, schools attached to a **cathedral church** (i.e., a church where the bishop of a diocese—the basic geographic division of the Church—has his seat). These schools trained not only men and women from the church, but also the children of Frankish aristocrats, and in some cases women as well as men. As a result, an increasing number of Frankish nobles would be literate or at least would sponsor efforts by schools to further train people.

Likewise, under the guidance of Charlemagne and the Frankish church, scriptoria throughout his empire launched on a massive new effort to copy new books. Many of these books were religious in character, although Carolingian monks (and nuns) would also copy books from Ancient Rome that had been written by pagans; many of these ancient books, like the poetry of Virgil (see Chapter Six), would serve as the basis of the curriculum of Western Europe's schools as they had since the Roman Empire. A Christian of the eighth century would believe that even works by pagans would nevertheless afford their readers education and, thus, self-improvement.

17.7.11.2: The Macedonian Renaissance

The Byzantine Empire had been that half of the Roman Empire where the language of life and culture was not Latin, but Greek. At around the same time as the Carolingians' efforts, the Byzantine Empire also saw close cooperation of Church and State to revive the study of ancient literature and improve learning. The Byzantine Empire had suffered from a collapse of literacy, which, while not as severe as Western Europe's, had still resulted in a much less literate population. As such, an effort similar to that of the Carolingians was necessary in the Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean. We call this effort the **Macedonian Renaissance** because it reached its fullest expression under a dynasty of Byzantine emperors that we call the **Macedonian Dynasty** (867 – 1056).



Figure **17.7.11.2**: Paris Psaulter | Picture from a Byzantine Greek manuscript written during the Macedonian Renaissance (Public Domain; User "Neuceu" via Wikimedia Commons)

The efforts of the Macedonian Dynasty, however, had begun earlier. The efforts to improve the availability of books and to increase learning began during the Iconoclast Controversy as both Iconophiles and Iconoclasts had sought to back up their positions by

quoting from the Bible and the Church Fathers. Emperor Theophilus (r. 829 – 842), one of the last Iconoclast emperors, had had Leo the Mathematician found a school in the emperor's palace in Constantinople, a palace known as the **Magnaura**. Like Charlemagne's palace at Aachen, this school would go on to serve as the foundation for a revived learning among elites, only this learning was in Greek, rather than Latin.

Following the final triumph of the Iconophiles, these efforts continued with Photius, patriarch of Constantinople from 858 to 867 and then from 877 to 886, as a particular sponsor of monastic schools in the Byzantine Empire and of the copying of books in Ancient Greek, particularly works like those of Plato's philosophy and the epic poetry of Homer.

17.7.11.3: Comparisons with the Abbasids

We should also note the global context of both the Carolingian and the Macedonian Renaissance. Carolingian and Macedonian Emperors were not the only ones seeking to increase the availability of ancient texts from the time of the Greeks and Romans. The Abbasid Caliphs under al-Mamun (r. 813 – 883) and his successors also sponsored the work of the House of Wisdom, whose scholars translated the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks into Arabic. Like the Christians of the Carolingian and Byzantine Empires, the Muslims of the Caliphate believed that one could learn from pagan writers even if they had not believed in the one Creator God.

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17.7.12: Daily Life in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empires

In both Western Europe and Byzantium, the vast majority of the population was made up of farmers. In Western Europe, some of these were what we call **dependent farmers**, living on the lands of aristocrats and giving over much of their surplus to their landlords. But in many villages, the majority of farmers might live on their own land and even enjoy a form of self-government. Although some slavery existed—especially in zones of conflict like the Mediterranean—compared to the days when vast estates had been worked by unfree labor (see Chapter Six), the workers on the estates of the Frankish aristocracy or those free and independent farmers enjoyed greater freedom than had their Roman counterparts. But their life was precarious. Crop yields were low, at ratios of around 3:1—meaning only giving back about three times as much as was planted—and the average Carolingian farmer frequently did not get adequate calories.

So too did most of the population of the Byzantine Empire live in small villages, living at a subsistence level, and selling what rare surplus they had. Byzantium, like its Western European counterpart, was fundamentally rural.

The nobles of Western Europe were generally part of a warrior aristocracy. These aristocrats often outfitted and equipped themselves based on the wealth of their lands. Their values were those of service to their king and loyalty and bravery in battle. Nobles would often not live on their lands but follow the royal court, which would itself travel from place to place rather than having a fixed location. Battle may have been frequent, but until Charlemagne, the scale of battle was often small, with armies numbering a few hundred at most.

Along with its warrior aristocracy, gender roles in the Frankish kingdom—like those of the Roman Empire that came before it—reflected a patriarchal society. The Christian religion generally taught that wives were to submit to their husbands, and the men who wrote much of the religious texts often thought of women in terms of weakness and temptations to sexual sin. “You,” an early Christian writer had exclaimed of women, “are the devil’s gateway…you are the first deserter of the divine law…you destroyed so easily God’s image, man…”[4] The warlike values of the aristocracy meant that aristocratic women were relegated to a supporting role, to the management of the household. Both Roman and Germanic law placed women in subordination to their fathers and then, when married, to their husbands.

That said, women did enjoy certain rights. Although legally inferior to men in Roman Law (practiced in the Byzantine Empire and often among those peoples who were subjects of the Germanic aristocracies), a wife maintained the right to any property she brought into a marriage. Women often played a strong economic role in peasant life, and, as with their aristocratic counterparts, peasant women often managed the household even if men performed tasks such as plowing and the like. And the Church gave women a fair degree of autonomy in certain circumstances. We often read of women choosing to become nuns, to take vows of celibacy, against the desires of their families for them to marry. These women, if they framed their choices in terms of Christian devotion, could often count on institutional support in their life choices. Although monasticism was usually limited to noblewomen, women who became nuns often had access to an education. Certain noblewomen who became abbesses could even become powerful political actors in their own right, as did Gertrude of Nivelles (c. 621 – 659), abbess of the monastery of Nivelles in what is today Belgium.

17.7.12.1: Endnotes

4 Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women, 1:1

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17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse

Charlemagne's efforts to create a unified empire did not long outlast Charlemagne himself. His son, Louis the Pious (r. 814 – 840), succeeded him as emperor. Louis continued Charlemagne's project of Church reform; unlike Charlemagne, who had had only one son to survive into adulthood, Louis had three. In addition, his eldest, Lothar, had already rebelled against him in the 830s. When Louis died, Lothar went to war with Louis's other two sons, Charles the Bald and Louis the German. This civil war proved to be inconclusive, and, at the 843 Treaty of Verdun, the Carolingian Empire was divided among the brothers. Charles the Bald took the lands in the west of the Empire, which would go on to be known first as West Francia and then, eventually, France. To the East, the largely German-speaking region of Saxony and Bavaria went to Louis the German. Lothar, although he had received the title of emperor, received only northern Italy and the land between Charles's and Louis's kingdoms.

This division of a kingdom was not unusual for the Franks—but it meant that there would be no restoration of a unified Empire in the West, although both the king of Francia and the rulers of Central Europe would each claim to be Charlemagne's successors.



Map **17.7.13.1**: Map of Carolingian Europe in 843 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

Western Europe faced worse problems than civil war between the descendants of Charlemagne. In the centuries following the rise of the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms, Western Europe had suffered comparatively few invasions. The ninth and tenth centuries, by contrast, would be an "age of invasions."

In the north of Europe, in the region known as Scandinavia, a people called the Norse had lived for centuries before. These were Germanic peoples, but one whose culture was not assimilated to the post-Roman world of the Carolingian west. They were still pagan and had a culture that, like that of other Germanic peoples, was quite warlike. Their population had increased; additionally, Norse kings tended to exile defeated enemies. These Norsemen would often take up raiding other peoples, and when they took up this activity, they were known as **Vikings**.

One factor that allowed Norse raids on Western Europe was an improvement in their construction of ships. Their ships were long, flexible, and also had a shallow enough draft that they did not need harbors so could be pulled up along any beach. Moreover, they were also shallow enough of draft that they could sail up rivers for hundreds of miles. What this feature of these ships meant was that Norse Vikings could strike at many different regions, often with very little warning.

Even more significant for the Norse attacks was that Western Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries was made up of weak states. The three successor kingdoms to Charlemagne's empire were often split by civil war. Although King Charles the Bald (r. 843 –

877) enjoyed some successes against the Vikings, his realm in general was subject to frequent raids. England's small kingdoms were particularly vulnerable. From 793, England had suffered numerous Viking raids, and these raids increased in size and scope over the ninth century. Likewise, to the west, Ireland, with its chiefs and petty kings, lacked the organization of a state necessary to deal with sustained incursions.



Figure **17.7.13.1**: Modern Replica of a Viking ship (CC BY-SA 2.0; William Murphy via Wikimedia Commons)

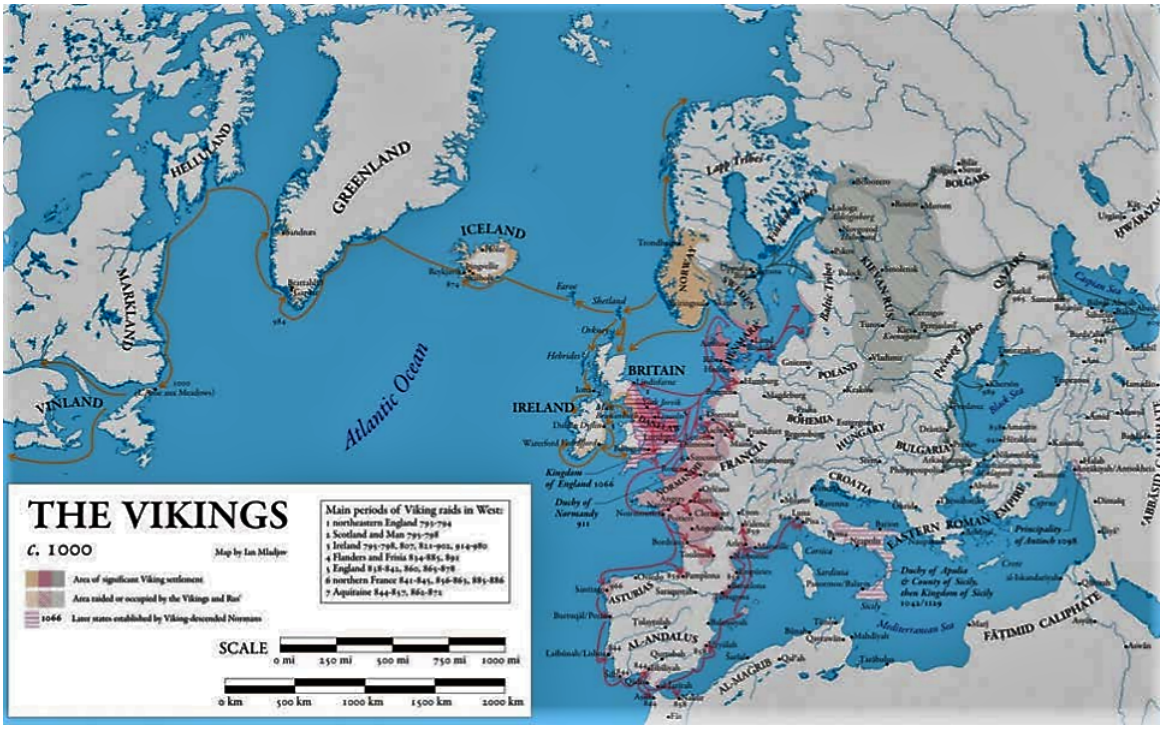
The result was that not only did Viking raids on the British Isles increase in scope and intensity over the ninth century, but also the Norse eventually came to take lands and settle.

To the south and west, al-Andalus suffered fewer Norse attacks than did the rest of Europe. A sophisticated, organized state with a regular army and a network of fortresses, it was able to effectively deal with raiders. The Spanish emir Abd-al Rahman II defeated a Viking raid and sent the Moroccan ambassador the severed heads of 200 Vikings to show how successful he had been in defending against them.

To the east, the Norse sailed along the rivers that stretched through the forests and steppes of the area that today makes up Russia and Ukraine. The Slavic peoples living there had a comparatively weak social organization, so in many instances they fell under Norse domination. The Norsemen Rurik and Oleg were said to have established themselves as rulers of Slavic peoples as well as the princedoms of Novgorod and Kiev, respectively, in the ninth century. These kingdoms of Slavic subjects and Norse masters became known as the **Rus**.

Further to the south, the Norse would often move their ships over land between rivers until finally reaching the Black Sea and thus Constantinople and Byzantium. Although on occasion a Norse raid would have great success against Byzantine forces, in general, a powerful and organized state meant that, as with al-Andalus, the Norse encountered less success.

Norse invaders were not the only threat faced by Western Europe. As the emirs of Muslim North Africa gradually broke away from the centralized rule of the Abbasid Caliphate (see Chapter Eight), these emirs, particularly those of Tunisia, what is today Algeria, and Morocco turned to legitimate themselves by raid and plunder; this aggression was often directed at southern Francia and Italy. The Aghlabid emirs in particular not only seized control of Sicily, but also sacked the city of Rome itself in 846. North African raiders would often seize territory on the coasts of Southern Europe and raid European shipping in order to increase their own control of trade and commerce. In addition, the emirs of these North African states would use the plunder from their attacks to reward followers, in another example of the pillage and gift system.



Map **17.7.13.2**: Map of The Vikings c. 1000 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

Central Europe also faced attacks, these from the Magyars, a steppe people. The Magyars had been forced out of Southeastern Europe by another steppe people, the Pechenegs, and so from 899 on migrated into Central Europe, threatening the integrity of East Francia. As was the case with other steppe peoples, their raids on horseback targeted people in small unfortified communities, avoiding larger settlements. They eventually settled in the plains of Eastern Europe to found the state of Hungary; although they made Hungary their primary location, they nevertheless continued to raid East Francia through the first part of the tenth century.

17.7.13.1: An Age of Invasions in Perspective

Norse, Magyar, and Muslim attacks on Europe wrought incredible damage. Thousands died, and tens of thousands more were captured and sold into slavery in the great slave markets of North Africa and the Kievan Rus. These raids furthered the breakdown of public order in Western Europe.

But these raids had effects that also brought long-term benefits. Both Norse and Muslim pirates traded just as much as they raided. Indeed, even the plunder of churches and selling of the gold and silver helped create new trade networks in both the North Sea and Mediterranean. These new trade networks, especially where the Norse had established settlements in places like Ireland, gradually brought about an increase in economic activity.

All told, we should remember this “age of invasions” in terms both of its human cost and of the economic growth it brought about.

17.7.13.2: New States in Response to Invasions

In response to the invasions that Europe faced, newer, stronger states came into being in the British Isles and in Central Europe. In England, Norse invasions had destroyed all but one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The only remaining kingdom was Wessex. Its king, Alfred the Great (r. 871 – 899), was able to stop Norse incursions by raising an army and navy financed by a kingdom-wide tax. This tax, known as the **geld**, was also used to finance the construction of a network of fortresses along the frontier of those parts of England still controlled by the Norse. This new system of tax collection would eventually mean that England, a small island on the periphery, would eventually have the most sophisticated bureaucracy in Western Europe (although we must note that in comparison with a Middle Eastern or East Asian state, this bureaucracy would be considered rudimentary and primitive).

Likewise, in Central Europe, the kings of East Francia, the region made up of those Saxon territories the Carolingians had conquered in the eighth century as well as various peoples to the south and east, gradually built a kingdom capable of dealing with Magyar invaders. Henry the Fowler (r. 919 – 936) took control of East Francia after the end of the Carolingian Dynasty. He was

succeeded by Otto the Great (r. 936 – 973), whose creation of a state was partially the result of luck: his territory contained large silver mines that allowed him to finance an army. This army was able to decisively defeat the Magyar raiders and also allow these kings to expand their power to the east, subjugating the Slavic peoples living in the forests of Eastern Europe.

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17.7.14: The Tenth-Century Church

As a result of endemic chaos in Western Europe, the Church suffered as well. The moral and intellectual quality of bishops and abbots declined sharply, as church establishments fell under the domination of warlords. These warlords would often appoint members of their families or personal allies to positions of leadership in the Church, appointments based not on any competence or sense of dedication to duty, but rather on ties of loyalty. This was the case even in Rome, when families of Roman nobles fought over the papacy. Between 872 and 965, twenty-four popes were assassinated in office.

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17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors

For Byzantium, however, the ninth and tenth centuries represented a time of recovery and expansion. In the first place, the height of the Macedonian Renaissance took place in the later ninth and tenth centuries, resulting in a growth of learning among both clergy and lay elites. This growth of learning took place against the backdrop of military success by the emperors of the Macedonian Dynasty (867 – 1056). The first emperor of this dynasty, Basil I (r. 867 – 886), a soldier and servant of the emperor, had come from a peasant background. He seized control of the Empire when he murdered the reigning emperor and took the position for himself.

Basil was an effective emperor. To the east, as the Abbasid Caliphate broke down, he inflicted several defeats on the Arab emirs on the border, pushing the frontiers of the Empire further east. Although unsuccessful in fighting to maintain control of Sicily, he re-established Byzantine control over most of southern Italy.

It was under the Macedonian emperors that the Eastern Orthodox culture of the Byzantines spread north beyond the borders of the Empire. In 864, the Bulgar khan, whose predecessors had been building a state of their own, converted to Christianity and was baptized. This conversion allowed the Bulgar state to be legitimated by the Church in the same manner as had the Byzantine Empire and the kingdoms of Western Europe.



Figure **17.7.15.1**: **Basil II** (Public Domain; User “Tokle” via Wikimedia Commons)

In the ninth century, Cyril and Methodius, missionaries from the city of Thessalonica, preached Orthodox Christianity to the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe and devised the alphabet that we today call **Cyrillic** in order to write the Bible and liturgy in their own language, **Slavonic**. By bringing Orthodox Christianity to the Slavic peoples, the Byzantines brought them into the culture of the Byzantines.

Subsequent emperors maintained this record of successes. John Tzimisces (r. 969 – 976) established Byzantine control over most of Syria. Basil II (r. 976 – 1025) achieved further successes, crushing and annexing the Bulgar state that had grown up in the lands south of the Danube and further subordinating the Armenian kingdoms to the Byzantine emperor. By the end of his reign, the Byzantine territory encompassed about a fourth of what had been the Roman Empire at its height under Augustus.

Basil II had further diplomatic triumphs. He allied with the princes of the **Kievan Rus**, a state that had grown up in Eastern Europe along the rivers between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. The Rus was a people group made up of a largely Slavic population, with rulers who were ethnically Norse and who had established themselves as rulers of both Slavic and Turkic subjects when they sailed down the rivers of Eastern Europe from their Scandinavian homeland. This was a hybrid culture already, combining Norse and Slavic. An alliance with the Byzantine Empire also brought Greek elements into the cultural mix. In 988, Kievan Grand Prince

Vladimir (r. 980 – 1015) was baptized into the Christian religion and became a close ally of Basil II, sealing the alliance by marrying Basil's sister, Anna. The elite culture of the Rus would come to reflect both Greek, Slavic, Norse, and also Turkic elements. Allying with these people had brought Basil II to the height of the Byzantine state's power.



Figure 17.7.15.2: Baptism of Grand Prince Vladimir (Public Domain; Viktor M. Vasnetsov via Wikimedia Commons)

Despite its successes during the reign of the Macedonian emperors, the Byzantine state faced weaknesses. The theme system had gradually broken down. Increasingly, soldiers came not from the themes, but from the ranks of professional mercenaries, to include those made up of Norsemen. The soldiers of the themes received less training and served mainly as a militia that would back up the core of a professional army, known as the **Tagmata**. Whether this smaller tagmata would be up to the task of defending an empire the size of Byzantium would remain to be seen.



Map 17.7.15.1: Map of the Byzantine Empire at the Death of Basil II in 1025 CE Author: User "Bigdaddy1204" Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0



Map **17.7.15.2**: Map of The Provinces (Themes) of the Byzantine Empire, 1025 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Cplakidas" via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.7.16: Conclusion and Global Perspectives

In many ways, the period between 500 and 1000 was as transitional for Western Europe and Byzantium as it was for East Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. Just as the Han State had fragmented politically in the third century and given rise to smaller states ruled by warrior aristocracies, so too had Rome fragmented into its eastern half and a series of Germanic kingdoms, themselves ruled by warrior aristocracies. Just as Mahayana Buddhism had arrived in post-Han China, so too had Christianity become the dominant faith of the Roman Empire and its successors.

And yet, these similarities in the end are superficial. All of China's successor states maintained a continuity of bureaucracy and literacy to an extent that Western Europe did not. Moreover, although Mahayana Buddhism would become a key element of East Asian culture, it would never come to enjoy a monopoly of power that Christianity enjoyed in Western Europe and Byzantium and that Islam enjoyed in Spain, the Middle East, and North Africa. The less exclusivist nature of Mahayana Buddhism would mean that it would always be one set of practices among many.

And the greatest difference is that China eventually saw a return to a unified empire under the Sui and then Tang Dynasties. In spite of Charlemagne's efforts to create a new Empire in the west, the story of Western Europe would be one of competing states rather than an empire claiming universal authority.

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17.7.18: Links to Primary Sources

Fordham University's Internet Medieval Sourcebook contains a wide variety of primary source documents from the Middle Ages (that is, 500 to 1500) hosted by Fordham University. From the main page one can find links based on period and category.

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook.asp

Georgetown University's The Labyrinth likewise contains a large selection of links to both primary sources and art and art historical materials. Some of the pages have succumbed to "link rot" due to the relative age of the site, but it remains one of the best collections of primary source material available online for free.

The Labyrinth https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/labyrinth

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.8: Islam to the Mamluks

17.8.1: Chronology

17.8.2: Introduction

17.8.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.8.4: Key Terms

17.8.5: Geography of the Middle East

17.8.6: Rise of Islam

17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam

17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs

17.8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate

17.8.10: The 'Abbasid Caliphate

17.8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate

17.8.12: The Crusades

17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate

17.8.14: Conclusion

17.8.15: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.8.16: Links to Primary Sources

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17.8.1: Chronology

632 – 661 CE Rashidun Caliphs

661 – 750 CE Umayyad Caliphate

750 – 1258 CE Abbasid Caliphate

909 – 1171 CE Fatimid Caliphate

1096 – 1487 CE Crusades

1171 – 1250 CE Ayubid Sultanate

1250 – 1517 CE Mamluk Sultanate

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17.8.2: Introduction

An inveterate adventurer and renowned intellectual, **Ibn Khaldun** was born into a family of ascendant Andalusian Arabs who had immigrated to North Africa. There, present day Tunisia, he received a traditional Islamic education until his parents died from the plague. At the time of their deaths, he was just seventeen years old. On his own, the young and resourceful Ibn Khaldun exploited personal relationships to secure an administrative position at court and thus began a career as an itinerant statesman. Time and time again, Ibn Khaldun landed in prison for his role in conspiracies against various ruling dynasties, only to be released by their heirs. Envoys and grandees recognized his remarkable intelligence and the value of his council. His reputation preceded him, and many dignitaries openly entreated him to join their court. Serving various dynasties, Ibn Khaldun held many important offices, like diplomat, court advisor, and prime minister. But he eventually grew weary of the hazards of palace intrigue and sought instead a more reclusive lifestyle.

Ibn Khaldun retired to the safety of a Berber tribe in Algeria, where he composed ***al-Muqaddimah***, or *Prolegomenon*, an outstanding work of sociology and historiography. Published in 1377, he theorized in *al-Muaqddimah* that tribal '***asabiyah,*** roughly translated as "social solidarity," is often accompanied by a novel religious ideology that helps a previously marginalized group of people, usually from the desert, rise up and conquer the city folk. Once ensconced in power, these desert peoples evolved into a grand civilization, but '*asabiyah* contained within it destructive elements that could precipitate their collapse. Known for this **Cyclical Theory of History**, Ibn Khaldun posited that, seduced by the wiles of urban culture, the dominant group would over time become soft and enter into a period of decay, until a new group of desert peoples conquered them, when the process would begin anew. This theory applies to the development of Islamic history discussed throughout this chapter.

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17.8.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. How does geography play a role in Islamic history?

2. Why were the concepts defined by *muruwah* so important to the early development of Islam?

3. What are the Five Pillars of Islam, and why are they important to the religion?

4. What were the five roles that the Prophet Muhammad played in Medina?

5. What factors led to the rapid expansion of Islam?

6. How did the Umayyads come to power following the Rashidun caliphs?

7. How do you account for the rise of the splits in the Islamic community, like the rise of the Kharijis and Shi‘a?

8. Describe the transition from the Umayyads to the ‘Abbasids. Compare and contrast the two caliphates.

9. The Fatimids marked the end to the High Caliphate. How did Egypt gain its autonomy from the ‘Abbasids? How did the Fatimids take over Egypt?

10. How did the Crusaders gain a foothold in the Middle East? What did it take for Salah al-Din to push them out?

11. What led to the establishment of the Mamluk Sultanate? How did the Mamluk Sultanate go into decline?

12. Does North African history move in cycles of birth, renewal, expansion and decadence? Ibn Khaldoun says that nomads come from the frontiers, desert, and periphery, settle down, and within 120 years, become decadent and collapse. Do you agree?

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17.8.4: Key Terms

- ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi
- Abdul Malik
- Abu al-‘Abbas al-Saffah, Caliph
- Abu Bakr, Caliph
- Ahmad Ibn Tulun
- ‘A’isha
- Al-Azhar
- Al-Hakim
- ‘Ali, Caliph
- al-Ma’mun
- Al-Mansur, Caliph
- Al-Mu‘izz
- *Al-Muqaddimah*
- Alexios Komnenos, Emperor
- Alids
- *Amsar*
- *Ansar*
- *Asabiyyah*
- Aybak
- Battle of Ajnadayn
- Battle of Badr
- Battle of Karbala
- Battle of Manzikert
- Battle of Marj Rahit
- Battle of Qadisiya
- Battle of Siffin
- Battle of the Camel
- Battle of the Trench
- Battle of Uhud
- Battle of Yarmuk
- Baybars
- *Bayt al-Hikmah*
- Cyclical Theory of History
- Hadith
- *Hajj*

- Harun al-Rashid, Caliph
- *Hijra*
- Husayn
- Ibn Khaldun
- ibn Zubayr
- Isma‘ilis
- *Jihad*
- Jizya
- Ka’ba
- *Kharanj*
- *Kharijis*
- *Majlis*
- *Mamluks*
- Marwan, Caliph
- *Mawali*
- Mu‘awiya, Caliph
- Mu‘tazila
- *Muhajirun*
- Muhammad ad-Darazi
- *Muruwah*
- People of the Book
- Quran
- Qutuz
- Ramadan
- Salah al-Din
- *Salat*
- *Sawm*
- *Shahada*
- Shajar al-Durr
- Sharia law
- Sunna
- The Battle of Ayn Jalut
- The Battle of Hattin
- Treaty of Hudaybiyyah
- ‘Umar, Caliph
- ‘Umar II, Caliph
- *Umma*

- Urban II, Pope
- ‘Uthman, Caliph
- Yazid
- *Zakat*

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17.8.5: Geography of the Middle East

Academics have not reached a consensus on the geographical boundaries of the Middle East. However, for the purposes of this chapter, this region will encompass the broadly defined areas known as Persia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Asia Minor, and the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East straddles three continents, including Asia, Africa, and Europe. The geography of the area promoted cultural diffusion by facilitating the spread of peoples, ideas, and goods along overland and maritime trade routes. In an area generally characterized by its aridity, climate has influenced settlement patterns. Larger settlements are found in river valleys and well-watered areas along the littoral. In these areas, we see the development and spread of productive agriculture.



Map **17.8.5.1**: Map of the Middle East (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “TownDown” via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.8.6: Rise of Islam

Legend traces the Arabs back to Isma'il, the son of Abraham and his Egyptian maid, Haga, a link that would later help to legitimize Islam by connecting it to the Hebrew tradition. In reality, Arabs inhabited the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula and shared socio-linguistic commonalities with such other Semitic-speaking peoples in the area as the Hebrews, Assyrians, Arameans, and even the Amhara of Ethiopia. Most of the population of Arabia prior to the rise of Islam resided in the south of the peninsula, in modern day Yemen, where they practiced terraced agriculture and herded ruminants in a relatively small area.

Farther to the north of Yemen, along the highland spine of western Arabia and up against the littoral of the Red Sea, was the Hijaz, a prominent cultural and economic region. Situated in this remote fastness was the dusty city of Mecca, the holiest place in the peninsula and the location of the **Ka'ba**, or "cube," which contained many of the traditional Arabian religious images, including many Christian icons. So important was the Ka'ba to the religion of polytheistic tribes of Arabia that they negotiated a truce lasting one month every year that allowed for safe pilgrimage to the shrine.



Map **17.8.6.1**: Map of the Hijaz Region of Arabia (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "TUBS" via Wikimedia Commons)

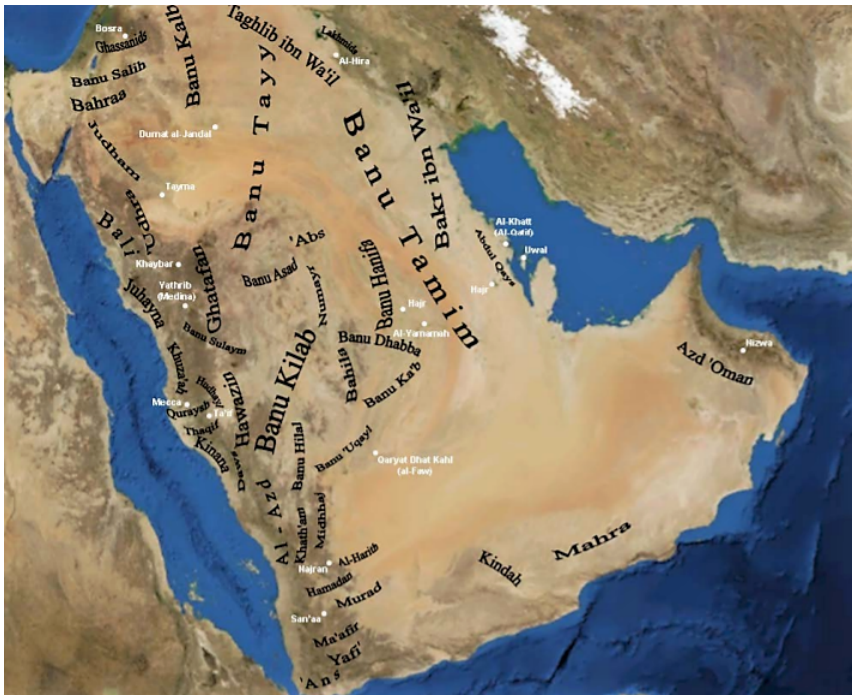
The Hijaz was the most arable part of the Arabian Peninsula north of Yemen and distinguished by irrigated agriculture that supported fruit trees and essential grains. Local traders exported a range of Hijazi agricultural products to Syria in the north in return for imperative imports like textiles and olive oil so the region benefited from robust trade. Regional commerce depended on the security of trade, and piracy on the Red Sea threatened to disrupt business. Under these conditions, merchants diverted their trade overland. Many goods journeyed up the Red Sea Rift from Yemen on their way to the eastern Mediterranean. Caravans of camels carried these goods, as well as Hijazi exports, to the Levant. Most of the caravans stopped in Mecca, the halfway point up the spine of the peninsula, thus their commerce brought much needed wealth and tax revenue to the city.



Figure **17.8.6.1**: The Mountains of the Hijaz (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Salem1990" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Arabs first domesticated the camel, probably sometime between 3000 and 1000 BCE. Caravan operators eventually availed themselves of these useful dromedaries because they were so adept at crossing the region's massive deserts. Capable of drinking 100 liters of water in mere minutes, they could endure days of travel without needing to replenish themselves again. Moreover, camels instinctively remembered the locations of important, life-sustaining oases. So important were these beasts of burden that the

tribes that controlled the camels controlled the trade. And the Quraysh Tribe of Mecca commanded many of the camels in the Hijaz region; therefore, they commanded much of the trade.



Map **17.8.6.2**: The Tribes of Arabia | Notice the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. (Public Domain; User "Slackerlwastudent" via Wikimedia Commons)

Life in the Arabian Peninsula centered around the tribe, which usually consisted of a group of relatives who claimed a shared ancestry. Tribal traditions found meaning in the poetic concept of ***muruwah***, which represented the notion of the ideal tribal man. This uniquely Arabian brand of chivalry focused on bravery, patience, persistence in revenge, generosity, hospitality, and protection of the poor and weak. In the absence of formal government, tribes offered physical security to its individual members. Tribes mitigated violence and theft through the shared understanding that retribution for such acts would follow swiftly. Tribes also organized to compete over increasingly scarce resources, as they had a responsibility to provide for the economic needs of their individual members. Nevertheless, tribal traditions had been breaking down prior to the rise of Islam; no longer were the dominant members of society adhering to the principles set forth in *muruwah*.

Into this evolving cultural milieu Muhammad (c.570 – 632) was born in the city of Mecca. Muhammad's father, 'Abdallah, was a member of the Hashimite Clan, a less prosperous branch of the Quraysh Tribe. 'Abdullah died just prior to his son's birth, and Muhammad's mother passed away when he was just six years old. Orphaned at such a young age, his tribe intervened to ensure Muhammad's survival. His uncle, Abu Thalib, the leader of the Hashimite Clan and an important member of the Quraysh Tribe, eventually took custody of the young boy. These early privations influenced Muhammad's later desire to take care of those who could not care for themselves.

In his youth, Muhammad found employment in the regional caravan trade as a dependable herder and driver of camels. During this period, he cultivated a reputation of an empathetic and honest man, one who earned the respect of many Meccans. His upright character soon attracted the attention of a wealthy merchant known as Khadija who hired Muhammad to manage her caravans. Once Muhammad proved his reliability, Khadija, who was fifteen years older than Muhammad, proposed to him, and they married. This marriage afforded Muhammad a financial security that allowed him to begin meditating on religion in the abstract.

Muhammad had been concerned about the direction society had recently been taking and that the concepts defined by *muruwah* were no longer being upheld. He believed that some of the most influential members of society, namely the merchant elite of the Quraysh Tribe, were no longer respecting their traditional responsibilities to the weaker members of society because of their own greed. He thought that the **People of the Book**, specifically, Christians and Jews, might have a better answer for the ills afflicting Meccan society. Muhammad had contact with the Christians and Jews of the peninsula and even traveled to Christian Syria while working in the caravan trade. In this context, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad at a cave nearby to Mecca in 610, during

the holy month of Ramadan. The Angel Gabriel instructed him to "recite," and then he spoke the divine word of God. His revelations became the **Quran**.

At first, Muhammad displayed the very human reactions of fear and distrust to the apparition of the Angel Gabriel. He also expressed embarrassment because he did not want to be associated with the pagan diviners of the region. Fortunately, his wife Khadija had a cousin who was a *hanif*, someone who was neither a Christian nor a Jew, but who believed in a vague concept of a monotheistic god. Her cousin trusted the veracity of Muhammad's revelations. So with trepidation, Muhammad eventually accepted his role as God's vehicle. His wife became the first convert to Islam, with Abu Thalib's son **'Ali** converting soon afterwards.

17.8.6.1: The Religion of Islam

As a religion of the Abrahamic faith, Islam holds much in common with Judaism and Christianity. Islam grew out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a link which helped to legitimize the new religion. In fact, Muslims believe in the same God, or Allah in Arabic, as the Jewish and Christian God. Although Muslims trust that the People of the Book had received the word of God, they believe that it had become distorted over time, so God sent the Angel Gabriel to deliver His word to Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, or Khatam an-Nabiyyin, for Muslims believe that he represented God's final word to man. Muhammad never claimed to be founding a new religion, rather he served as the last in a long line of God's messengers, beginning with the Hebrew prophets, and including Jesus. His revelations, therefore, represent the pure, unadulterated version of God's message. The Prophet's followers memorized the revelations and ultimately recorded them in a book called the Quran. Together with the Quran, the **Hadith**, traditions of Muhammad used to illustrate a concept, and the **Sunna**, the teachings of the Prophet not found in the Quran, helped guide and inform Muslims on proper behavior. And with that knowledge came great responsibility, as God held His people to a high standard of behavior, based on their obedience, or submission to His will. In fact, the word Islam means submission in Arabic, and a Muslim is one who submits (to God).



Figure **17.8.6.2**: The Birmingham Quran Manuscript | Dated among the oldest in the World. (Public Domain; Anonymous via Wikimedia Commons)

Derived from a Hadith, the Five Pillars of Islam are essential, obligatory actions that serve as the foundation of the faith. The first pillar, known as the witness, or *shahada*, is a profession of faith, in which believers declare that "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger." Prayer, also called ***salat***, is the second pillar of Islam. Islam expects faithful Muslims to pray five times a day, kneeling towards Mecca, at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening. One should perform ritual ablutions prior to their prayers in order to approach God as being symbolically clean and pure. The third pillar is almsgiving, or ***zakat*** in Arabic. Islam requires Muslims to contribute a proportion of their wealth to the upkeep of the Islamic community. This proportion, or tithe, accorded with the size of one's wealth; therefore, the rich should expect to contribute more than the poor. Fasting, or ***sawm***, is the fourth pillar of Islam and takes place during **Ramadan**, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. For the duration of Ramadan, believers consume neither food nor drink from dawn to dusk. This practice is meant to remind them of what it is like to be poor and go hungry. The fifth and final pillar of Islam is pilgrimage, or ***hajj***. Islam expects all able-bodied Muslims to make a journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. All five pillars combine to unite the Islamic community.



Figure 17.8.6.3: Pilgrimage to Mecca | Notice the prominently featured Ka'ba. (CC BY-SA 2.0; User "BotMultichillT" via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam

The Prophet Muhammad started publically preaching his strict brand of monotheism in the year 613, by reciting the Quran, quickly convincing some of the commoners of Mecca to believe in him. Most of his early converts belonged to groups of people who had failed to achieve any significant social mobility, which, of course, included many of the poor. His followers memorized his recitations and message that called for the powerful to take care of the weak, a message that resonated with many of these economically and socially marginalized. Islam served as a binding force, replacing tribal solidarity, or *'asabiyah*.

Muhammad's message challenged the Umayyad Clan's leadership of society. The most powerful branch of the Quraysh Tribe, the Umayyads had been enriching themselves from the lucrative caravan trade while, at the same time, ignoring the privations of the needy. Prodding his tribal brethren, Muhammad had also spoken out against the traditional pagan gods. Tribal tradition dictated that the polytheistic Arabs of the peninsula worship their tribal gods; they also believed in *jinns*, or nature spirits. As custodians of the Ka'ba, which contained all of these traditional Arabian religious images, the Umayyad Clan augmented their income by collecting revenue from the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca.

The political implications were clear. The Muslims threatened to disrupt a delicate equilibrium. The Prophet's message jeopardized the social and economic standing of the elite members of society, who accused the Muslims of serving as agents of unwelcome change. Tensions grew, and conflict spilled into the streets of Mecca, dragging the two respective camps into the fray. The more that Muhammad's followers grew in number, the more opposition they encountered from the Umayyad Clan. To avoid this conflict, some Muslims fled to the Kingdom of Aksum, located in Ethiopia, at this stage in the early history of Islam, where they received protection from Muhammad's enemies under the Christian King Armah. Indeed, the first Muslims went by the name of ***muhajirun***, meaning "emigrants," for they would soon be forced to leave Mecca under pain of severe Umayyad persecution.

During this period, Muhammad's wife Khadija died in 619. With her death, Muhammad lost his source of emotional support and fell into depression, thus enduring a personal crisis. That same year, the Prophet's uncle Abu Thalib passed away. Already bereaved, Muhammad further suffered the loss of his personal protector in the Quraysh Tribe. Now cut off from the tribal leadership and accused of stirring sectarian tension, Muhammad was on his own and vulnerable to Umayyad harassment in Mecca.



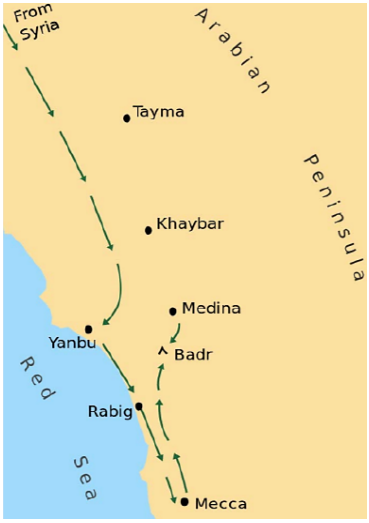
Figure 17.8.7.1: The Quba Mosque of Medina | The oldest mosque in Islam. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Abderlrhman 1990" via Wikimedia Commons)

While Muhammad endured harsh reprisals from the Umayyads for his public preaching, a conflict was boiling in Yathrib, later called Medina, a trade city located a few days to the north of Mecca. Some individuals from Medina had traveled to Mecca in 620, where they heard the Prophet preach and soon adopted Islam. Impressed by his reputation as an honest man, the leaders of Medina invited Muhammad to their city in 622 to act as a mediator of tribal infighting over a shared oasis. As opposition in Mecca had

become too intense for Muhammad and his followers to remain there, they migrated to Medina in 622, a seminal event known as the ***hijra*** that marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. The Prophet rapidly converted many of the city's inhabitants to Islam. These new Muslims came to be identified as the ansar, meaning "helpers." Together with the muhajirun, the ***ansar*** helped the Prophet institutionalize the religion of Islam and develop an ***umma***, or community of believers, that would dominate the social and political life of Medina.

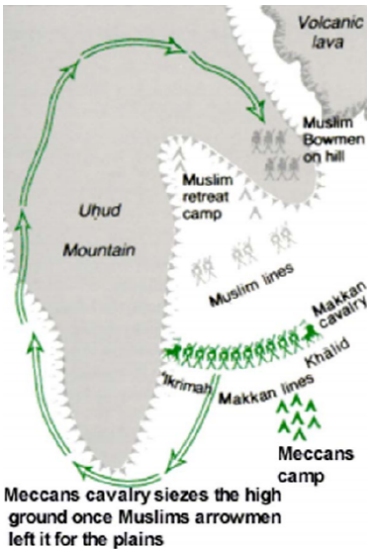
Muhammad assumed five different roles in Medina. First and foremost, he was the Prophet of Islam; therefore, he was the religious leader of the community. Second, he acted as the political leader of the *umma*. Because his followers agreed with him politically, they agreed with him religiously as well. Third, Muhammad served as a judicial leader, using the Quran as the basis of law. Fourth, the Prophet functioned as a legislator, working with the ***majlis***, or council of elders, to enact laws. He therefore governed his capital, Medina, with no separation of church and state. Finally, Muhammad was a military leader who ensured that statehood would prevail for the Muslims.

A major concern of Muhammad's leadership was to determine how the Muslims could contribute to the Medinan economy. He received a revelation during this period that suggested the Muslims should raid the caravans coming north out of Mecca. (Qur'an 22:39) In 624, the Medinans engaged a caravan of Meccans along a popular trade route bypassing Medina. In the ensuing **Battle of Badr**, named after a nearby oasis, 300 Muslims defeated nearly 1000 Meccans and seized their caravan. They considered their signal victory a sign from God that he was on their side. Their success enhanced Muhammad's prestige and that of the Islamic community among the Arab tribes in the peninsula.



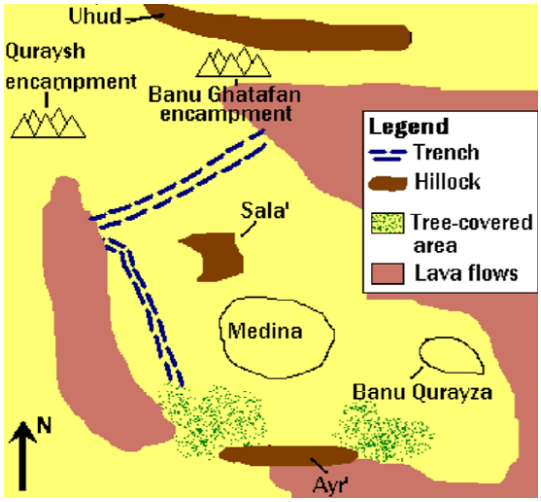
Map **17.8.7.1**: Map of the Battle of Badr (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Vedantm" via Wikimedia Commons)

Unwilling to cede control of the lucrative caravan trade to the upstart Muslims of Medina, the Umayyads confronted the Muslims in 625 in the **Battle of Uhud**, which referred to a local mountain. Foot soldiers in the vanguard of the Muslim forces led their defense. Meanwhile, a group of ambitious archers, ignoring the Prophet's command to remain stationary, joined the battle. Their imprudent action let the Meccan cavalry strike the unprotected flank of Muhammad's warriors. The Meccans failed to capitalize on their victory, however, and were unable to take Medina, a failure that leads some historians to consider the battle an ultimate success for the Muslims.



Map **17.8.7.2**: Map of the Battle of Uhud (CC BY-SA 1.0; User "Warda99" via Wikimedia Commons)

In 627, the Umayyads of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina met in a final confrontation in what became known as the **Battle of the Trench**, or *khandaq* in Arabic; this battle ended in another triumph for the Muslims. In preparation for a foreseeable Umayyad attack, a Persian engineer named Salman had suggested that the Medinans build defensive works around the city. So the Muslims survived the Meccan assault by entrenching themselves behind a near-impregnable barrier. In 628, the Umayyads finally realized that they were unable to vanquish the Muslims so sent a delegation of Meccans to sue for peace. The resulting **Treaty of Hudaybiyyah** symbolized their desire to extricate themselves from a losing situation, as Mecca ultimately compromised so their merchant elite would not lose any more trade to the Medinans. The treaty provided for an official tolerance of Islam and for the Muslims to return to Mecca the following year, free from persecution.



Map **17.8.7.3**: Map of the Battle of the Trench (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Bless sins" via Wikimedia Commons)

In 630, two years before his death, the Prophet Muhammad advanced on the city of Mecca with an army of some 10,000 Muslims. Encountering only limited resistance, the army of Muslims took control of the city, an act that symbolized the idea of Islamic expansion. Muhammad cleansed the Ka'ba of its purported 360 religious images and dedicated it to God. The prestige of the Muslims extended with their victory over the Meccans. As tribes learned of this triumph, they soon followed the lead of the winners, both politically and religiously, sending delegations to forge alliances with the Prophet. By the time that Muhammad passed away, most of Arabia had converted to Islam. The religion provided the Muslims of the peninsula with a new '*asabiyah*, or social solidarity, endowing the movement with a unity of purpose.

In the absence of the Prophet, Muslim leaders had to develop a body of law to deal with important legal questions. Over time, **Sharia law** became a legal system in which Islamic principles provided an accepted means to regulate all features of daily life,

including, but not limited to, economics, politics, family life, and society. Sharia law is based on the Quran, Hadith, precedent, and interpretation. In fact, the capacity for various interpretations of the law has led to the development of several schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

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17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs

Muhammad did not formally appoint a successor, or *khalifa* in Arabic, and no clear replacement arose to lead the Muslim community forward at the time of his death. In fact, the *umma* divided into three groups, with each willing to appoint their own successor to the Prophet. Emerging as a vocal leader at this critical juncture, ‘Umar, one of Muhammad’s closest companions, convinced the *majlis*, or elders of the community, to elect **Abu Bakr** by consensus as a compromise candidate. Abu Bakr had been Muhammad’s closest friend; Muhammad’s marriage of political alliance to **‘A’isha**, Abu Bakr’s daughter, further solidified their relationship.

The election of Abu Bakr (632 – 634) brought much-needed stability and an almost democratic form of government to Islam. As caliph, Abu Bakr held together the converts to Islam by deploying the forces at his disposal, thus cementing his authority among the Arabian tribes. He prevented any rebellious Muslim tribes from reverting to the worship of their traditional tribal gods, as they were wont to do. Abu Bakr died in 634, two years after the Prophet Muhammad had died.

The *majlis* chose **‘Umar** (634 – 644), a close friend of Abu Bakr, to be the next caliph. ‘Umar had been the military power behind Abu Bakr. A dynamic and uncompromising leader, ‘Umar recognized the necessity of expansion northward to achieve various ends. First, he sought to subdue the security threat of raiding nomads, many of which remained a law unto themselves. Second, in his struggle to contain discontent, he used the cohesive element of ***jihad*** to unite the Muslim community against unbelievers and expand God’s dominion. (The Arabic term of *jihad* actually refers to a “struggle,” usually against spiritual impurity, often known as “greater *jihad*,” and is associated with fulfilling God’s objectives here on earth. The “lesser *jihad*,” alternatively, is a physical struggle against the unbelievers of the *Dar al-Harb*, or Abode of War, until it is absorbed into the *Dar al-Islam*, or Abode of Islam, where believers were free to practice their faith as members of the predominant faith. Of note is the fact that Muhammad did not consider jihad important enough to make one of the pillars of Islam.) Third, ‘Umar understood the importance of plunder for the nascent caliphate. Troops received four-fifths of the loot from conquest; the remainder of the revenue went to him to be dispersed amongst the neediest members in the Islamic community.

‘Umar directed the full might of Islam northward against the Eastern Roman Empire, sometimes referred to as the Byzantine Empire. In 634, their first encounter took place in southern Palestine. The ensuing **Battle of Ajnadayn** was a decisive victory for the Muslims and a major loss for Emperor Heraclius. Two years later, an outnumbered Muslim army defeated the Eastern Roman Empire yet again at the **Battle of Yarmouk**, located on the eponymous river, somewhere between Damascus and Jerusalem. In both instances, the Byzantines relied on their slow, heavy cavalry, whereas the Arabs capitalized on their light armor and their superior mobility. The Muslims realized that they could not just charge the East Roman lines; they showed their tactical superiority by flanking the Byzantines and executing a successful rearguard action instead. These victories opened up greater Syria to Muslim conquest. Antioch, Aleppo, and Jerusalem fell to the Muslims not long thereafter. ‘Umar appointed Mu‘awiya, a member of the Meccan Umayyad aristocracy to govern Syria at his behest.

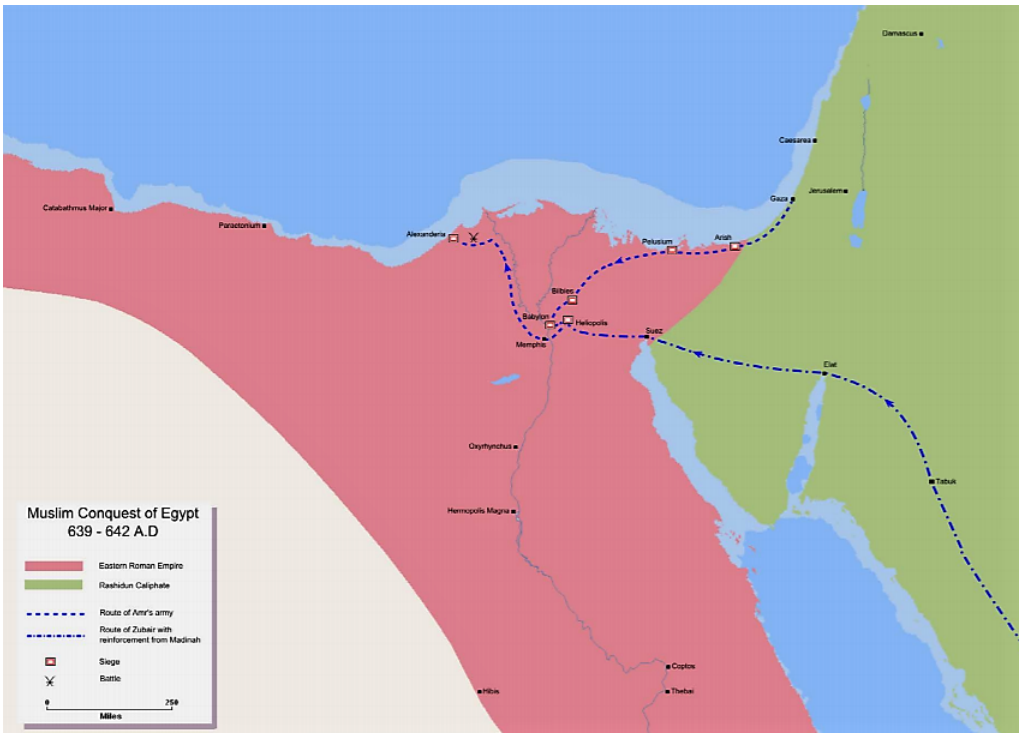


Map **17.8.8.1**: Map of Muslim and Byzantine Troop Movements, 635-636 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Magnus Manske" via Wikimedia Commons)

Once he dealt with the increasingly vulnerable Byzantines in the Levant, 'Umar directed his army to the east against the Sasanian Empire of Persia. In 636, fighting along the banks of the Euphrates River, a smaller Arab force triumphed over the Persians, at the **Battle of Qadisiya**. After successive days of exhaustive combat, the Muslims took advantage of environmental conditions and their light cavalry's mobility when they chased a dust storm and took the Sasanids by surprise.

To save their empire, the Persians mounted a failed counterattack. In 642, Umar's army eventually defeated the forces of the Sasanian Emperor Yazdagird III at the Battle of Nahavand, situated deep in Iran's Zagros Mountains. Yazdagird fled to the east as a fugitive, and, in 651, met his death at the hands of a local miller who killed the emperor in order to rob him of his belongings.

In 639, General 'Amr petitioned 'Umar for permission to invade Egypt and eventually persuaded the caliph that he could easily take Egypt so gained his reluctant consent. In 641, he received a message from 'Umar recalling his forces. The general ignored the order and seized Egypt with just a few hundred soldiers. With promises of toleration, 'Amr convinced the Egyptian Coptic majority to side with him against the Greek Orthodox ruling minority, whose Patriarch Cyrus had been actively persecuting the Copts as followers of a Christian heresy that failed to recognize the Holy Trinity.



Map 17.8.8.2: Map of the Muslim Conquest of Egypt, 639-641 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Magnus Manske" via Wikimedia Commons)

Clearly outnumbered Muslim armies thus successfully defeated two long-standing empires in the span of just a few decades. Several explanations help us understand the rapid expansion of Islam during this period. One concept, termed the vacuum theory, posits that the Byzantine and Persian empires had been severely weakened from near-continuous fighting, dating back decades prior to the rise of Islam, so they both suffered from the fatigue of war. Islam, therefore, occupied the vacuum of political power resulting from the collapse of these two exhausted empires.

The success of Muslim military strategy offers a second explanation. While Byzantine forces adopted a defensive stance on the battlefield, the Arabs employed more aggressive tactics, making use of their mobile light cavalry against their enemies' heavily armored armies. Once victorious, the Arabs populated garrison cities on the frontier, called ***amsar***, with Muslims. These military settlements provided security, served as logistical loci, and discouraged Muslim troops from mingling with the locals. The caliphs thereby prevented their warriors being assimilated into the communities of the conquered while also preventing soldiers from disturbing the peace. Fustat in Egypt, as well as Kufa and Basra in Iraq, were the largest of the *amsar*. From bases like these, the Arabs could expand and consolidate their hold over the frontier.

Religion also provided an impetus for the expansion of Islam. Fearing that internal tribal divisions threatened the early Islamic state, 'Umar united the Muslims through their common Islamic theology and faced them against a common enemy. Dedicated to the expansion of Islam, Muslims used the concept of *jihad* as a way to unify the *umma*, or Islamic community, against a foreign foe. Faith motivated the troops, who were zealous and determined to fight.

Simple economics also served as a primary motivating factor in the expansion of Islam. For one, Muslim rulers applied the **jizya**, an annual tax levied on non-Muslims, to newly-conquered lands. The money derived from conquest functioned as a driving force in the growth of the caliphate. With the expectation of material reward, soldiers could earn money for their service. While the practice of dividing the spoils of war amongst the soldiers continued under 'Umar, he also started offering salaries to his troops, determining salaries according to the length of service.

The Muslims further exploited the internal divisions of targeted societies, as exemplified in Egypt, where the Coptic Christian majority, together with a large Jewish minority in Alexandria, had suffered under the rule of an oppressive Greek Orthodox Christian minority but gained autonomy and toleration within an Islamic state. And in Syria, another monophysite Christian minority called the Syrian Orthodox Church, or Jacobites, collaborated with the Muslims and hastened the collapse of the Byzantines. All these factors led the early Islamic state to expand exponentially.

In 644, an Iranian captive from the Persian campaign stabbed ‘Umar to death. His successor, **‘Uthman** (644 – 656), was an elderly man from the Umayyad Clan who won a contentious election over ‘Ali. ‘Ali possessed all of the ‘Alid bona fides. ‘Ali was not only son of Muhammad’s early protector, Abu Thalib; he was also the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. He had married Muhammad’s daughter Fatima; together, they had two sons, Hasan and Husayn. ‘Ali had also earned a well-deserved reputation as a virtuous Muslim. One of the first converts to Islam, he had journeyed with Muhammad on most of his expeditions and fought against the Meccans. Finally, ‘Ali also served as a valued advisor to the early caliphs on questions of dogma.

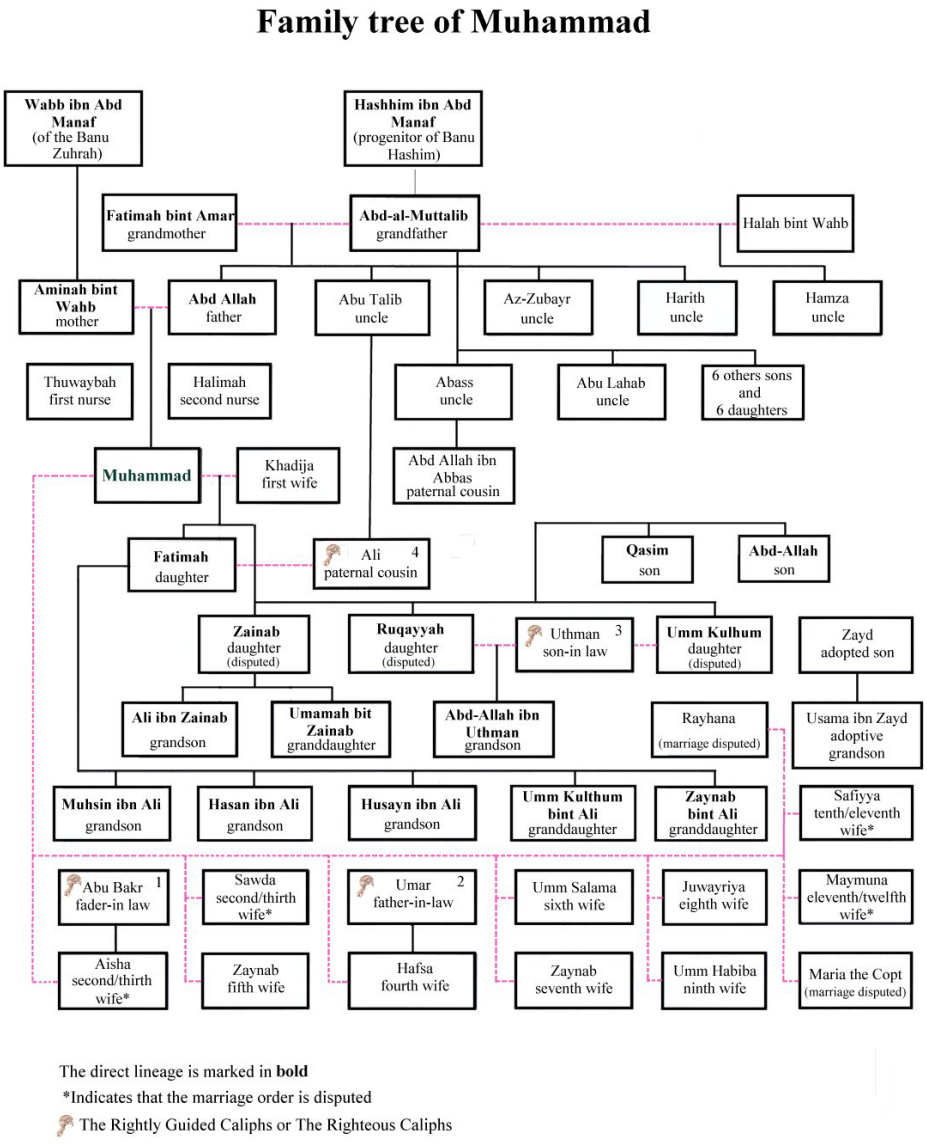


Figure **17.8.8.1**: Family Tree of the Prophet Muhammad (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Basilio” via Wikimedia Commons)

Two factions formed in the wake of questions over ‘Uthman’s succession, thus initiating the development of a division within Islam. One faction was a group of **‘Alids** who believed that ‘Ali should inherit the mantle of Islam and referred to traditions suggesting that Muhammad had proclaimed to the faithful that ‘Ali should be his successor. The *amsar* followed the ‘Alids and later adopted the Shi‘a appellation. The other faction, the Umayyads contended that the method of appointing successors should be by consensus, as was done with the first caliphs. Mostly based in Mecca, they later identified as Sunnis. Over time, these factional differences became increasingly difficult to bridge.

Although ‘Uthman, one of the Prophet’s first converts, was a pious Muslim, he was a corrupt administrator. He displayed nepotistic tendencies that gave precedence to the Meccan elite, a practice that diverged from ‘Umar’s policies of favoring soldiers who had been the first to respond to the call to action. ‘Umar’s beneficiaries had usually originated from lesser tribes, those too weak to constitute a coherent threat to the establishment; by contrast, ‘Uthman’s appointees were members of the Meccan elite who generally pursued policies benefiting the Umayyad merchants of Mecca.

Government also began to disintegrate under ‘Uthman’s rule, as opposition and instability plagued his tenure as caliph. He managed to offend three separate groups of Muslims. The first of these were the older, pious Muslims, who hailed from Medina. They resented how the hated Umayyads had taken over the same *umma* that they had previously persecuted and had once tried to destroy. Second were the Quran reciters. When ‘Uthman commissioned and authorized a single official version of the holy text, an act for which he received many accolades, the Quran reciters lost the opportunity for gainful employment. Third were a disgruntled contingent of ‘Alids who called for ‘Uthman to resign and advocated the election of ‘Ali. Their discontent culminated in 656, when resentful devotees of ‘Ali from Egypt broke into ‘Uthman’s home in Medina and assassinated him, purportedly while he was reading the Quran. They then hastily arranged for the election of ‘Ali as ‘Uthman’s successor.

Thrice rejected by the *majlis* in favor of the first three caliphs, **‘Ali** (656 – 661) reluctantly accepted the position of leader of the Islamic community. His selection represented a victory for the faction of legitimists disappointed in the earlier choice of ‘Uthman. ‘Ali assumed the role of caliph amid high expectations, for he was a pious and generous man. Yet the caliphate suffered under his rule. During this time of instability, he constantly had to suppress revolts. For example, tensions between the supporters of ‘Ali and the family of ‘Uthman eventually erupted into the first civil war in Islam. In 656, at the **Battle of the Camel**, ‘Ali engaged the combined forces of the Prophet’s favored wife, **‘A’isha**, and her associates, Talha and Zubayr, who were both relatives of ‘Uthman. Because ‘Ali had failed to bring the dead caliph’s assassins to justice; these three together demanded satisfaction for his death.

The conspirators challenged ‘Ali near the garrison city of Basra, in southern Iraq, before he had the chance to move the caliphate from Medina to the sympathetic military settlement of Kufa. A first, diplomacy seemed to prevail, as ‘Ali sought to avoid bloodshed by negotiating. He succeeded in convincing the three to lay down their arms; however, a group later known as **Kharijis** conspired to undermine their reconciliation and set fire to the tents in both camps in the dead of the night. Pandemonium ensued. Because of this single impetuous action, both parties thought the other side had flouted the agreement, committing a violation of trust. During the ensuing battle, ‘A’isha was pushed into the middle of the fray on the back of a camel, as was Arab custom. The supporters who rallied to her side were cut down, and ‘Ali emerged victorious from a very bloody battle. The repercussions of his victory reverberated across the Islamic world, as older Muslim men castigated ‘A’isha for her part in the conflict and suggested that women should not play a role in public life.



Figure **17.8.8.2**: ‘Ali and ‘A’isha at the Battle of the Camel (Public Domain; Unknown via Wikimedia Commons)

This threat was not the only one ‘Ali faced, for he also had to contend with Mu‘awiya, ‘Uthman’s cousin and former governor of Syria. Conspicuously absent from ‘Ali’s new administration, **Mu‘awiya** refused to pay homage to ‘Ali and asserted his own independence in Syria. He also echoed the accusations of ‘A’isha, Talha, and Zubayr, as members of Mu‘awiya’s Umayyad Clan had expressed dismay about the quick election of ‘Ali, and questions still lingered over the new caliph’s part in ‘Uthman’s death. ‘Ali’s failure to act against ‘Uthman’s assassins proved his culpability, Mu‘awiya and the Umayyads, and Mu‘awiya asserted the traditional Arab custom of exacting revenge on one’s enemies.

His conflict with ‘Ali culminated in 657 when they met at the **Battle of Siffin**, on the Euphrates River in northern Syria. After months of clashes, ‘Ali agreed to arbitration with Mu‘awiya. Still preferring negotiation over bloodshed, ‘Ali had been of the opinion that Muslims should never take up arms against fellow Muslims. His willingness to negotiate with Mu‘awiya, however, caused some of Ali’s own soldiers to defect and adopt the appellation of Kharijis, from *kharaja*, meaning “to depart.” The first sect in Islam, they departed from Ali because they believed that “judgement belongs to God alone” (Quran 6:57); they saw ‘Ali’s willingness to negotiate with Mu‘awiya as somehow reducing the role of God in determining a successor. In lieu of arbitration, they thought that God would determine the rightful successor by influencing the outcome on the field of battle.



Figure 17.8.8.3: Battle of Siffin, from Balami's Tarikhnama (Public Domain; Bal'ami via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate

In 661, ‘Ali suffered the same fate as his predecessor when a Khariji stabbed him to death. And, just like with ‘Uthman, the murder of ‘Ali took place during prayers. ‘Ali’s death represented a deep loss for his followers, who saw him as an advocate of an egalitarian version of Islam and a believer in a just and righteous government. His martyrdom came to be regarded as a sacrifice in the service of God and prompted his supporters to pattern themselves after their champion, who, they insisted, had developed spiritual gifts that remained virtually unattainable for others.

The ‘Alids encouraged ‘Ali’s oldest son, Hasan, to succeed his father; however, Mu‘awiya threatened the Prophet’s grandson with continued warfare and convinced him to renounce his claim to the caliphate. Mu‘awiya promised Hasan that he would not appoint an heir so that election of future caliphs would return to the *majlis*. Handsomely compensated by Mu‘awiya, Hassan subsequently retired to Mecca and took up religion. He remained there until his death in 669. With this major obstacle removed, Mu‘awiya became the fifth caliph, ending the period of the four rightly guided caliphs, also known as the Rashidun Caliphate.



Map **17.8.9.1**: Map of The Umayyad Caliphate at its Greatest Extent (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Gabagool” via Wikimedia Commons)

Mu‘awiya (661 – 680) founded the Umayyad Caliphate; the tribal *‘asabiyah* of his Umayyad Clan contributed to their ascendance. And once ensconced in power, the Umayyad Caliphate ended the election of caliphs by consensus and established instead a hereditary principle of succession. Mu‘awiya established the caliphate to Damascus, where he previously served as ‘Uthman’s governor. In Syria, Mu‘awiya reformed the bureaucracy by eventually centralizing it. Unable to rely on the Arab tribal system or peninsula traditions to administer to an ever expanding empire, he depended on related Greek merchant families for administrators and adopted the existing administrative machinery of Byzantines, including their imperial customs and bureaucratic practices.

Mu‘awiya had received much recognition for his unfaltering determination to seek retribution for ‘Uthman’s death; however, he had squandered much of that good will in harassing ‘Ali. As anti-Umayyad sentiment increased, the rift that existed between the Sunnis and Shi‘a continued to expand, for recalcitrant ‘Alids continued to harbor resentment against the Umayyads. They remembered when the ruling aristocracy of Mecca had opposed Muhammad and the Muslim community. In fact, Mu‘awiya himself had fought against Muhammad until the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, only to reverse course, convert to Islam, and become the Prophet’s secretary.

Unlike the two caliphs who preceded him, Mu‘awiya died peacefully in bed. Prior to his death, he designated his son **Yazid** (680 – 683) as his successor, thus violating his agreement with Hasan. Most notable for his well-deserved reputation as a fierce fighter, Yazid was also known for generally dissolute behavior that offended the religious sensibilities of many pious Muslims. Once ensconced as caliph, Yazid failed to secure an oath of allegiance from **Husayn**, brother of Hasan, one of the most important of Muslim leaders. Their rivalry escalated into a full-scale civil war.



Figure **17.8.9.1**: Hasan fought at the Battle of Siffin, from Bal'ami's Tarikhnama (Public Domain; Bal'ami via Wikimedia Commons)

A direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad and the younger son of the Caliph 'Ali, Husayn rejected the deal that his brother had negotiated, instead pursuing his own claim to the rightful leadership of the Islamic community. His 'Alid supporters loathed the Umayyads and believed that the caliph must be closely related to the Prophet. Husayn's refusal to recognize Yazid as the next caliph and their subsequent conflict culminated in 680 at the Battle of Karbala, located to the west of present day Baghdad. Yazid dispatched a military detachment to Iraq and overwhelmed Husayn's small band of armed followers so that many of Husayn's own men deserted him in his hour of need. The Shi'a perceived this seminal event as a turning point in their history.

Much like the loss of 'Ali, the death of Husayn shocked the incipient Shi'a community, many of whom suffered from intense guilt for failing to assist his little band. Increasing numbers of Shi'a became profoundly affected by his martyrdom, interpreting it as a sacrifice in the best interests of their community; over time, a passion narrative developed that commemorated his last hours. Through this commemoration of the Battle of Karbala on Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, they remember the terrible suffering and his untimely death and strive to experience an existential intimacy with their martyr.

Yazid had inherited an empire punctuated by civil war and rebellion. Another principle figure among those in revolt was **ibn Zubayr**, grandson of Caliph Abu Bakr. Following the death of Mu'awiya, Ibn Zubayr had sworn allegiance to Husayn. He remained in Mecca, where he stood in opposition to the Umayyads. The general unpopularity of the Umayyads advanced his cause, and many Muslims considered him the rightful caliph. Indeed, much of his support came from Muslims who rejected the idea of hereditary succession and sought a return to the election of caliphs by consensus.



Figure **17.8.9.2**: Artistic commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at the Battle of Karbala | The focus of the painting is on Husayn's half-brother 'Abbas on a white horse. (Public Domain; Abbas Al-Musavo via Wikimedia Commons)

Yazid invaded the Hijaz in order to put an end to ibn Zubayr's rebellion, but the caliph's abrupt death in 683 halted the campaign. **Marwan** (684 – 685) followed his cousin Yazid but was not universally recognized as caliph, for many considered ibn Zubayr the legitimate successor. To garner support, Marwan exploited latent tribal animosities that existed between his Kalb Tribe, also known as the Yemen, and the Qays Tribe, who supported ibn Zubayr. At the **Battle of Marj Rahit** in 684, Marwan's Kalb forces defeated the Qays, allowing him to consolidate Umayyad control over Syria and Egypt, thus shrinking ibn Zubayr's rule down to Iraq and the Hijaz. Not until 691 did **Abdul Malik** (685 – 705), heir to Marwan, recover Iraq from ibn Zubayr. In the process, he also had to pacify Khariji and Shi'a areas. Abdul Malik then dispatched General Hajjaj to the Hijaz. A brutal military leader, Hajjaj laid siege to the holy city of Mecca in 692 in order to secure the submission of ibn Zubayr's men. He then beheaded ibn Zubayr and crucified his body. Abdul Malik rewarded the brutal general for his loyal service with the governorship of Iraq, where his ruthless reputation persisted.



Figure **17.8.9.3**: The Mourning of Muharram in Iran (CC BY-SA 4.0; Payam Moein via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure **17.8.9.4**: Abdul Malik on One of the New Coins (CC BY-SA 3.0; World Imaging via Wikimedia Commons)

Once he had assumed the throne, Abdul Malik promoted the Arabization of the caliphate. He rejected the use of Greek, Persian, Coptic, or Aramaic in government, decreeing that all bureaucracy had to be only in Arabic. Non-Arab administrators had to learn Arabic in order to keep their government jobs. Their integration did not lead to the complete Arabization of Umayyad society that Abdul Malik envisioned, however, and the spread of Arabic was not as great as the spread of Islam. Many Muslims continued to speak Berber, Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian. Although a separate process, Arabization only accompanied Islamization.

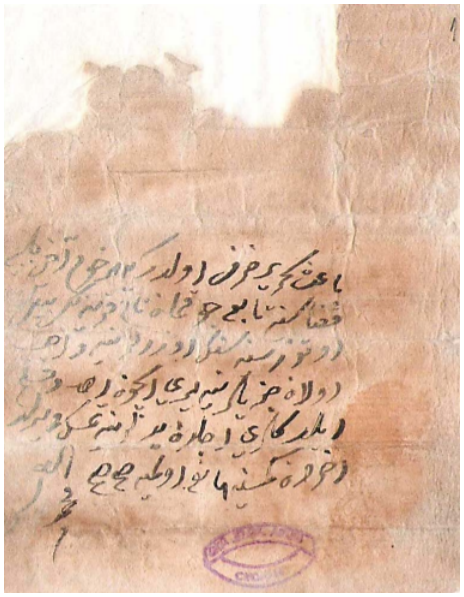


Figure **17.8.9.5**: Early Ottoman Jizya Document (CC BY-SA 3.0; World Imaging via Wikimedia Commons)

Abdul Malik also sought to Islamize the caliphate. First, he discontinued the earlier Byzantine coinage and created the first Islamic currency. Then he instituted a tax code based on the principles of Islam. Caliphs levied an additional tax on non-Muslims, known as the ***jizya***, as was customary in Islam. Christians and Jews in conquered lands also paid a property tax called ***kharaj***. By converting to Islam, one could avoid paying the *jizya* and *kharaj* altogether. Most important for ordinary citizens was the fact that Muslims bore lower tax rates than non-Muslims. As one could imagine, the thrust for conversion became primarily economic. Although the process of Islamization was relatively peaceful and gradual, Islam did become the dominant religion of the region. And the parallel processes of Arabization and Islamization helped to reestablish centralized rule after the second civil war.

Not all of Abdul Malik's reforms adhered to the egalitarian principles set forth in Islam. Arab tribal elites did not want to recognize the ***mawali***, non-Arab Muslims, as social equals, so did not afford them the same rights as Arab Muslims. However, the emerging

power and influence of the *mawali* was apparent. They had become the intellectual elite of society and were the bureaucrats and commercial leaders of the *umma*. Nevertheless, they faced social discrimination. For example, Umayyad caliphs taxed the *mawali* as if they were non-Muslims. This inequitable practice became a social problem for the Umayyads, for it stood in stark relief against the values of justice and equality that had originally compelled them to convert.

An extremely devout and pious man, the Caliph **'Umar II** (r. 717 – 720) upended the Umayyad moral order. He considered it immoral to show prejudice against the *mawali* and to favor the Arabs, so he attempted to resolve the lingering hostilities of the *mawali* by advocating the equality of all Muslims. 'Umar II declared an end to the practice of taxing the *mawali* like the Christians and Jews. His advisors warned him against this change because it precipitated numerous conversions of non-Muslims, so he decreased military expenditures to compensate for an expected drop in revenue. His reforms might have ended the official discrimination against the *mawali*, but they alienated the Umayyad privileged class, who paid a servant to poison 'Umar II to death in 720.

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17.8.10: The 'Abbasid Caliphate

For many Muslims, ‘Umar II’s reforms had come too late. The Umayyads had already managed to alienate three important groups of Muslims, Kharijis, the mawali, and the Shi‘a, whose combined power and influence were coopted by the ‘Abbasids and threatened the internal security of the caliphate. Kharijis eschewed disputes over lineage and advocated a more egalitarian brand of Islam than the Sunni Umayyads. They believed that any Muslim could be the rightful heir to the mantle of the Prophet, so long as that person rigorously adhered to the examples set forth in the Sunna. Kharijis thought that caliphs who diverged from the Prophet’s example should be overthrown, as evidenced by their assassination of the Caliph ‘Ali. Second, Umayyad authorities had enacted punitive measures against the mawali, mostly Persians, but also Kurds and Turks. They treated them like second-class citizens, no different than the People of the Book. Finally, it angered most of the Shi‘a that the Umayyads could not trace their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad. They also blamed the Umayyads for the death of their martyr Husayn. The ‘Abbasids collaborated with these disaffected groups to incite unrest and rebellion. They particularly cultivated Shi‘a anti-Umayyad sentiment, emphasizing their own connection to the Prophet; indeed, the ‘Abbasids traced their ancestry to Muhammad’s uncle ‘Abbas and the Hashimite Clan. They also vaguely promised to adopt Shi‘a Islam once in power. Together, these three groups formed a constituency that campaigned on behalf of the ‘Abbasids.



Map **17.8.10.1**: The ‘Abbasid Caliphate at its Greatest Extent, c. 850 CE (CC BY 3.0; User “Gabagool” via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure **17.8.10.1**: Abu al-‘Abbas al-Saffah is proclaimed the first ‘Abbasid Caliph, from Balami’s Tarikhnama (Public Domain; Bal’ami via Wikimedia Commons)

A secretive family, ‘Abbasids bided their time until the opportune moment to rebel against the Umayyad Caliphate. In 743, the ‘Abbasids began their revolution in remote Khorasan, a region in eastern Persia, just as the Umayyads were contending with not

only revolts but also the inopportune death of the Caliph Hisham. In that moment of Umayyad disorder, the ‘Abbasids dispatched Abu Muslim, a Persian general, to Khorasan to start the revolution. Abu Muslim’s early victories against the Umayyads allowed **Abu al-‘Abbas**, leader of the ‘Abbasid dynasty, to enter the sympathetic city of Kufa in 748. Together, Abu Muslim and Abu al-‘Abbas, who adopted the honorific of as-Saffah, or “the generous,” confronted the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II in 750, at the Battle of the Zab, in modern day Iraq. Sensing defeat, Marwan II fled, but his pursuers eventually caught and killed him in Egypt. As-Saffah captured the Umayyad capital of Damascus shortly thereafter. The ‘Abbasids attempted to eliminate the entire house of the Umayyads so that not one remained to come forth and rise up against them, but one, ‘Abd al-Rahman, escaped eminent death and fled to Egypt. The only member of the family to abscond from certain demise, ‘Abd al-Rahman fled across North Africa to Spain, where he recreated a Spanish Muslim dynasty in a parallel fashion to the Umayyad dynasty in Syria. Under the Umayyads, Spain became the wealthiest and most developed part of Europe (see Chapter Seven). In fact, it was through Islamic Spain that ancient Greek learning entered Europe.

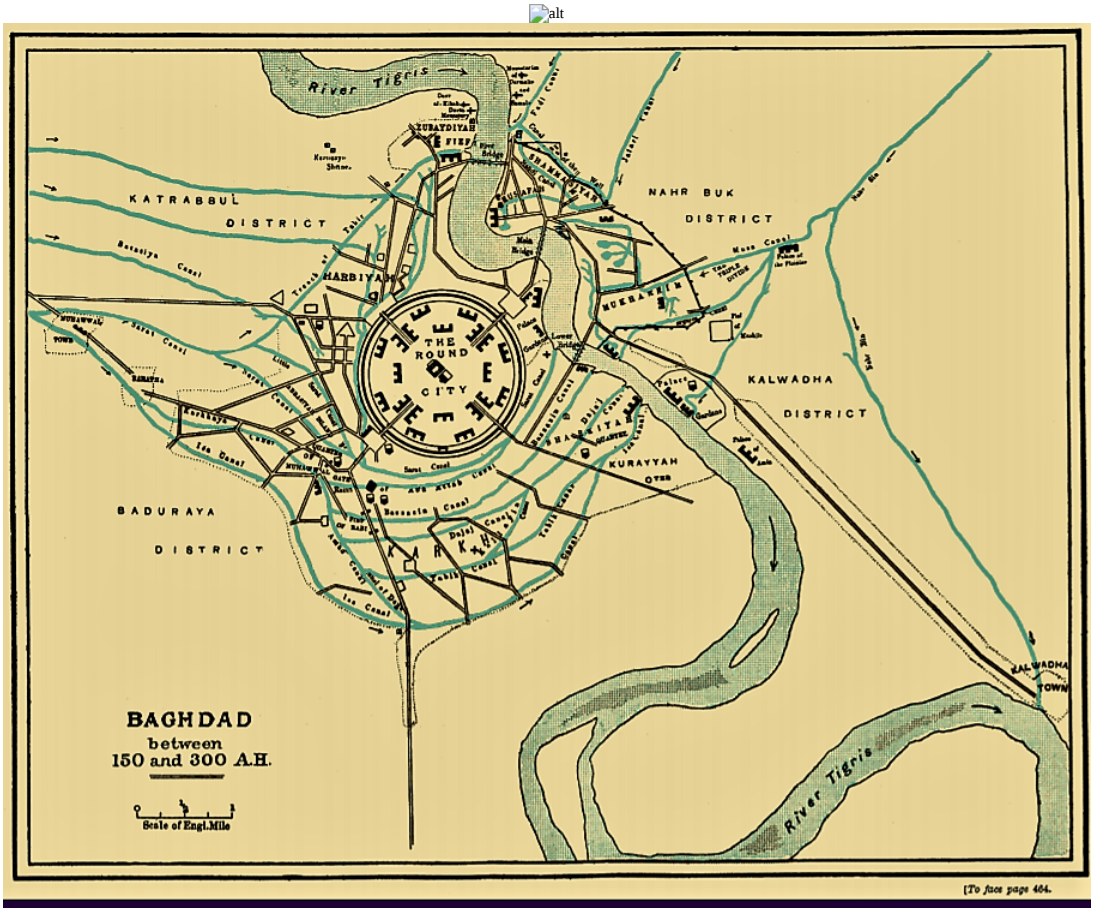
The change from the Umayyad’s Arab tribal aristocracy to a more egalitarian government, one based on the doctrines of Islam, under the ‘Abbasids, corresponds to Ibn Khaldun’s Cyclical Theory of History. The ‘Abbasids officially advocated Sunni orthodoxy and severed their relationship of convenience with the Shi‘a. They even went so far as to assassinate many Shi‘a leaders, whom they regarded as potential threats to their rule. To escape ‘Abbasid persecution and find safety and security, many Shi‘a scattered to the edges of the empire. While the Shi‘a might have been disappointed with the ‘Abbasids for refusing to advocate Shi‘a Islam, most Muslims welcomed the ‘Abbasid’s arrival. They had justified their revolt against the corrupt Umayyads because the latter had digressed from the core principles of Islam. As standard bearers of the Prophet’s own family, the ‘Abbasids were publicly pious, even digging wells and providing protection along hajj routes.

Caliph al-Mansur (754 – 775) abandoned the Umayyad capital of Damascus and moved the caliphate close to the old Persian capital of Ctesiphon. Construction of the new city of Baghdad began in 762. Situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Diyala rivers, it boasted a prime location that provided access to the sea with enough distance from the coast to offer safety from pirates. Modeled after circular Persian cities, Baghdad rapidly escaped its confines and expanded into its environs. Quickly eclipsing Chang’an, it became the largest city in the world, with over half a million inhabitants. In effect, Baghdad became a public works project, employing 100,000 citizens and stimulating the economy. Al-Mansur’s newly-founded city proudly displayed lavish ‘Abbasid family residences and grandiose public buildings. It even had working sewers, which dumped raw sewage into the nearby canals and rivers.

Prominently featured in *One Thousand and One Nights*, **Harun al-Rashid** (789 – 809) represented the climax of ‘Abbasid rulers; as such, he improved upon the work his predecessors had begun. For example, Harun furthered Baghdad’s development into a major economic center by encouraging trade along the Silk Road and through the waters of the Indian Ocean. He also made marginal agricultural land more productive, taking advantage of technological advances in irrigation to cultivate borrowed crops like rice, cotton, and sugar from India, as well as citrus fruits from China.

Harun al-Rashid’s reign coincided with the so-called Golden Age of Islam when Baghdad developed into a preeminent city of scholarship. He began construction of the ***Bayt al-Hikmah*** (House of Wisdom), the foremost intellectual center in the Islamic world. The complex boasted of several schools, astronomical observatories, and even a giant library, where scholars translated scientific and philosophical works from neighboring civilizations, including works from Persian, Hindi, Chinese, and Greek.

As a result of this move from Damascus to Baghdad, Persia increasingly influenced the Islamic world, with a synthesis of Arab and Persian culture beginning under the ‘Abbasids. For instance, the Persian Sibawayah (d. c. 793) responded to the need for non-Arab Muslims to understand the Quran by systematizing the first Arabic grammar, titled *al-Kitab*. The greatest poet of the period, Abu Nuwas (d. c. 813), was of mixed parentage, Arab and Iranian. The avant-garde themes of his poems often emphasized dissolute behavior. Although ibn Ishaq (d.768), a historian of sorts, was born in Medina, he relocated to Baghdad, where he too came under the influence of Persian culture. At the behest of Caliph al-Mansur, he composed the first authoritative biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Another important Persian scholar, al-Tabari (d. 923) wrote the *History of Prophets and Kings*, a great resource on early Islamic history.



Map **17.8.10.2**: Map of Baghdad between 767 and 912 CE (CC BY 3.0; William Muir via Wikimedia Commons)

Inheritors of Sasanian court traditions that emphasized ceremony, the ‘Abbasids slowly distanced themselves from their subjects. The harem embodied this spatial separation. A forbidden place, the caliph’s family made the harem their personal residence. Caliphs controlled the empire through family, solidifying political alliances by marrying many powerful women.



Figure **17.8.10.2**: John the Grammarian as Ambassador Before Theophilos and Mamun | The Embassy of John the Grammarian in 829, between the Byzantine emperor Theophilos on the right and the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun on the left. (Public Domain; Unknown via Wikimedia Commons)

The harem bestowed power to women, and they played an important role in influencing ‘Abbasid politics, particularly in terms of questions over succession. In the late ‘Abbasid period, various women selected and trained the successors. Young men who were to rule resided in the harem, and much scheming over which son the caliph preferred occurred there. The mother of the caliph, however, dominated internal politics of the space. Harun’s mother played a significant role in his reign, for example. The second

most powerful woman in the household was the mother of the heir apparent. She could be any woman, even a concubine, for young, beautiful women were highly sought after at a time when the harem became more important under the ‘Abbasids.

Riven apart by palace intrigue, the ‘Abbasid Caliphate eventually succumbed to internecine warfare. In fact, Harun al-Rashid himself divided the caliphate when he designated his eldest son, al-Amin, as his heir, for he had already bequeathed the province of Khorasan to his younger son, al-Ma’mun. Upon their father’s death in 809, al-Amin demanded his brother’s territory and obeisance. Of course, al-Ma’mun refused, and a catastrophic civil war ensued. In 812, alMa’mun’s army, under the command of his Persian general, Tahir, laid siege to Baghdad. Tahir caught al-Amin attempting to escape from the city and decapitated him. Al-Ma’mun succeeded his brother as caliph, but remained in Merv, his former capital. He ultimately relocated to Baghdad in 819, by which time, years of sporadic violence and lawlessness had severely damaged the city.

Al-Ma’mun (r.813 – 833) continued his father’s tradition of sponsoring scholarship. He completed the *Bayt al-Hikmah* that his father had begun. He also expressed a love for philosophical and theological debate and encouraged the Islamic doctrine known as the **Mu‘tazila**, a rationalist formulation of Islam that stressed free will over divine predestination. Influenced by Aristotelian thought, the Mu‘tazila attempted to solve the theological question of evil. It asserted that human reason alone could inform proper behavior. Condemned as a heresy for incorporating extra Islamic patterns of thought into their belief system, many Muslims concluded that the Mu‘tazila’s rationalism exceeded the holy doctrines of Islam.

The ‘Abbasids began their long, slow decline under al-Ma’mun, who was the first caliph to confer greater freedom upon his emirs, or provincial governors, initiating a process of decentralization that eventually unleashed uncontrollable centrifugal forces. This process began when al-Ma’mun first awarded his general Tahir with the governorship of Khorasan, where Tahir raised his own revenue and directed his own affairs. The Tahirid dynasty dominated the politics of the region, resisting Abbasid attempts to restrain them. From Khorasan, Tahir’s family represented an existential threat to the caliphate.

Internal problems continued under al-Mu‘tasim (833 – 842), the successor to al-Ma’mun, who replaced undependable tribal armies with ***mamluks***. The *mamluks* played an increasingly important role in the fate of the caliphate. They were part of an elite slave system that imported young boys from various backgrounds, though usually Turkic, and trained them in the military arts. Because the enslavement of Muslims was not permitted in Islam, caliphs obtained slaves by raiding outside of the Islamic world or by trading for them. Indoctrinated at a young age, *mamluks* remained loyal to their leaders, serving as their personal bodyguard. Once emancipated, however, they entered into a contractual relationship with their former masters and benefited from certain property and marriage rights. Although often portrayed as slaves in the popular imagination, *mamluks* actually formed a proud caste of soldiers who considered themselves superior to the rest of society. As the elite bodyguards to the caliph, they supplanted the traditional ethnic hierarchy of the ‘Abbasids, a shift which led to much class conflict often resulting in unrest and civil disturbances. In order to remove the *mamluks* from the volatile situation in Baghdad, the caliph moved the capital to Samarra, some 60 miles to the north, a measure that only delayed the inevitable, as subsequent caliphs could not control the rising tensions that resulted in social instability and contributed to the decentralization and fragmentation of the empire.



Figure 17.8.10.3: Mamluk Lancers on Horseback (Public Domain; Nick Michael via Wikimedia Commons)

The transition from tribal armies to *mamluks* had profound repercussions for the ‘Abbasids. *Mamluks* like **Ahmad ibn Tulun** (835 – 884), a slave from Circassia, most exemplified this pattern of decentralization and fragmentation that had disastrous consequences for the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. He had been sent by the ‘Abbasids to Egypt in order to restructure and strengthen it on their behalf. An intellectual and religious person, ibn Tulun founded schools, hospitals, and mosques in Egypt, the most famous being the eponymous ibn Tulun Mosque. However, he saw weakness back in Baghdad, as the ‘Abbasids suffered from instability, including palace intrigue, disorderly *mamluks*, and revolts like the Zanj Rebellion, a slave rebellion that threatened the fate of the caliphate. The ‘Abbasids could not control ibn Tulun, and, as the caliphate broke down, he managed to secure almost complete autonomy from Baghdad. By the end of his reign, he was so independent that he kept his own tax revenue and raised his own *mamluk* army, for he, too, depended militarily and politically on his loyal *mamluks* to stay in power.



Figure 17.8.10.4: The Ibn Tulun Mosque, Cairo, Egypt (CC BY-SA 3.0; Berthol Werner via Wikimedia Commons)

Ibn Tulun’s autonomy in Egypt portended the decline of the ‘Abbasids, whose real authority came to an end in 945. The Buyids, an Iranian dynasty, overthrew the ‘Abbasids and relegated them to the status of mere religious figureheads; the caliphate continued in

name only. Following the collapse of the Abbasids, the centralization and political unity of the lands formerly under their control broke down; however, economic, cultural, and religious unity remained.

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17.8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate

While Egypt grew increasingly independent of Baghdad under the Tulunids, the rule of the ‘Abbasids over their broad empire generally declined. From this vacuum of power, the Fatimids (910 – 1171) emerged. Members of the Isma‘ili sect of Shi‘a Islam, the Fatimids traced their genealogy to the relationship between Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, and ‘Ali. **Isma‘ilis** believe that the divinely ordained spiritual leadership of the Islamic community, or caliphate, descended from ‘Ali down to Isma‘il, the son of Jafar al-Sadiq. They refused to recognize the legitimacy of the ‘Abbasids and sought to convert the masses of Sunnis to their own schismatic brand of Islam. To do so, Isma‘ili missionaries spread out to the far flung fringes of the empire and preached a religious revolution. These emissaries achieved their greatest success in the North African Maghreb.



Map **17.8.11.1**: Map of the Fatimid Caliphate, 969 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Gabagool” via Wikimedia Commons)

‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimids, proclaimed himself the *mahdi*, the precursor to the final judgement, representing an ideology that compelled people to change. Hounded by ‘Abbasid agents of persecution who sought to uphold Sunni orthodoxy, he fled from his family’s homeland in Syria and, disguised as an ordinary merchant, traveled westward through the Maghreb to Sijilmasa, where he went into hiding. In 909, local Isma‘ili missionaries rescued him from Sijilmasa. By 920, he had consolidated power and made his capital at Mahdiya, located in present day Tunisia. As the *mahdi* and a catalyst for change, he converted tribal troops and inspired them to fight on his behalf. ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi endowed the Fatimids with a new *‘asabiyah*, providing them with the unity of purpose necessary to defeat the ‘Abbasids in North Africa. Within forty years, ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi had conquered the whole of Northwest Africa. He aimed his expansion at Egypt but failed to seize it. His grandson, al-Mu‘izz, however, succeeded in this aim.

Al-Mu‘izz (953 – 975) used a combination of *mamluk* and tribal armies to capture Egypt in 969. Rather than contend with older, possibly rebellious cities like Alexandria, al-Mu‘izz founded Cairo, the City of the Conqueror. He developed Cairo into the preeminent cultural and economic center of the Islamic world, taking over from a Baghdad in decline. Al-Mu‘izz established **al-Azhar**, the largest and most famous mosque in Egypt, which also served as a religious center that focused on the theological development of Shi‘a Islam. Once in power, the Fatimids changed the official state religion of Egypt from Sunni orthodoxy to Shi‘a heterodoxy, though the majority of the population in Egypt remained Sunni Muslims.

Al-Hakim (991 – 1021) ascended to the throne of his father, al-‘Aziz, at the age of eleven. As a young man, he quickly displayed a pattern of unpredictable behavior. Just four years after taking command of the empire, he had his regent, the eunuch Barjawan, murdered. Additionally, al-Hakim earned a place in infamy by targeting Christians and Jews, worsening the generally amiable relations with the People of the Book that the Fatimids had previously enjoyed. For instance, in 1004, al-Hakim prohibited Christians from celebrating Epiphany and Easter. He also forbad the use of wine, a prohibition which caused religious difficulties for Christians and Jews alike. In 1005, al-Hakim decreed the Law of Differentiation, requiring all of the People of the Book to prominently display religious icons indicating their particular religious adherence. In 1009, he became infuriated by some of the Orthodox Church’s religious practices and consequently razed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in response. A few years later, he ordered the destruction of thousands of churches and synagogues in Palestine. Al-Hakim even made Western pilgrimage to the Holy Land difficult. During this period, pilgrimages to Palestine had been increasing, and many pilgrims returned home

complaining of Muslim treatment of Christians in the Holy Land. His behavior towards Christians elicited a strong Western reaction, for Europeans used his conduct as a way to encourage support for the Crusades.



Figure **17.8.11.1**: The Al-Azhar (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Buyoof” via Wikimedia Commons)

Around the year 1010, **Muhammad adDarazi**, an Isma‘ili preacher, began teaching that al-Hakim was a manifestation of God. Ad-Darazi believed that universal rationality was made incarnate in the person of Adam and then passed down through the prophets to the family of ‘Ali and his descendants, including the Fatimids. His doctrines eventually spread to the Levant, where these ideas found reception amongst the Druze, a cognate of Darazi, although they viewed Ad-Darazi as a heretic. A follower of Isma‘ilism, al-Hakim did not want to be associated with ad-Darazi and his teachings, so he had the preacher executed in 1018.



Figure **17.8.11.2**: Al-Hakim (Public Domain; Al-Ahram via Wikimedia Commons)

Al-Hakim continued his tendency to display erratic behavior when he walked out into the desert in 1021 and never returned. While his disappearance has remained a mystery for the ages, those who worshiped the caliph believe that he went into Occultation, later to return as the messianic *mahdi*.

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17.8.12: The Crusades

In 1071, the Great Seljuq Empire, under the leadership of Alp Arslan, defeated the Byzantines at the **Battle of Manzikert**, near Lake Van, taking the Eastern Roman Emperor, Romanus I, prisoner in the process. This defeat was crushing for the Byzantines, allowing waves of Turkmen *ghazis*, or raiders, to press deep into the heartland of Anatolia, eventually establishing the Sultanate of Rum, with its capital at Nicaea. A series of weak emperors succeeded Romanus I with **Alexios Komnenos** (1081 – 1108) eventually ascending to the throne ten years later. As the new emperor, he made peace with the Seljuqs of Rum, and the two states eventually adopted cordial relations. They began to trade with each other and even lent one another military support when needed. Alexius needed this military support in order to secure his borders from groups of Turkic marauders. To that end, he appealed to **Pope Urban II** (1088 – 1099) for help recruiting mercenary soldiers, namely Frankish knights. An effective cavalry, the Frankish knights had earned an impressive reputation for how they acquitted themselves on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, European leaders had been searching for creative ways of expelling society's troublemakers and were not averse to sending their soldiers abroad, for the region was suffering from overpopulation and endemic violence. They believed that it was better for the martial groups in their society to fight against the Muslims than amongst themselves. In this way, the Crusades externalized continental violence and promoted European peace.

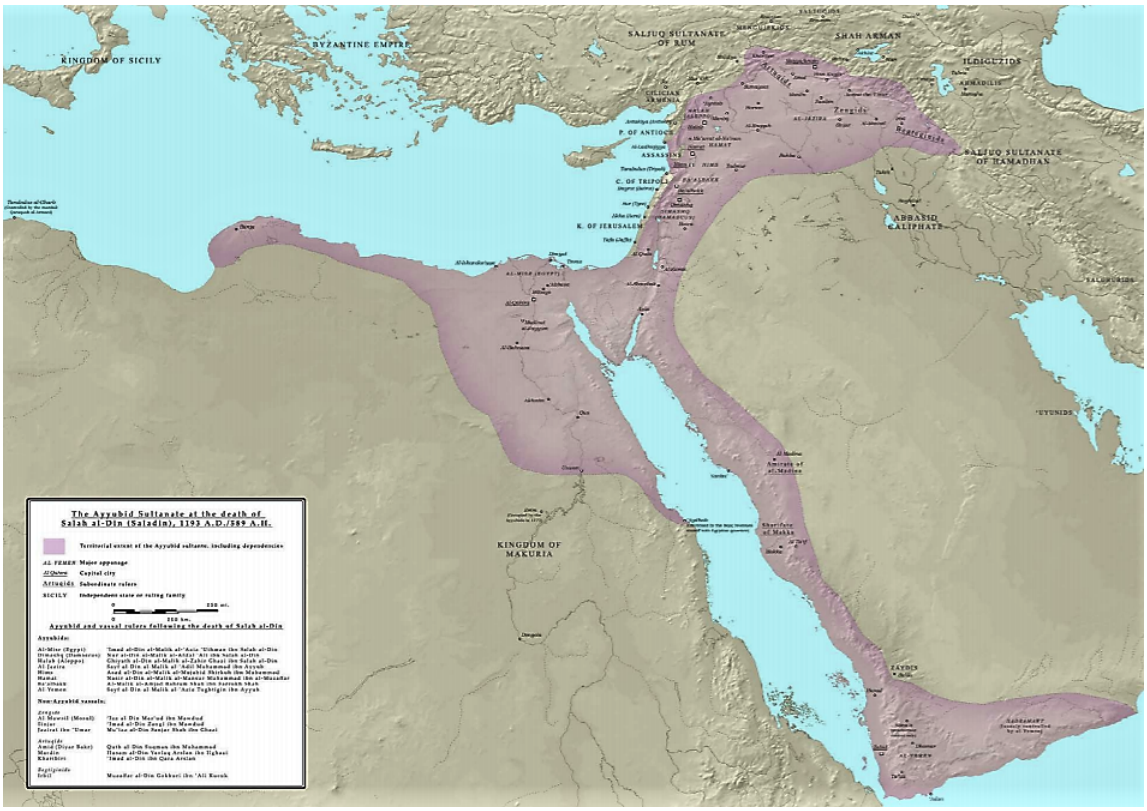
In 1095, Urban II launched the first crusade from Clermont, a city in southern France. He had benefited from recent church reforms, renewed religious fervor, and a concomitant increase in papal power. While traveling through France, he made an argument for the recovery of the Holy Land: because it belonged to Jesus, it should be controlled by his followers. He also appealed to the greatness of the Franks, promising potential pilgrims a land flowing with milk, honey, and riches. And he offered them well-designed spiritual rewards. For example, salvation applied to those who died on campaign, and anyone who invested in a crusade secured themselves a place in heaven.

The Crusades started in 1096 and were part of a larger process whereby Muslims ceded territory to non-Muslims, sometimes permanently. Provoked by al-Hakim's treatment of Christians in the Holy Land, as well as the Turkic invasion of Anatolia, Europeans commenced several centuries' worth of armed crusades against the Muslim states of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Save for the first crusade, in which the Christians established the Crusader states of Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli, and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, all of their campaigns ended in disaster. In fact, they were either looting expeditions or responses to the loss of Crusader states to Muslims. The success that the Latin knights did enjoy related to not only the political fragmentation of the Seljuqs in the eastern Mediterranean, but also the general disinterest of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, which had been dealing with both the repercussions of a religious schism and the consequences of famine and plague. Slow to respond to the challenge posed by the Christians, the Fatimids watched the Crusaders from afar with indifference.

The Muslim counterattack eventually came under the direction of **Salah al-Din** (Saladin) (d. 1193), a unifier of various Muslim factions in the eastern Mediterranean. An ethnic Kurd, he hailed from a family of soldiers of fortune in the employ of the Zengid Dynasty's Nur al-Din, a vassal of the Seljuq Turks. Salah al-Din set off in his twenties to fight battles for his uncle, Shirkuh, a Zengid general. A dynamic leader and tactician, he helped his uncle dispatch with the Fatimid opposition in Egypt and solidified Nur al-Din's rule there. His uncle dying soon thereafter, Salah al-Din eventually became the vizier, or senior minister, to Nur al-Din in 1169. For five years, Salah al-Din ruled Egypt on behalf of Nur al-Din. Then Nur al-Din died in Damascus in 1174, leaving no clear successor.

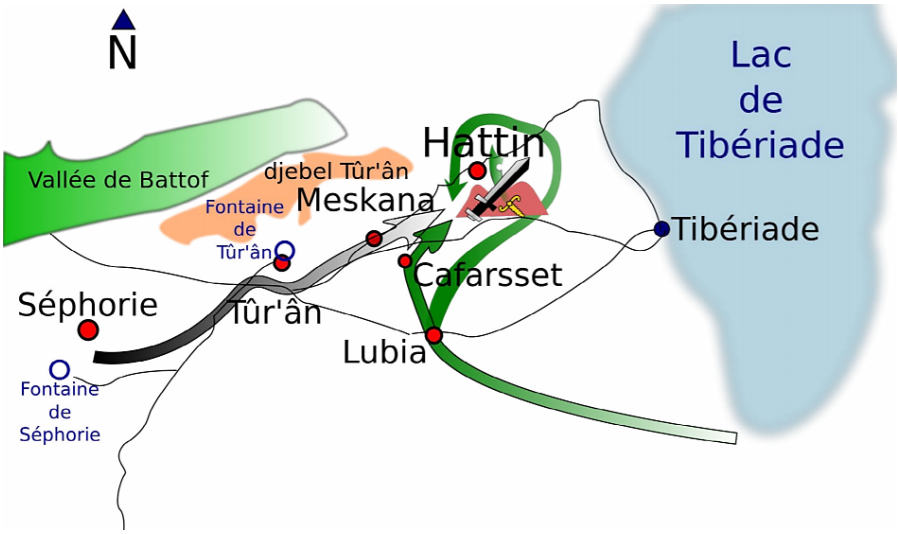
17.8.12.1: The Ayyubid Sultanate

In the absence of a formal heir to Nur al-Din, Salah al-Din established the Ayyubid Dynasty (1171 – 1260), named after his father, Ayyub, a provincial governor for the Zengid Dynasty, a family of Oghuz Turks who served as vassals of the Seljuq Empire. Once in power, Salah al-Din established a Sunni government and insisted that the mosque of al-Azhar preach his brand of Islam. He used the concept of *jihad* to unify the Middle East under the banner of Islam in order to defeat the Christians, but he did not principally direct jihad towards them. A champion of Sunni Islam, he believed that his religion was being threatened mainly from within by the Shi'a. Like most of their predecessors, the Ayyubids also benefited from tribal 'asabiyah, or dynastic consensus. Ayyubid '*asabiyah* included a Kurdish heritage, as well as a strong desire to return to Sunni orthodoxy. It was as champions of Sunni Islam that they purposely recruited leading Muslim scholars from abroad, ultimately culminating in Egypt becoming the preeminent state in the Islamic world.



Map **17.8.12.1**: Map of The Ayyubid Sultanate, 1193 CE (CC BY-SA 4.0; User “Ro4444” via Wikimedia Commons)

Initially, Salah al-Din displayed no particular interest in the Crusader states. He had clashed with the Crusaders, and King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem; also, Raynald de Châtillon even had handed him a rare defeat at the Battle of Montgisard in 1177. But the Crusaders ultimately brokered an armistice with Salah al-Din. Eventually, Raynald broke their truce when he started attacking Muslim pilgrims and trade caravans in the 1180s. Ensuing skirmishes between the forces of Salah al-Din and Guy de Lusignan, the new King of Jerusalem, presaged a forthcoming battle. In 1187, the two sides met near Tiberias, in modern day Israel. Salah al-Din intentionally attacked the fortress of Tiberius in order to lure the Crusaders away from their well-watered stronghold. His plan worked, and the Christians quickly ran out of water. On the night before the battle, Salah al-Din set brush fires to exacerbate their thirst. He coerced the parched Latin Knights down through the Horns of Hattin towards the cool waters of Lake Tiberius. Salah al-Din bottlenecked the Crusader forces, with the double hill of Hattin acting as a choke point.



Map **17.8.12.2**: Map of the Battle of Hattin (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Benherz” via Wikimedia Commons)

The **Battle of Hattin** represented a smashing victory for Salah al-Din and a major loss for the Crusaders. Tradition dictated that Salah al-Din hold most of the leaders for ransom. Unlike the Crusaders, he treated the defenders of cities with understanding. He showed tolerance of minorities, and even established a committee to partition Jerusalem amongst all the interested religious groups. In this way, he proved his moral superiority to the Crusaders.

With most of their important leaders either killed in battle or captured, no unified Christian leadership remained to fight against Salah al-Din. Deprived of the backbone of their organization, the Crusaders were left with only a few defenseless fortresses along the coast. Salah al-Din pressed his advantage. Increasingly isolated and relying on ever dwindling numbers of Latin Christians willing to remain permanently in the Holy Land, the Latin Crusaders were eventually expelled from the region in 1291.

Although Salah al-Din had maintained direct control over Egypt, he intentionally distributed control over wide swaths of the empire to loyal vassals and family members, whose governance became increasingly autonomous from Cairo. Salah al-Din's sons and grandsons, who did not have the same ability as their forefather, had trouble managing an increasingly decentralized empire. Widespread *mamluk* factionalism and family disputes over the control of territory contributed to the weakening of the sultanate. In this vacuum of power, the mamluks came to the fore.

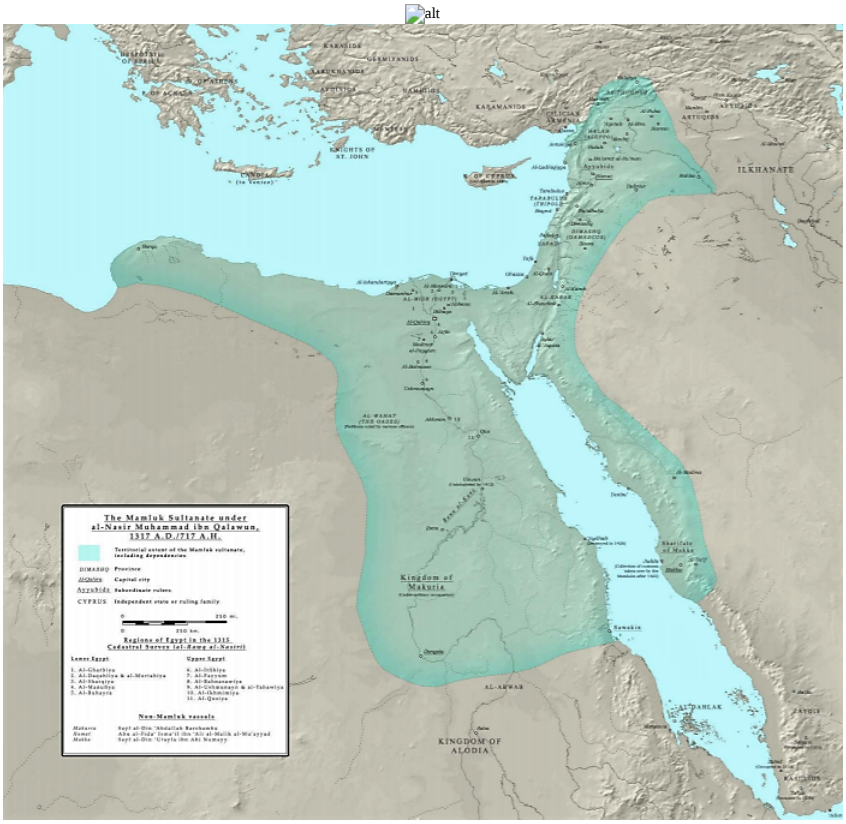
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17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate

The year was 1249, and Louis IX's seventh crusade had just gotten underway when as-Salih, the last Ayyubid ruler, took to his deathbed. Under the eminent threat of a Crusader invasion, as-Salih's wife, **Shajar al-Durr**, a Turkish concubine, agreed to take over the reins of government until her son, Turanshah, could assert himself. But he had never truly gained the trust of his father, and a cabal of *mamluks* loyal to as-Salih murdered Turanshah. They then raised Shajar al-Durr to the throne. Her rule resulted in much controversy and suffered from many internal problems. According to tradition, she sought recognition as sultana from the figurehead 'Abbasid Caliph, but he refused to pay homage to her. The *mamluks* responded by installing into power one of their own, a certain **Aybak**. He married Shajar al-Durr, and she abdicated the throne. The most powerful *mamluk* in Egypt, Aybak placated some of the opposition to Shajar al-Durr's rule and also dealt with Louis IX's crusade to Egypt. While *mamluks* did not possess a tribal *'asabiyah* in the traditional sense, they did constitute a proud caste of elite warriors who had an exaggerated sense of group solidarity. As a social group, their former status as slaves provided them with enough group cohesion to overthrow the Ayyubids.

Shajar al-Durr remained unsatisfied in her new role, however. In fact, she saw herself as another Cleopatra and wanted to rule in her own right. She also feared the consequences of Aybak's potential marriage alliance with the daughter of the Ayyubid Emir of Mosul. In 1257, Shajar al-Durr had Aybak strangled and claimed that he had died a natural death. However, **Qutuz**, a leading *mamluk*, did not believe her story. Under duress, her servants confessed to the murder. Qutuz arrested Shajar al-Durr and imprisoned her in the Red Tower. Not long thereafter, Aybak's fifteen year old son, al-Mansur 'Ali, had Shajar al-Durr stripped and beaten to death. He reigned as sultan for two years until Qutuz deposed him, as he thought the sultanate needed a strong and capable ruler to deal with the looming Mongol threat.



Map **17.8.13.1**: Map of the Mamluk Sultanate, 1317 CE (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Ro4444" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Mamluk Sultanate appeared to be on a collision course with Hulagu's Ilkhanate, one of Mongol Empire's four khanates, whose forces were advancing through the Mamluk-held Levant. Then in the summer of 1260, the Great Khan Möngke died and Hulagu returned home with the bulk of his forces to participate in the required khuriltai, or Mongol assembly, perhaps expecting to be elected the next Great Khan. Hulagu left his general Kitbuqa behind with a smaller army to fight the Mamluks. In July of that year, a confrontation took place at **Ayn Jalut**, near Lake Tiberias. During the ensuing battle, the Mamluk General Baybars drew out the

Mongols with a feigned retreat. Hiding behind a hill, Aybak's *mamluk* heavy cavalrymen ambushed the unsuspecting Mongols and defeated them in close combat, securing a rare victory over the Mongols. The Mamluks captured and executed Kitbuqa, and forced the remnants of the Mongol forces to retreat.

Just days after their signal victory over the Mongols, **Baybars** (1260 – 1277) murdered Qutuz, continuing a pattern of rule in which only the strongest Mamluk rulers could survive. Too clever to be deposed, Baybars developed a strong military oligarchy that rested on the iqta' system, a centralized system of land tenure based on money that, by the thirteenth century, had been perfected in Egypt. Under the iqta' system, individual *mamluks* received a percentage of profit from the sale of crops for their upkeep. Baybars owned all of the land, so *mamluks* only received the right to collect taxes from the land, a right akin to usufruct in feudal Europe.

Baybars relocated the 'Abbasid Caliph from Baghdad to Cairo in order to present a veneer of legitimacy to *mamluk* rule. Since the Ptolemys, Egypt had been ruled by foreigners. In fact, the only impact native-born Egyptians had was in religion. The Mamluk Sultanate practiced Sunni Islam and emphasized Sufism. Sufis believed that traditional, orthodox Islam lacked compassion, and their Sufism helped conversion efforts because of its emphasis on love and making a closer connection to God, as opposed to a strict adherence to the dictates of the Quran. Sufis desired something more from religion and emphasized integrating the reality of God into man. Sufis thought that they could achieve a union with God based on love, a notion that contrasted sharply with the general perception of orthodox Islam which denied believers a direct experience to God because Muhammad represented the Seal of the Prophets and all understanding of God came through the prophet. They set up new religious schools to pass on this Sufism. These *madrasa* consisted of a complex, with a mosque, school, hospital, and water supply for each community.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the decline of the Mamluk Empire. Several internal and external factors help explain their decline. Domestically, the Black Death ravaged Egypt for years. In fact, it continued in North Africa longer than it did in Europe. This plague caused economic disruption in the sultanate. With fewer people available, labor, or human capital, became much more expensive. Further, plague-related inflation destabilized the economy, as the value of goods and services also rose. The *mamluks* responded to inflationary pressures by increasing taxes, but their revenue from those taxes actually decreased. This decrease made it difficult for the *mamluks* to maintain their irrigation networks and, without irrigation, agricultural productivity decreased.

Externally, plague was not the only cause of inflation. Columbus's discovery of the New World began a process in which gold began filtering through Europe and into North Africa. Egypt's weak economy could not absorb this massive influx of money, thus causing more inflation. New trade routes, like the one pioneered by Vasco de Gama, offered Europeans direct sea routes to Asia. No longer was Egypt the middleman for long-distance trade between Europe and Asia, thereby losing out on valuable revenue from tariffs. The profits from commerce transferred to the ascending states of Portugal and Spain. The decline of the Mamluks set the stage for the rise of the Ottomans.

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17.8.14: Conclusion

A contemporary historian who served the Mamluk Sultanate, Ibn Khaldun astutely recognized the applicability of his Cyclical Theory of History to the evolution of Islamic history during the period covered in this chapter. By the eighth century, Islam became the predominant social and political unifier of the Middle East. And for the next nine hundred years, various caliphates used family and religion as tools to rule the region. However, these caliphates faced religiously-inspired revolts that challenged their authority. Quelling these revolts weakened the regimes, often leading to greater decentralization and the fragmentation of empires. Into these vacuums of power, new families armed with tribal *'asabiyah* and a novel religious ideology came forth to supplant a once dominant group who had succumbed to the wiles of civilization and whose influence gradually waned in the face of insurgent desert peoples.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.9: African History to 1500

17.9.1: Chronology

17.9.2: Introduction

17.9.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.9.4: Key Terms

17.9.5: Writing the History of Ancient and Medieval Africa

17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia

17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States

17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe

17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)

17.9.10: Conclusion

17.9.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading

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17.9.1: Chronology

200,000 – 100,000 BP (Before Present) First behaviorally modern human emerged in Africa

c. 7000 BCE Beginnings of the Agricultural Revolution in Africa

c. 3000 BCE – 1500 CE The Bantu expansions

900s BCE Rule of Queen Makeda (Ethiopia)

c. 800 BCE – 300 CE Kingdom of Da'amat (Ethiopia)

c. 250 BCE Founding of Djenne-Jeno, one of Africa's first cities (Western Sudan)

c. 100 – 950 CE The Empire of Aksum

c. 300 CE Ghana emerged as a state (Western Sudan)

c. 325 – 350 CE The rule of King Ezana (Aksum/Ethiopia)

c. 800 CE Ghana became an empire (Western Sudan)

1000 – 1500 CE Height of Swahili society (East Africa)

1200 – 1450 CE Height of Great Zimbabwe (southern Africa/ Zimbabwe Plateau)

1235 CE Sundiata Keita founded the Mali Empire (Western Sudan)

1324 – 1325 CE Mansa Musa performed the hajj (Western Sudan)

Early 1400s CE Portuguese began to explore the Atlantic coast of West Africa; beginnings of the Age of Exploration

1460s CE Sunni Ali built the Songhai Empire (Western Sudan)

1493 – 1528 CE Askia the Great ruled during the Golden Age of the Songhai Empire (Western Sudan)

Early 1500s CE The Portuguese built a Trading Post Empire in the Indian Ocean (East Africa)

1591 CE Moroccans invaded the Songhai Empire (Western Sudan)

1699 CE The Omanis (allied with some Swahili rulers) seized Swahili city-states from the Portuguese (East Africa)

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17.9.2: Introduction

Adventurously sailing the Indian Ocean in the early 1500s CE, Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese naval officer, was confident that he was helping to forge a new, enduring era of Portuguese dominance. As he passed through several Swahili city-states on the East African coast, Barbosa noted the brisk trade and the riches of these African settlements where he saw a "great plenty of gold" that would serve Portuguese interests.[1] In his mind, God had destined these stashes of gold for the Portuguese and the local Swahili rulers acted unwisely and arrogantly to defend themselves. In the conflict that followed, the Portuguese plundered the Swahili city-states, burning buildings and enslaving African men and women. Barbosa boasted that when the Portuguese looted the settlements, they slaughtered many people and took a "great spoil of gold and silver and goods."[2] Barbosa's description highlights the violence of Portuguese conquest and also his expectation that he and his countrymen were creating a new Portuguese empire that would make a lasting mark in East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean world. However, less than 100 years later, Portuguese influences were noticeably absent in most of East Africa and their power in the Indian Ocean was fading rapidly. Barbosa, himself, had traveled with his brother-in-law, Ferdinand Magellan, and met an untimely end (in his early 40s) in the Philippines.

Writing about the coast of East Africa, Barbosa paid little heed to the hundreds of years of Swahili history that preceded his visit. Therefore, his narrative gives us minimal information about Swahili civilization. This chapter will fill in some of the silences in the written historical record as it describes Africa's major contributions to World History.

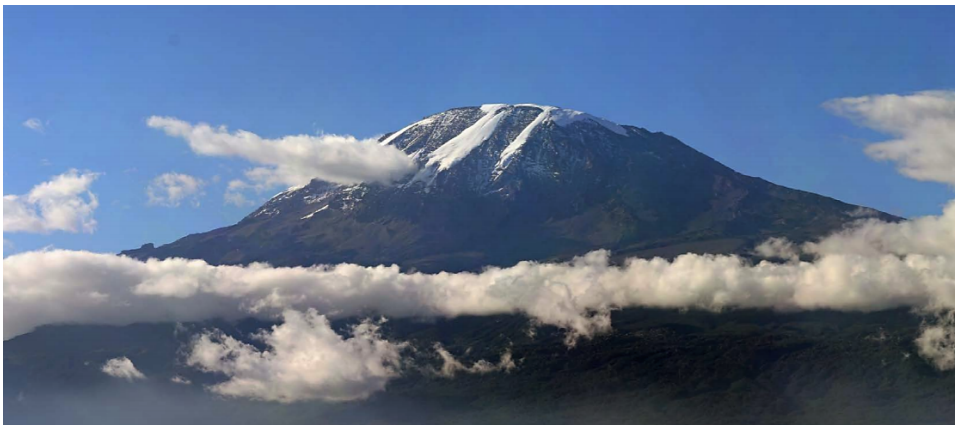
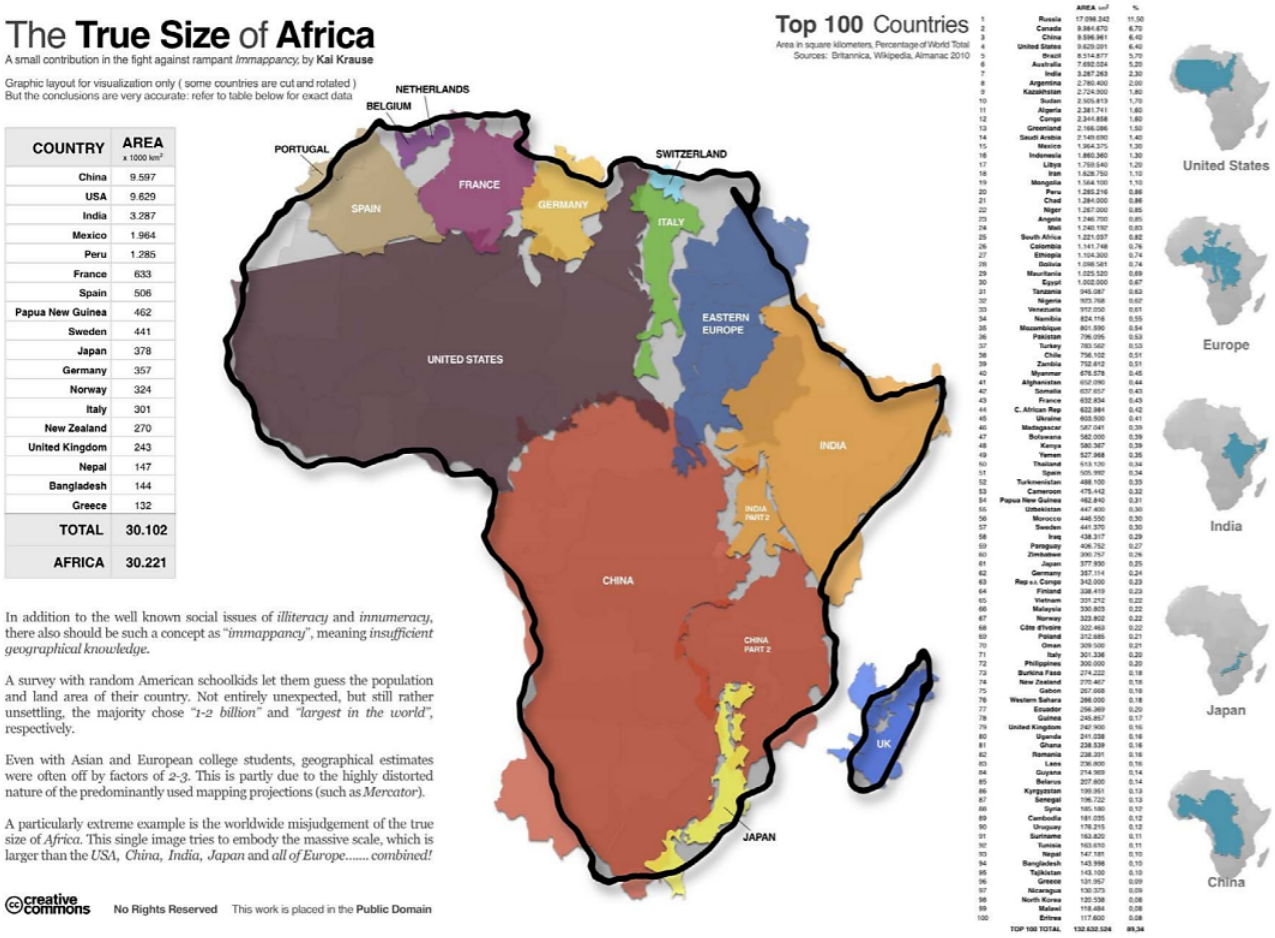


Figure **17.9.2.1**: Kibo Summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro | Is this the image of Africa you have? The picture shows the famous snow-capped peak, Kibo summit, of Mt. Kilimanjaro, which is located in Tanzania (East Africa). The African continent has great geographic and climatic diversity. (GNU Free Documentation License (email author before using); Muhammad mahdi Karmi via Wikipedia)

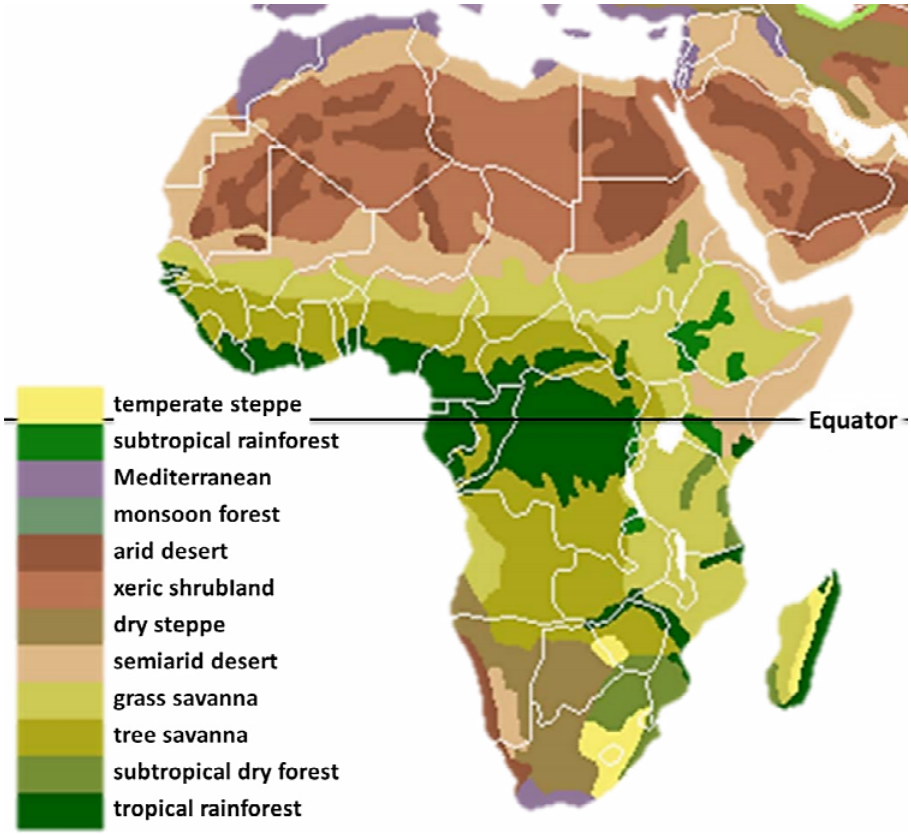
Since information readily available in the U.S. tends to focus on issues like drought, famine, and war, Americans have many common misconceptions about Africa. In addition to associating Africa with extreme hardships, a plethora of western-made TV shows focus on wildlife and the rainforests. However, these popular images don't give an accurate portrayal of the everyday experiences of most Africans or tell us much about the history of the continent.

One of the main points glossed over by these popular images is that the African continent is large and diverse. Africa is the second largest continent in the world. Today, it has over 50 independent countries. You can also find just about every imaginable environment, from savannahs, rainforests, and deserts, to glaciers and snow-capped mountains in Africa. Its over 1,000 languages (or about one-third of the world's languages) also demonstrate the continent's diversity.[3] Africa is home to more than a billion people, who are living, working, and raising their families.



Map **17.9.2.1**: Kibo Summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro | Is this the image of Africa you have? The picture shows the famous snow-capped peak, Kibo summit, of Mt. Kilimanjaro, which is located in Tanzania (East Africa). It shows that the African continent has great geographic and climatic diversity. (CC0 1.0; Kai Krause via Wikimedia Commons)

Historically, Africans faced significant environmental challenges that limited population growth. There are exceptions, but overall, African soils are poor and rainfall has been unpredictable. Soils are comparatively unfertile, due in part to the geologic age of the continent. Also, the more temperate climates in a number of regions slows the decomposition of organic materials in the soil, meaning that the soil in many regions has few minerals and nutrients. The areas that are exceptions, such as the highlands of Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi, have seen much higher population concentrations. Rainfall also tends to be concentrated in just two or three months a year, while disease has been yet another challenge.



Map 17.9.2.2: Climatic Map of Africa | Here you can see the present-day climatic map of Africa. There is great variation from the Mediterranean climate of the north and southern tips (think: olives, grapes for wine, and citrus fruits), to the second largest desert in the world (the Sahara Desert), through the savannas, grasslands, and the more forested regions. Today, we see a general drying trend on the continent, leading to increasing conflict over things like water rights and pastureland. However, although there has been some contraction and expansion of rainforests over the past millennia, the continental climatic map has remained fairly stable for about 5,000 years. (CC BY-SA 2.5 ; Ville Koistinen via Wikimedia Commons)

Considering the past 5,000 years of African history, malaria, yellow fever, and trypanosomiasis (also known as sleeping sickness) have made the biggest impacts on population growth and settlement patterns. Even today, all three diseases affect the continent. Both **malaria** and **yellow fever** are spread to people by mosquitos. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), despite preventative measures and great efforts to extend the availability of treatments, malaria was responsible for almost 600,000 deaths in 2013. Children in Africa account for most of the fatalities, and the WHO estimates that currently one African child dies from malaria every minute of every day.[4] Those who have suffered through malaria multiple times as adults will attest that malaria, with the exception of its most virulent strains like *plasmodium falciparum*, is usually more of a nuisance than an emergency for healthy adults. It causes symptoms like headaches, fever, and chills. Even though it does not usually constitute a medical emergency for adults, malaria does decrease productivity and has significant treatment costs. On the other hand, yellow fever has a high mortality rate—about 50%—even amongst healthy adult populations.[5] While malaria and yellow fever have historically taken the largest toll on human populations, one of the main effects of **trypanosomiasis** (or sleeping sickness) has been to limit the practicality of keeping certain types of livestock in Africa. Horses and many breeds of cattle are especially susceptible to trypranosomiasis, which is spread by the tsetse fly and can lead to either chronic illness, characterized by weight loss, fever, anemia, cardiac lesions, and other symptoms in animals, or to a more immediate death. Until the past fifty years or so, in many parts of the continent, these noteworthy challenges with disease, alongside the low fertility of the soils and the unpredictable rainfalls, were significant constraints on human population growth. Environmental challenges and disease also affected settlement patterns as, for example, people avoided more forested and wetter areas because of the prevalence of mosquitoes. Additionally, Africans continuously adapted their herding and farming techniques to overcome these challenges.

17.9.2.1: Endnotes

1 Quoted in “The East Coast of Africa: Duarte Barbosa,” Aspects of World Civilization, vol. 1, Ed. Perry M. Rogers, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003): 376.

2 Ibid, p. 377.

3 African Language Program, Department of African and African American Studies, “African Languages,” Harvard University, aaas.fas.harvard.edu/greeting...nguage-program.

4 World Health Organization Media Centre, “Malaria: Fact Sheet,” www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs094/en

5 World Health Organization Media Centre, “Yellow Fever: Fact Sheet,” www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs100/en

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17.9.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. Describe the environments of Africa.

2. Which environmental challenges and diseases have historically limited population growth in Africa?

3. Discuss the methodological challenges of studying Ancient and Medieval African History.

4. Identify commonly used terms that are potentially problematic for scholars of Africa. Explain why these terms are potentially problematic.

5. What was distinctive about the agriculture of the Ethiopian Highlands?

6. Explain the legend of Queen Makeda and King Solomon and why it remains significant for Ethiopians.

7. How were the states in this region shaped by trade and inter-cultural relationships?

8. Describe the spread of Christianity into Aksum.

9. What characteristics were shared by the Western Sudanic States?

10. How did the location of the Western Sudanic states have an impact on their history?

11. Describe the relationship between the Western Sudanic States and the Islamic World.

12. How did nineteenth century European scholars depict the Bantu Migration? What factors influenced their view?

13. How have post-colonial scholars challenged nineteenth century depictions of the Bantu Migration?

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17.9.4: Key Terms

- African diaspora
- Aksum
- Bantu expansions
- Bantu Migration
- Catalan Atlas
- Ghana
- Great Zimbabwe
- griots
- Indian Ocean World
- *Kebra Nagast*
- Kingdom of Da'amat
- King Ezana
- malaria
- Mali Empire
- mansa
- Mansa Musa
- monsoon winds
- Queen Mekeda
- Sahel
- Songhai Empire
- stelae
- Sundiata Keita
- Swahili city-states
- syncretism
- Timbuktu
- Trading Post Empire
- tribe
- trypanosomiasis
- Western Sudan
- yellow fever
- Zanj Rebellion

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17.9.5: Writing the History of Ancient and Medieval Africa

Scholars of Africa, particularly those working in the last two generations, have employed all sorts of methods to describe the ancient African past. They have necessarily been on the forefront of methodological innovation because of the limited availability of written primary sources, meaning sources recorded by ancient Africans themselves. Therefore, scholars have turned to a wide range of materials to complement the available written records.

Before about 1800 CE, many African societies kept their records orally, as opposed to in written form. These societies have rich, complex histories that some past historians, relying primarily on written records, ignored when they studied the African continent.

The professionalization of the study of history in the West (meaning primarily in Europe and the United States), which entailed the transition from writing about the past out of personal interest to writing about the past as a profession with established methodologies, mainly occurred in the 1800s. European and American views of Africans during that era were generally derogatory and prejudiced. These nineteenth century professional scholars tended to portray Africans as primitive, meaning unchanged from time immemorial. Western methodologies, with their reliance on written sources, backed up European views of Africans as unchanged. Two general results of the nineteenth century scholarship in the West were the assumptions that Africa, which was commonly referred to as "the dark continent," lacked a history prior to European arrival on the continent and that any urban developments or complex state structures in Africa were the achievements of outsiders. For example, as you will see in this chapter, there were nineteenth century European scholars who credited people from Yemen with building the Axum trading empire and attributed the archaeological findings at Great Zimbabwe to Phoenicians. Especially since the 1960s, there has been a strong movement to reclaim these (and other) developments as African. As part of this effort, scholars employ new methodologies, including the study of oral sources, archaeology, climate change, linguistics (the study of languages), and paleoarchaobotany (the study of ancient plant materials), to gain more accurate, multi-faceted information about the African past.

Perhaps most contested and also potentially the most revealing are the available oral sources. Many ancient African societies had special people tasked with orally transmitting official histories and preserved traditions. For example, **griots** in parts of West Africa memorized chronologies, cultural traditions, and legal precedence to advise kings and state leaders. Griots also traveled and performed theater and praise-songs throughout empires to spread cultural values and communicate news from governments. Griots held honored places in their societies, reflecting their importance to both rulers and people's everyday lives. Locally produced proverbs and oral teachings also played vital roles in many ancient African societies. Additionally, African communities honored older generations for their knowledge of the past, leading Amadou Hampate Ba, a famous author from Mali, to write, "In Africa, when an old man dies, it's a library burning."[6] These examples are just some of the ways that ancient peoples used oral traditions. Since the 1960s, scholars of Africa have recognized the importance of studying these oral sources as they convey a great deal of information about the past. Using oral sources is not without its challenges, but their inclusion has broadened the scholarly understanding of African societies.

17.9.5.1: Terminology

Especially due to nineteenth-century tendencies to portray Africans as inferior, current scholars of Africa have a whole host of stereotypes to correct. One of the main stereotypes they encounter is the common perception that African societies are timeless, that they have not changed in hundreds or thousands of years. The movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* encapsulates this stereotype. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) is a fictional account that follows the San people in the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. The movie portrays the San as untouched by and unaware of the modern world until one member of their community finds a Coke bottle discarded from an airplane. In the movie, adventure ensues.

Movies, television shows, and other media often show us an Africa that is rural, a landscape dominated by wild animals, and a continent isolated from the rest of the modern world. However, these images do not accurately represent the continent in either our present time or the past. In 2010, one-third of Africa's population lived in cities, and it is likely that one-half of Africa's population will be urban dwelling by 2030.[7] Lagos (Nigeria) is Africa's largest city south of the Sahara Desert, with population experts estimating that it is home to 21 million people. With this estimate, Lagos is on a par size-wise with cities like Beijing, Cairo, and Mexico City. Urbanization on this scale is a fairly recent phenomena. However, this chapter will introduce you to some Medieval cities, including the famous city of Timbuktu, to discuss African urban cultures. We will also explore the trade routes that

connected Africa to much of the world, emphasizing that Africa has been connected to the Arabian Peninsula, Asia, and Europe for millenia.

Even if we do not intend it to, some of the language that we use on an everyday basis can perpetuate assumptions that Africa is isolated or behind the rest of the world. One example of a potentially problematic term is "**tribe**." As African historian Christopher Ehret has pointed out, the use of "tribe" in reference to Africans often carries the underlying judgment that the people who are "tribal" are exotic, wild, backwards, and potentially dangerous. In common usage, "tribesmen" are not modern citizens of nation-states, but instead remnants of the past. To highlight the discriminatory use of the term, Ehret asks us to consider why African wars are often referred to as "tribal" wars instead of as the civil wars they actually are, and,

> …Why is Shaka, the famous nineteenth-century ruler, called the king of the Zulu "tribe" when he was actually the king of a centralized and military powerful state? Why are Africans in "traditional" dress said to be engaging in "tribal" dancing, when Europeans garbed similarly in the clothes of an earlier time are said to be performing "folk" dances?[8]

Ehret makes the case that the way that we commonly use "tribe" perpetuates a lot of the negative stereotypes Europeans had of Africa in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, many historians question the idea that African "tribes" even existed prior to European colonization of the continent one hundred and fifty years ago. Instead, scholars discuss much more fluid, adaptive, or inclusive ethnic identities and suggest that nineteenth century Europeans tried to harden divisions and create "tribes" to suit their own administrative purposes. Dismissing Africans as "tribal" also allowed European to legitimize the trans-Atlantic slave trade (in the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries) and colonization of the continent (in the nineteenth century). Today, people often fall back on "tribe" and "tribal" instead of trying to understand the complexities of African politics and social organization.

There are a handful of other terms that modern scholars scrutinize to show that they are based on similar prejudices. Two such terms are "stateless society" and "bushmen." Many written sources from the nineteenth century produced by Europeans did not recognize the existence of states in Africa that had more democratic, less centralized, or less hierarchical leadership structures. These written sources assumed that all states had kings or other centralized authority figures. They denied the existence of states organized in other ways. Some African societies were centralized under the rule of monarchs, but others used, for example, councils of elders, had more decentralized, egalitarian systems, or relied on age-sets to mobilize labor and manage government affairs. These latter examples had functioning governmental structures, but nineteenth century Europeans usually did not recognize these alternative forms of state organization and claimed that Africans were incapable of ruling themselves without European intervention. The use of the phrase "stateless society" was one way that Europeans claimed to be more advanced and thus destined to colonize Africa in the nineteenth century.

According to this same nineteenth-century ideology, the "bushmen" and "pygmies" of Africa were hopelessly behind and isolated from modern times. The San people featured in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* are an example of a society sometimes referred to as "bushmen." Scholars now consider "bushmen" and "pygmy" to be derogatory when used in reference to Africans because of the history of the terms. Over the past two hundred years, the terms have been coupled with assumptions of a lack of historical development, isolationism, and a lack of participation in modern economies. These assumptions do not reflect the reality of hunter-gathering societies. Instead, scholars have shown that hunter-gathering societies have long been in regular contact with pastoralists and people living in agriculturally-based societies in Africa. Most people,who in the past would have been labeled bushmen or pygmies, prefer to be referred to by their linguistic or ethnic identities in order to avoid the stigmas attached to these terms and to avoid being lumped in with people with whom they share very little. If we understand how words like tribe, stateless societies, and bushmen have been used in the past, then we can avoid perpetuating some of the problematic stereotypes about Africa.

Overall, as you read this chapter, keep in mind that Africa has been a continent of innovation and change since the first behaviorally modern humans emerged there between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago. Africans were some of the first farmers and some of the first iron-workers. Africans developed their own artistic traditions (see Figure **17.9.5.1**, Map **17.9.5.1**, Figure **17.9.5.2**) and unique state structures. With such a big, diverse continent to consider, this chapter examines four civilizations (states of larger scale and complexity) to show major changes impacting the continent. Each of these states was also connected to the rest of the world. The chapter starts with ancient Ethiopia in Northeast Africa (300 to 700 CE) and moves to the Western Sudanic Empires in the Sahel of West Africa (800 to 1591 CE). In the second half, it discusses Great Zimbabwe (1200 to 1450 CE) and, finally, the Swahili states in East Africa (1000 to 1500 CE).

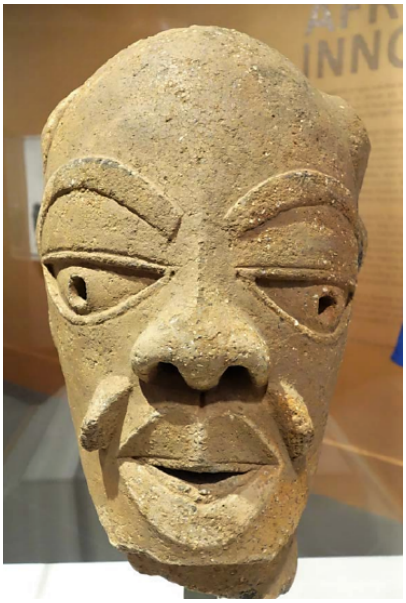
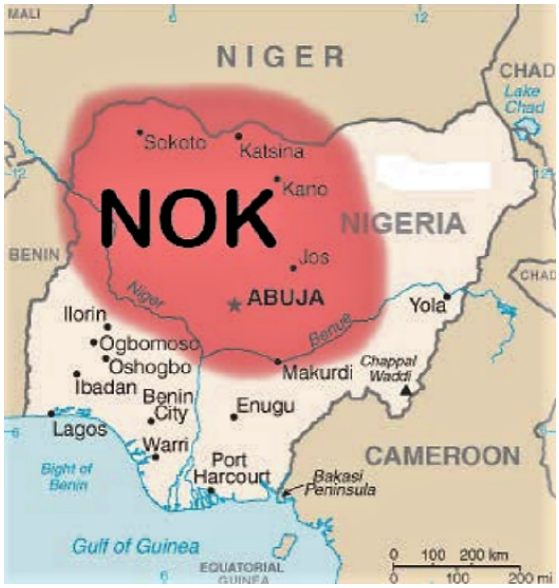


Figure **17.9.5.1**: An Example of a Terra-Cotta Statue Produced by the Nok Culture, c. 550 BCE | The Nok people lived in what is today Northern Nigeria. (Public Domain; User “Daderot” via Wikimedia Commons)



Map **17.9.5.1**: Map of Nok Culture | The Nok were just one innovative community in ancient Africa. They were a sophisticated Iron-Age civilization (c. 1000 BCE) now known for their terra-cotta sculptures. (Public Domain; Locutus Borg via Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17.9.5.2: A lifesize bronze head found at Ife (Nigeria) | Created by a Yoruba artist in the thirteenth century CE, it may represent a member of the royal family. (Public Domain; Locutus Borg via Wikimedia Commons)

17.9.5.2: Endnotes

6 Quoted in Ann Badkhen, Walking with Abel: Journeys with the Nomads of the African Savannah (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015): 20.

7 “Growth Areas: the urbanisation of Africa,” Economist (Dec. 13, 2010), http://www.economist.com/blogs/daily...isation_africa

8 Christopher Ehret, The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800 (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2002): 7.

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17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia

Aksum, which was at its most powerful in the fourth through sixth centuries CE, was located in what are today Ethiopia, Eritrea, and parts of Sudan. At its high point, Aksum extended its influence beyond Africa into parts of the southern Arabian Peninsula as shown on the map below. Aksum was a great trading empire, with its own coinage, its own language, and its own distinctive Christian church. If you are familiar with accounts of the Queen of Sheba, you know pieces of the story that Ethiopians use to explain the origins of the Ethiopian Solomonic Dynasty and their possession of the Ark of the Covenant. The capital of the kingdom was the city of Aksum and its most important port was Adulis. You can see that the kingdom stretched into the Sudan and Yemen at its height in the sixth century.)

Unlike some other regions in Africa, Ethiopia had very fertile, volcanic soils that supported large populations. Climatic variation found at the different elevations throughout Ethiopia also encouraged agricultural diversification and trade. Around 7000 BCE, there was population growth in the region that corresponded with the Agricultural Revolution. While some domesticated animals and crops were introduced from Northeast Africa and the Fertile Crescent, Ethiopians domesticated other crops themselves. Most notably, Ethiopians domesticated teff, a grass, and nsete, known as the "false banana," that they ground to make bread and porridge. We also have Ethiopians to thank for coffee! Since the Neolithic Revolution, Ethiopia stands out for its agricultural productivity and innovation, both of which sustained large populations in the region.

The ***Kebra Nagast*** ("The Glory of Kings"), a 700 year old text that is sacred for Ethiopian Christians and Rastafarians, traces the origins of the Ethopian royal family back to the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem. The *Kebra Nagast* identifies the Queen of Sheba as an Ethiopian ruler known locally as **Queen Mekeda.** According to the text, in approximately 950 BCE, the newly enthroned Queen Mekeda traveled to study with Jerusalem's well-known king, King Solomon. Queen Mekeda wanted a capable mentor for leadership advice and spiritual guidance. Charmed by her, King Solomon played these roles and Queen Mekeda, flattered by his attentions, was a hardworking tutee who eventually converted to Judaism. As their lessons continued, King Solomon planned the seduction of Queen Mekeda, which, as described in the text, occurred when Solomon tricked and cornered her. Their sexual union produced a child, Menelik I, to whom Queen Mekeda gave birth on her journey home to Ethopia.

As time passed, King Solomon remained haunted by a dream that Menelik was his rightful sucessor and was delighted when his son, as an adult, returned to Jersusalem. According to the *Kebra Nagast*, King Solomon intended for Menelik to follow him as the next king of Jerusalem, but Menelik refused and instead returned to Ethopia. In an unexpected twist, when leaving Jerusalem, part of Menelik's entourage stole the Ark of the Covenant, which held the Ten Commandments. When King Solomon discovered the theft, he sent soldiers to recapture the Ark of the Covenant. However according to the *Kebra Nagast*, God helped Menelik and his men evade capture by lifting them up over the Red Sea. In the end, Menelik and the Ark of the Covenant made it safely to Ethopia. For Ethiopian Christians, the *Kebra Nagast* partially explains the formation of the Ethopian Orthodox Church (the Tawahedo Church). Through today, the Ethopian Orthodox Church claims possession of the Ark of the Covenant, which it says is housed in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum, Ethiopia.



Figure 17.9.6.1: The Queen of Sheba | The Queen of Sheba as illustrated by Conrad Kyeser in the early fifteenth century. (Public Domain; Conrad Kyeser via Wikimedia Commons)

According to the *Kebra Nagast*, early Ethiopian rulers were descendants of King Solomon through Menelik I. More than two thousand years after King Solomon's rule, a thirteenth century Ethiopian king, Yekuno Amlak (r. 1270 – 1285 CE), reclaimed this legacy by tracing his origins back to King Solomon and Queen Mekeda. He founded what became known as the Solomonic Dynasty, which ruled Ethiopia for about 500 years from 1270 to 1769 CE. Members of Ethiopia's royal family continued to claim descent from King Solomon up through the last Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, who was overthrown in 1974. Therefore, the link back to King Solomon and Queen Mekeda is part of Ethiopian religious beliefs and has also legitimized claims to political power.



Figure 17.9.6.2: The Building that Allegedly Houses the Ark of the Covenant | It is part of the Church of Our Lady of Zion, built in the fifth or sixth entury CE in Aksum, Ethiopia. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Adam Cohn via Wikimedia Commons)

From the era of the rule of Queen Mekeda in about the tenth century BCE and Yekuno Amlak's revival of the Solomonic Dynasty in the thirteenth century CE, the largest kingdoms in Ethiopia were Da'amat and Aksum. The **Kingdom of Da'amat** was the first to emerge in northern Ethiopia in about the tenth century BCE. In the 1960s and 1970s, archaeologists excavating the Kingdom of Da'amat unearthed evidence of the region's role in trade and its connections to Southern Arabia. Archeological finds show that, by the seventh century BCE, ivory, tortoiseshell, rhino horn, gold, silver, and slaves were brought from interior regions of Africa and traded through Da'amat for imported cloth, tools, metals, and jewelry. Inscriptions, imagery, architectural styles, and even overlaps in historical traditions (such as those associated with the Queen of Sheba) also suggest close connections between the Kingdom of Da'amat and Saba (Yemen) in Southern Arabia. For example, the Kingdom of Da'amat used religious symbols in its monumental architecture, including the disc and crescent, also found in Southern Arabia. The oldest standing building in Ethiopia, the Temple at Yeha (c. 700 BCE), had an altar with these symbols. Up until several decades ago, some scholars used evidence of these connections to argue that people from Saba founded the civilization at Da'amat. Now, in line with the trend to reclaim African civilizations, very vocal scholars push us to acknowledge the African origins of the Kingdom of Da'amat and view it as a precursor to the trading empire of Aksum.



Figure **17.9.6.3**: The Temple at Yeha, Located in Northern Ethiopia | Yeha was likely the first capital of the Kingdom of Da'amat. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "JialiangGao" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Kingdom of Da'amat weakened in the fourth century BCE as Red Sea trade became more important than some of the previous northern overland routes. It gave way to the state of Aksum, with its important cities of Adulis and Aksum. Adulis, positioned on the coast, rose in prominence and grew wealthy. It served as a safe harbor for ships traveling from Southeast Asia. The growing capital city in the interior, Aksum, was a stopover point for land-based trade routes into the Sudan and especially Sub-Saharan Africa. Ivory, slaves, tools, spices, gold, silver jewelry, copper, and iron were eventually traded through the capital city of Aksum to the coast. The state of Aksum began minting its own gold and silver coins in the third century CE, demonstrating how important long-distance trade was to its economy.

In addition to its role in inter-regional trade, Aksum was also known for its early conversion to Christianity. Ethiopian tradition traces the establishment of Christianity in the region back to two shipwrecked Syrians. One of the Syrians, Frumentius, was particularly influential because he became the first bishop of Ethiopia in 303 CE and guided the king of Aksum, **King Ezana** (r. 325 – 350 CE), in his conversion to Christianity. Some of the coins minted in Aksum actually attest to King Ezana's conversion as the coins from the first half of Ezana's reign have the disc and crescent symbols of earlier Ethiopian rulers, while coins from the later decades of Ezana's reign have a Christian cross. As bishop, Frumentius also encouraged Christian merchants to settle in Aksum. About a century later, Christianity in Ethiopia grew further as the state offered refuge to Christians fleeing persecution due to doctrinal disputes within the Church. Nine priests, breaking with the Church in Jerusalem, settled in Ethiopia and founded the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They maintained ties with the Coptic Church in Egypt and developed a distinct liturgy using Ge'ez, the local language. Members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also incorporated local beliefs, such as the legendary connection to King Solomon, into their religious traditions.



Figure 17.9.6.4: The Church of Debre Damo | In the sixth century CE, Christians exiled due to doctrinal diputes sought refuge in Ethiopia. Once there, they founded the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Subsequently, one group of Orthodox monks built a monastery at Debre Damo. Debre Damo is located on an isolated mountain top in northern Ethiopia. To this day, it is accessible only by rope ladder and no women (or female animals) are allowed up the rope. (CC BY-SA 2.0; User "Giustino" via Wikimedia Commons)

The ruling family, coastal elites, and military leaders amassed significant wealth during the height of Aksumite power. Like the Aksumite kings before him, Ezana amassed wealth by collecting tribute from surrounding states and taxing trade. Aksum and its surrounding states were agriculturally productive with fertile soils and effective irrigation systems. Their agricultural productivity meant that the work of peasants and the wealth generated through foreign trade supported the ruling classes and elites. Building a powerful miitary, King Ezana expanded the empire and claimed control over most of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Saba (Yemen). He also used his assets to showcase his power with, for example, "conquest stones" that commemorated his victories. In addition to celebrating Ezana's military strength and commitment to ruling fairly, the "conquest stones" also proclaimed that God had ordained his reign. The stones impart Ezana's edicts and Christian beliefs. One section reads:

> […] The Lord of Heaven strengthens my dominion! And as he now has conquered my enemy, (so) May he conquer for me, where I (but) go! As he now has given me victory and has overthrown my enemies. (So will I rule) in right and justice, doing no wrong to the peoples. And I placed The throne, which I have set up, and the Earth which bears it, in the protection of the Lord of Heaven, who has made me king…[9]

Ezana is known to us because of archaeological findings, including the aforementioned conquest stones. He and other Aksumite kings also famously commissioned the construction of **stelae** (singular: stele). Stelae were tall rectangular pillars with rounded tops set up to mark the underground grave sites of Aksum's royalty and elite. The most ornate stelae were elaboratedly carved into a marble-like material with faux doors at the bottom and multiple stories, as indicated by windows etched into each level. They have been described as "ancient skyscrapers," with the largest being one hundred and eight feet tall. Most stelae have fallen in the over 1700 years since their construction, but several do remain standing. One stele even caused international uproar as the Italians took it during their occupation of Ethiopia at the onset of the Second World War and just recently returned it at great expense.



Figure **17.9.6.5**: A Stele Built during the Height of the Aksum Empire in Ethiopia (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Zhiem" via Wikimedia Commons)

The stelae demonstrate the wealth of Aksum's ruling classes and links between the ruling generations. Unfortunately, the graves marked by the stelae have been cleared out by tomb robbers in the intervening years. However, small remnants of glass, pottery, furniture, beads, bangles, earrings, ivory carvings, and objects gilded in gold attest to the wealth buried with affluent Aksumites. These artifacts also show the availability of trade goods brought from long distances. Furthermore, the architecture of the stelae is suggestive of connections back to earlier kingdoms. For example, the rounded top of the stelae is reminiscent of the disc symbol found in the region as far back as the Kingdom of Da'amat. Ezana was the first Christian king in the region; however, the architecture that he commissioned maintained ties to Aksum's pre-Christian past.

Aksum's power began to wane at the end of the sixth century CE. First, the Persian Empire interrupted Aksum's trade with parts of southern Arabia in the late sixth century. Then, Muslims increasingly dominated trade along the Red Sea coast and the most profitable trade routes shifted from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. In response, Aksum shrank as Ethiopia's Christian rulers turned away from coastal trade and became more dependent on the tribute they collected from agriculturally productive regions to their south.

As Muslims in coastal areas became more powerful and Christian rulers shifted their attentions away from the coast, the relationship between Ethiopian Muslims and Christians remained complex. In the seventh century CE, one king of Aksum, al-Najashi Ashama Ibn Abjar, gave sanctuary to some of the first followers of Islam before he himself converted. In subsequent years, Muslims traders and Christian elites oftentimes cooperated. For example from the tenth through fourteenth centuries, Muslims set up trading settlements in the interior that facilitated the conspicuous consumption of Christian elites who desired imported goods. However, there were also periods of conflict, especially after Muslims unified to form the Adal Sultanate in the fourteenth century. The Adal Sultanate militarily extended its influence over much of the region and for several centuries supported a thriving, multi-ethnic state. In the sixteenth century, Ethiopian Christians allied with the Portuguese to fight against the Adal Sultanate. After the fall of the Adal Sultanate, Ethiopian Christians rejected Portuguese attempts to convert them to Catholicism and forced Portuguese missionaries out of the region in 1633 CE.

17.9.6.1: Endnotes

9 As quoted in Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia and Trevor Getz, African Histories: New Sources and New Techniques for Studying African Pasts (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2012): 33-36.

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17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States

Who comes to mind as the richest person ever? Many economists and historians propose a person who might surprise you: **Mansa Musa**. Mansa Musa was an emperor in the Western Sudan during the Middle Ages. He was so rich that the people of his own time could not even fathom his wealth. Unable to put a dollar amount on Mansa Musa's bewilderingly large fortune, Rudolph Ware, a current professor at the University of Michigan, instructs us to "imagine as much gold as you think a human being could possess and double it..."[10] Other sources estimate that, adjusted for inflation, Mansa Musa was worth $400 billion.[11] How did Mansa Musa become so wealthy? Like the other Western Sudanic rulers, he controlled much of the world's access to gold during a period when gold was in very high demand.

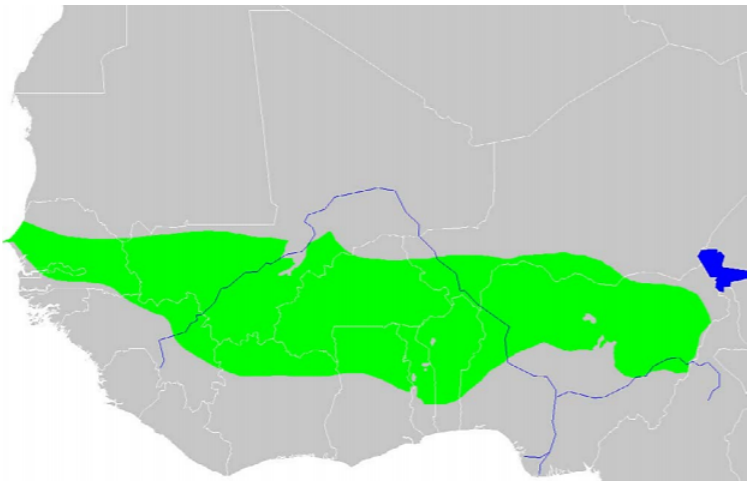
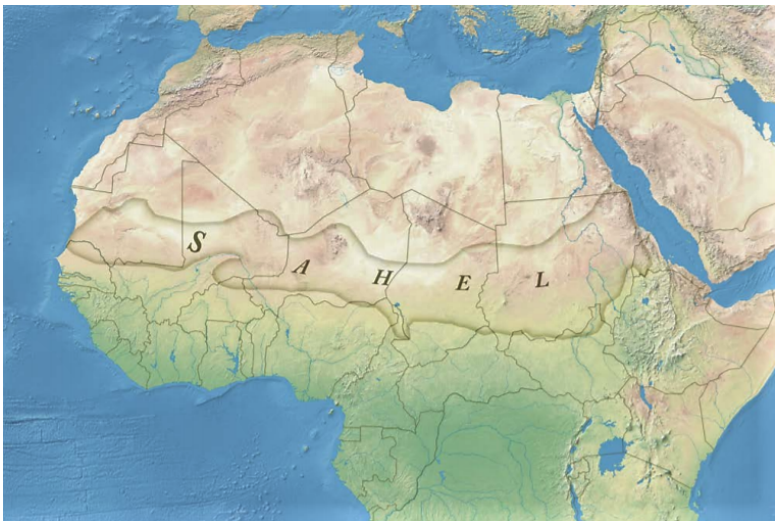


Figure **17.9.7.1**: Map of Western Sudan | The area highlighted in green is the Western Sudan. In the Middle Ages, African kings used their monopoly over west African gold to build a series of large empires in the Western Sudan. (Public Domain; User "Alatoron" via Wikimedia Commons)

Map **17.9.7.1** shows the large area in West Africa commonly referred to as **the Western Sudan**. The Western Sudan does not correspond with a modern-day African country; instead, it is a region. Arabic-speaking travelers gave the region its name, calling it *bilad-al-Sudan* or the "Land of Blacks." The Western Sudan encompasses the Sahel and some of its surrounding grasslands from the Atlantic coast in the east through Lake Chad in the west. **The Sahel,** which in Arabic means "the shore," is a transition zone between the Sahara Desert to its north and the more forested regions to its south. Much of the Sahel is grassland savannah. Straddling regions with different climates, the people of the Western Sudan developed productive agriculture, trade networks, and an urban culture. The architecture of the Western Sudanic states stands out for its use of mud (adobe) to construct its monumental buildings, such as the Great Mosque in Djenne (Figure **17.9.7.1**,, and Aksia the Great's tomb in Gao (Figure **17.9.7.2**). From roughly 800 to 1600 CE, the people of this region organized and supported—sometimes under duress—the large states that dominated the Western Sudan. Three of the best known of these states became the empires of Ghana (800 – 1070s CE), Mali (1230s – 1430s CE), and Songhai (1460s – 1591 CE).



Map **17.9.7.2**: The Sahel (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Munion" via Wikimedia Commons)

The leaders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai came to dominate the region because they controlled access to West African gold. An increase in the demand for West African gold corresponded with the rise of these empires. The spread of Islam and rise of new states along the North African coast and in Europe gave the biggest boost to the demand for gold. Monarchs in Europe and North Africa wanted West African gold to mint coins. To meet the demand, Berber traders used newly introduced camels to carry gold north across the desert. Then, they loaded up their camels with big slabs of salt to return south. The people in many parts of West Africa considered salt a valuable commodity due to their distance from the ocean and the time required to extract salt from plant, animal, and other resources. While the demands for gold and salt drove the trade, weapons, manufactured goods, slaves, textiles, and manuscripts also passed through the desert. With the flow of all of these goods, the Western Sudanic states emerged at the nexus of the trans-Saharan trade routes.

The North African Berber traders crossing the Sahara Desert were early converts to Islam, and they introduced Islam to market towns of the Western Sudanic states. With continuing trade, the region's connections with Northeast Africa and the Middle East grew through the Middle Ages. Growing urban areas, like Timbuktu, attracted Muslim scholars. In later centuries, the kings of Mali and Songhai deliberately fostered these connections with the larger Islamic World due to their religious beliefs and, sometimes, to enhance their status and secure their positions. For example, Askiya Muhammad, the king of Songhai from 1495 to 1528, successfully sought recognition as the "caliph of Sudan" from Egyptian rulers. The new title brought him prestige within the Islamic world and Africa. Therefore, trans-Saharan trade brought Islam to the Western Sudan, and many of the kings of Mali and Songhai cultivated their relationships with Muslims in Northeast Africa and the Middle East. As a result, Islam influenced the culture and lifestyle, particularly of urban residents, in the Western Sudan.

17.9.7.1: Ghana

We associate the first powerful empire, **Ghana** (800 – 1070s CE), with people who spoke the Soninke language and lived in the area between the Niger and Senegal Rivers—parts of present day Mauritania and Mali. In this region, agricultural productivity supported labor specialization, urban areas, and eventually state formation. From as early as 300 BCE, the region's farmers used iron tools to grow an abundance of crops. Archaeological evidence found at Djenne-Jeno, one of the earliest urban areas in the Western Sudan, which has been dated to approximately 250 BCE, suggests that people had access to plenty of rice, millet, and vegetables. Iron technologies also allowed craftsmen to make iron spears and swords so people could protect themselves. Probably for defense purposes, Soninke speakers began joining together to form the ancient state of Ghana around 300 CE. Then, as the populations continued to grow, the state expanded its territory.

Even before Ghana was a state with a clearly defined centralized administration, Soninke speakers had been involved in extensive systems of trade using the region's complex river systems. They often acted as middlemen, trading in fish from the rivers, meat from herders, and grains from farmers. After 300 CE, Ghanian leadership began collecting tributary payments from neighboring chiefdoms. In the centuries that followed, Ghana's leaders used their ability to tax trade to build an empire. By 800 CE, they had consolidated their control over trade, their authority over urban areas, and their reign over tributary states.



Map **17.9.7.3**: Map of the Trans-Saharan Trade Routes | Note how the routes crossed to settlements, like Koumbi Saleh, Gao, and Timbuktu, that began as market towns before growing into state capitals and cities of Muslim scholarship. The map also shows the origins of the gold in the region's southern forested areas. The sites where the gold originated are appropriately shaded to indicate the gold mines at Bambuk, Boure, and Lobi. (CC0 1.0; User "As77zz" via Wikimedia Commons)

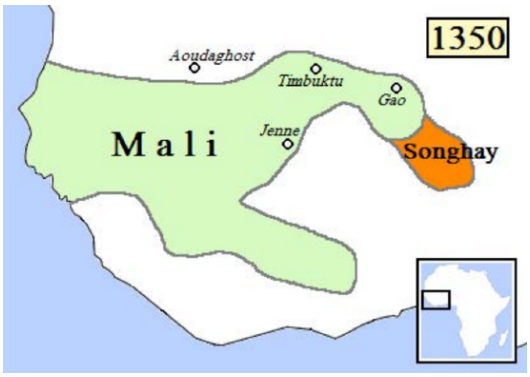
Especially in the minds of the Arab scholars chronicling the history of this period, the gold trade defined Ghana. They heard about the large caravans with hundreds of camels passing through the Sahara Desert on their way to and from Ghana. To build their fortunes, the Ghanian kings taxed trade goods twice. They taxed gold when it was initially brought from the forested regions in the south to their market towns and again right as the Berber traders departed for the north. News of Ghana's wealth spread to the extent that Medieval Arab scholars who had never even traveled to Africa wrote about the Ghanian kings. In one manuscript, Al-Bakri, an eleventh century geographer based in Muslim Spain, described how a Ghanian king was adorned in gold and guarded by dogs wearing gold and silver collars. According to Al-Bakri, the king demonstrated his power having his subjects "fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their heads" upon entering his presence.[12] The kings shored up their power through their ostentatious displays of gold and their monopoly over trade. Al-Bakri recognized the centrality of gold to the finances of the Ghanian kings. According to him, the kings claimed all of the gold nuggets for themselves, leaving only gold dust for everyone else. By this time, the Ghanian kings had also used their wealth to build strong armies, with archers and calvary, to collect tribute and carry out the empire's expansion.

Al-Bakri's depiction of Ghana's capital city, Koumbi Saleh, also evidences the introduction of Islam to the region. He described two separate sites within the capital city, Koumbi-Saleh. To trade their wares, the merchants used one site, which was clearly Muslim with mosques, while the king lived in a royal palace six miles away. The separation between the sites and lack of mosques near the royal palace suggest that Islam had primarily impacted the market towns; the leadership and masses of Ghana did not convert.

17.9.7.2: The Mali Empire

Due to attacks from the Muslim Almoravids from the North, issues with overgrazing, and internal rebellions, Ghana declined in the eleventh century, opening up an opportunity for the rise of Mali. The origins of the **Mali Empire** (Map **17.9.7.4**) are associated with the king **Sundiata Keita** (c. 1217 – 1255 CE). An epic, recounted orally by griots for centuries and written down in various forms in the twentieth century, relates the story of Sundiata's rise. One version written by Guinean D. T. Niani in 1960 follows Sundiata as he overcomes a number of challenges, like being unable to walk until he is seven years old, being banished by a cruel stepmother, and facing tests given by witches. With loyal followers and the attributes of a born leader, Sundiata overcomes these and other challenges in the epic to found the new empire. Under Sundiata, some of Mali's leadership converted to Islam; however,

even with conversion, they maintained important pre-Islamic traditions. The epic demonstrates the prevalence of **syncretism** or the blending of religious beliefs and practices in West Africa. For instance, the epic traces Sundiata's background back to Bilali Bounama, one of the early followers of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, and the powerful pre-Islamic, local clans of the lion and the buffalo. According to oral tradition, Sundiata's ability to draw from both Muslim and traditional African sources of strength allows him to overcome adversity and defeat his less worthy opponents.



Map **17.9.7.4**: The Mali Empire, c. 1350 CE | The empire encompassed over 400,000 miles, including territory in the Sahara Desert, through the Sahel, and into some of the coastal forest. The empire's control over such a large area meant access to a wide range of crops, facilitating agricultural specialization and trade. (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Astrokey44" via Wikimedia Commons)

Like Sundiata, most of the subsequent kings of Mali combined Muslim and local religious traditions. For example, they often completed the "Fifth Pillar" of Islam by performing the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all able Muslims. In the meanwhile, they continued to use pre-Islamic amulets, maintain their animistic beliefs, and consider pre-Islamic sacred sites to be important. Similarly, when they converted, the people living within Mali's cities and those involved in trans-Saharan trade also blended Muslim and traditional beliefs and practices.

Sundiata built the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century and the empire reached its height under Mansa Musa (c. 1280 – 1337 CE), in the early fourteenth century. Through diplomacy and military victories, Sundiata swayed surrounding leaders to relinquish their titles to him. Thus, Sundiata established a sizeable empire with tributary states and became the **mansa**, or emperor, of Mali. Most of the subsequent mansas of Mali maintained their control over the gold-salt trade, the basis of their wealth. Mali also developed a more diversified economy and was recognized in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East as a prosperous trading center.



Figure **17.9.7.5**: The Great Mosque in Djenne | The Great Mosque in Djenne demonstrates the regional architectural style of the Western Sudan. The original structure was likely built in the thirteenth century. The current mosque was rebuilt in the early twentieth century. The wooden scaffolding gives the structure support and also helps men replaster the exterior, which they do every year. The exterior of the mosque is plastered in mud (adobe). (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Ruud Zwart" via Wikimedia Commons)

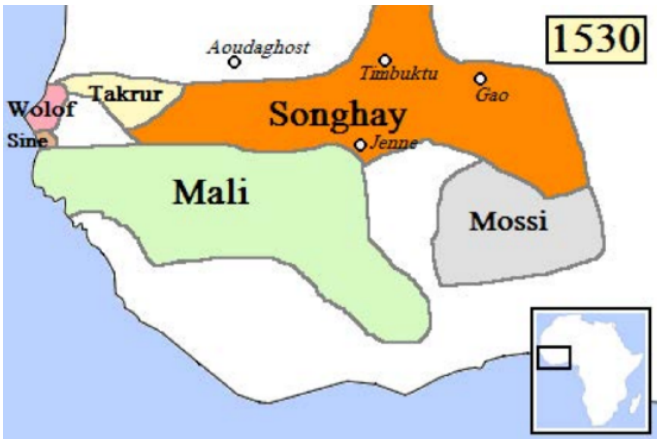
Mansa Musa, who was likely Sundiata's grandson or grandnephew, further developed the empire and made it one of the crossroads of the Medieval Islamic World. Mansa Musa used a large army of approximately 100,000 soldiers to reunify the empire after several tumultuous decades. Under Mansa Musa, Mali stretched much farther east, west, and south than had its predecessor kingdom, Ghana. With its access to very diverse environments, trade in agricultural produce became more important in Mali than it had been in Ghana. Farmers specialized in regional crops and the state operated farms where slaves grew food for the royal family

and the army. Mansa Musa also developed the empire's administration, dividing the territory into provinces and appointing competent governors. With all of these achievements, Mansa Musa is best remembered for going on the hajj from 1324 to 1325 CE. He attracted a great deal of attention traveling in a huge caravan made up of almost 100 camels, 12,000 slaves, and an estimated 30,000 pounds of gold. Local lore claims that he gave out so much gold during his three month stay in Cairo that the price of gold dropped by 25%. Likewise, reportedly after he passed through Alexandria, the value of gold in the city stayed low for a decade. Mansa Musa's impressive display in Northeast Africa and the Middle East boosted Mali's standing in the Islamic World. After his return to Mali, Mansa Musa further cultivated Islamic connections by building new mosques and schools. He hosted Muslim scholars and made cities, including **Timbuktu**, Djenne, and Gao, into centers of learning. Mansa Musa also encouraged the use of Arabic, and the libraries, especially of Timbuktu, became repositories of Islamic manuscripts. The **Catalan Atlas** (Figure **17.9.7.2**) demonstrates Mansa Musa's preeminence. Commissioned by Charles V of France, the 1375 map shows Mansa Musa ruling his empire. He sits atop a gold throne, wearing a gold crown, carrying a gold sceptre, and gauging (or perhaps admiring) a gold nugget. Awash in gold in the Catalan Atlas, Mansa Musa paid for his various projects by collecting tribute from surrounding states and taxing trans-Saharan and inter-regional trade.



Figure **17.9.7.6**: Mansa Musa | An image from the Catalan Atlas that demonstrates Mansa Musa's reputation as the gold-laden king of Medieval Mali. The description reads, "This Black lord is called Musa Mali, Lord of the Black people of Guinea. So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land." (The British Museum. The Wealth of Africa: The Kingdom of Mali, Presentation. www.britishmuseum. org/pdf/KingdomOfMali_Presentation.pdf.) (Public Domain; User "Olivierkeita" via Wikimedia Commons)

Several factors, such as weak leadership, foreign invasions, and rebellions within the tributary states, led to the decline of Mali after Mansa Musa's death. The empire got increasingly smaller through the early fifteenth century. With the decline of Mali, leaders in one of its breakaway tributary states, Songhai (alternatively spelled Songhay), expanded militarily and encroached on Mali's territory. By the late 1460s when he captured Timbuktu, Songhai's leader Sunni Ali had begun to build a new empire, the Songhai Empire, through military conquest.



Map 17.9.7.6: The Songhai (alternatively spelled Songhay) Empire, c. 1530 | Note that by the early sixteenth century, the Songhai Empire encompassed the important trading and religious centers of Timbuktu, Djenne (sometimes spelled Jenne), and Gao. (Public Domain; User "Olivierkeita" via Wikimedia Commons)

17.9.7.3: Songhai

The **Songhai Empire** is most closely associated with the Sorko people who lived alongside the Niger River, southeast of Gao. By about 800 CE, the Sorko had created their own state, Songhai, trading along the river and building a military that used war canoes. With the growth of trans-Saharan trade and eventually the discovery of new gold fields, the Sorko and other ethnic groups in the area established market towns in Songhai. Most of the people who moved to these market towns converted to Islam by the eleventh century. In the early fourteenth century, the Mali Empire collected tribute from Gao, though other parts of the Songhai state remained independent. Using his military to pick off pieces of Mali in its waning years, Sunni Ali built the Songhai state into an empire in the 1460s.

During its Golden Age, the Songhai Empire was ruled by Askia Mohammad I (r. 1493 – 1528). Referred to as Askia the Great, Askia Mohammad I was a devout Muslim, who centralized the empire's administration, encouraged agriculture, and further expanded the state. Askia rose to power as the general-in-chief of the army of Gao. He won a military victory over Sunni Ali's son to found a new dynasty, the Askia dynasty. As a devout Muslim, Askia went on the hajj to Mecca from 1496 – 1497. The pilgrimage brought him international recognition and reinforced his claims to power especially because the Sharif of Mecca bestowed Askia with the title "the Caliph of the Sudan." Upon his return, Askia used Islam to validate attacks on neighboring states, like the Mossi in 1498. He also rebuilt Islamic centers. Leo Africanus, originally from Granada (Spain), traveled through Timbuktu in 1526 and wrote,

> […] There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers, and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many hand-written books imported from Barbary [the coastal regions of North Africa] are also sold. There is more profit made from this commerce than from all other merchandise.[13]

Under Askia, Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao, once again, beckoned scholars and people with commercial aspirations. Taxing gold remained an important source of revenue for the king, but trade expanded to incorporate items such as manuscripts, kola nuts, prisoners of war (who were sold as slaves), horses, and cowry shells (which were used as an internal currency). Additionally, to centralize his administration, Askia appointed loyal Muslim governors to new provinces, replacing hereditary rulers. After his death, Askia's sons, particulary his last son, Askia Dawud (r. 1549 – 1582 CE) continued to generate wealth by taxing trans-Saharan trade. Like their father, they also tended to invest in Songhai's Islamic centers. For example, during the reign of Dawud, there were approximately one hundred and fifty Islamic schools operating in Timbuktu. Askia Dawud's death in 1582 saw the reemergence of power struggles amongst competing rulers and rebellions within tributary states, signaling the end of the Golden Age of Songhai.



Figure **17.9.7.8**: The tomb of Askia the Great built in 1495 in Gao | Note the use of mud (adobe) architecture common in the cities of the Western Sudanic states. People still use the prayer rooms and meeting space at the site. (Public Domain; User "Olivierkeita" via Wikimedia Commons)

Then, the biggest blow to the crumbling Songhai Empire came from the invasion by Morocco in 1591. The Moroccan army used new technology, muzzle-loading firearms, to defeat the Songhai troops. The Songhai state limped along until 1737, but after 1591, it was no longer a unified empire with control over numerous tributary states. For almost 1,000 years, large empires had dominated the Sahel. The leaders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, each in turn, taxed trans-Saharan trade and grew powerful. They built their empires with urban centers, strong militaries, and numerous tributary states. However, the Moroccan invasion eroded their power. Furthermore, the Age of Exploration, begun by the Portuguese in their progress down the West Africa coast in the fifteenth century, redirected trade. Trans-Saharan trade diminished and was largely replaced by trade up and down the Atlantic coast of West Africa.

17.9.7.4: Endnotes

10 Jacob Davidson, "The 10 Richest People of All Time," Time (July 2015) time.com/money/3977798/the-10...e-of-all-time/

11 "Musa's Money." BBC. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02f9r6g

12 Quoted in "Kingdom of Ghana: Primary Source Documents." African Studies Center. Boston University Pardee School of Global Studies. http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/k_o_ghana

13 "Leo Africanus: Description of Timbuktu." From The Description of Africa (1526). public.wsu.edu/~brians/world_civ/worldcivreader/world_civ_reader_2/leo_africanus.html

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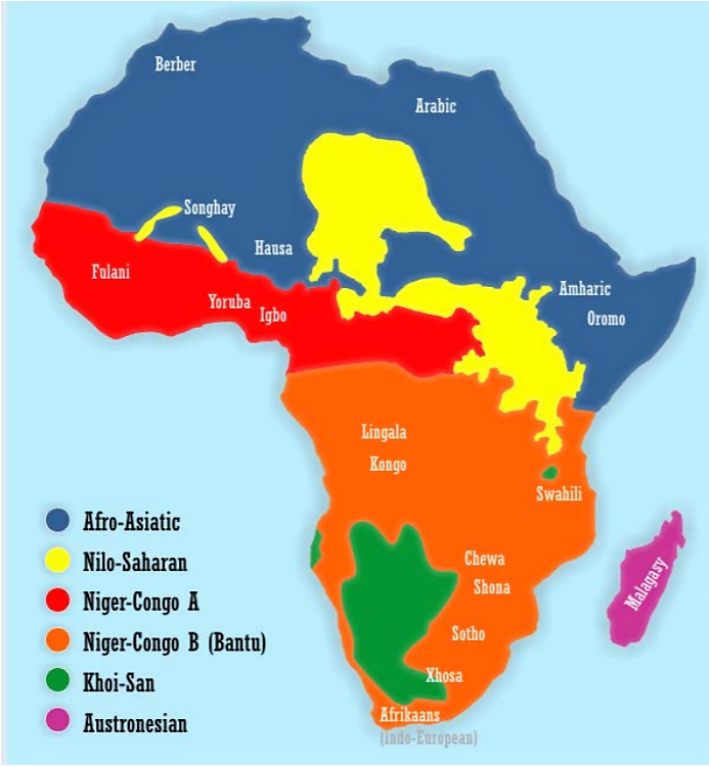
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17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe

Most of the languages indigenous to Africa belong to one of the major language groups shown in Map **17.9.8.1**. Over the past several decades, historians of Africa have started to pay more attention to these language groups. They use comparisons of core vocabulary words in related languages to examine the spread of ancient technologies and the interaction between peoples. Using linguistics (the study of languages), historians corroborate information found in other sources, like oral traditions of dynastic origins and archaeological findings.

Today's scholars are not the first ones to notice linguistic similarities on the continent. During European colonization one hundred and fifty years ago, anthropologists grouped Africans into "tribes" based on presumed physical, cultural, and linguistic similarites. Involved in this classification, anthropologists and others noticed striking similarities amongst the languages spoken by about 400 different ethnic groups in the southern and eastern third of the continent. They found that people in most of Sub-Saharan Africa spoke languages that used the root *–ntu* to refer to person, with the prefix *ba-* added in the plural. Combining the root and the plural prefix, nineteenth-century colonial anthropologists referred to people in these communities as *Bantu* and later traced Bantu languages back to a root, a mother language spoken in parts of Cameroon and Nigeria. To explain the similarities in the languages, European scholars hypothesized that about 2,000 years ago there was a **Bantu Migration**, a massive departure of thousands of Bantu speakers from the Bantu homeland. As they described, Bantu-speakers imposed iron technology and traditions of agriculture on the peoples they encountered in eastern and southern Africa. Influenced by their own conceptions of colonization, nineteenth century anthropologists portayed the Bantu Migration as a rapid conquest of Sub-Saharan hunter-gatherer societies by the technologically advanced, Iron Age Bantu speakers.



Map **17.9.8.1**: Map showing the Distribution of the Six Major Language Families in Africa | While it is not marked, the Bantu homeland was in parts of Nigeria and Cameroon. From 3000 BCE to 1500 CE, Bantu (or Niger-Congo B) languages spread slowly and unevenly from the Bantu homeland through most of southern and eastern Africa. (CC BY-SA 2.5; Mark Dingemanse via Wikimedia Commons)

Since the 1990s, historians of Africa have used linguistics to reject some pieces of the nineteenth-century description of the Bantu Migration. Referring instead to Bantu expansions, they generally agree that the movement of Bantu speakers was more of a slow diffusion of languages and technologies that lasted about 4500 years, from roughly 3000 BCE to 1500 CE. Bantu speakers took multiple routes, and sometimes their movement occurred on the scale of a single family, as opposed to a mass of thousands. From the linguistic evidence, historians also suspect that both Bantu speakers and those they settled amongst contributed ideas and

technologies; there was mutual "teaching and learning from one another."[14] The current view of the Bantu expansions is much more complex as it recognizes give and take between Bantu newcomers and indigenous populations. For example, some indigenous populations rejected Bantu languages, while others repackaged Bantu technologies incorporating their own innovations. There was no Bantu migratory conquest of indigenous communities. Instead, the study of linguistics seems to confirm that Bantu languages, iron-working, and agriculture slowly spread through eastern and southern Africa in the early centuries CE.

These corrections are important because they allow scholars to much more accurately discuss state formation in southern Africa. In the colonial era, European scholars sometimes jumped to misleading conclusions when they encountered evidence of early African states. For example, in 1871 when the German geographer Carl Maunch saw the ruins of an impressive civilization, Great Zimbabwe, he concluded that people from Yemen must have built the grand structures. Biased by nineteenth-century racism, Maunch assumed that Africans were incapable of statehood and the skilled masonry techniques evident at Great Zimbabwe. Subsequent Europeans reached similar conclusions upon viewing the site, attributing the civilization to Phoenecians and Arabs. Some white supremicists in southern Africa clung onto this fabricated history of Great Zimbabwe's foreign origins until the early 1990s.



Figure **17.9.8.1**: The Ruins of the Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe in the Mosvingo Province of present-day Zimbabwe (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Macvivo" via Wikimedia Commons)

In the meantime, a number of scholars had confirmed the African origins of Great Zimbabwe. Archaeologists showed that Great Zimbabwe had features, like stone masonry and rituals involving cattle, found in nearby African kingdoms. Historians used oral tradition and linguistics to track African state formation in the region and show that Great Zimbabwe was a Bantu civilization. Archaeologists and historians concluded that from approximately 1200 to 1450 CE, **Great Zimbabwe** was the thriving commercial and political center of a rich southern African state.



Figure **17.9.8.2**: The Hill Complex at Great Zimbabwe (Public Domain; Jan Derk via Wikimedia Commons)

During the Middle Ages, a prosperous elite based in Great Zimbabwe ruled over about 300 settlements on the Zimbabwe Plateau. Great Zimbabwe and the linked settlements had similarly constructed walled enclosures, practiced mixed farming (they grew crops and kept livestock), and used iron, copper, and bronze. The 300 settlements paid tribute in the form of ivory, gold, cattle, and crops to the rulers in Great Zimbabwe. The wealth generated through the collection of tribute helped Great Zimbabwe become a center of trade and artistry. Great Zimbabwe exported gold and ivory to cities like Sofala and Kilwa Kisanwani, on the East African coast. From the coast, these goods were carried to the Persian Gulf, India, and China. In exchange, Great Zimbabwe's elite imported luxury items like stoneware, colored glass beads, and cotton. Out of these imports, artisans based in Great Zimbabwe made jewelry, ornaments, and cloth for elite consumption.

The architectural evidence of Great Zimbabwe's social hierachies is one of the most dramatic elements of the site's ruins. Covering three square miles, the ruins of Great Zimbabwe consists of many clusters of stone buildings. The most famous structures are the Hill Complex (Figure **17.9.8.2**) and the Great Enclosure (Figure **17.9.8.1**). The stone buildings were constructed with local granite, and the stones were stacked without mortar. Scholars hypothesize that the ruling elite resided and performed ceremonies on the Hill Complex, symbolically demonstrating their authority with the height and separation of the complex. From about 1300 CE, more than 15,000 people lived in the valley below them in small, circular homes with thatched roofs and walls made of clay and gravel. The Hill Complex overlooked a number of other structures, including the famous Great Enclosure. With its stone walls up to thirty-five feet tall, the Great Enclosure was the largest structure in precolonial sub-Saharan Africa. The Great Enclosure was a ceremonial site, perhaps used by religious leaders or as a site for the initation of youth. Scholars disagree about its exact function, but suggest that the Great Enclosure further demonstrated the status and wealth of the capital city and the ruling classes.

Great Zimbabwe declined in the fifteenth century and was abandoned by 1450 CE. Some scholars suggest that the site deteriorated because it was supporting up to 30,000 people and thus became too crowded, deforested, and stripped bare of resources through overuse. Surrounding gold mines may have also been depleted. In any case, trade shifted to support the rise of two new kingdoms, Batua to the west and Mutapa to the east. Both kingdoms built stone walls like those seen in Great Zimbabwe and practiced mixed agriculture, using cattle for ceremonies and as symbols of the ruling elite's power. From the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, the kingdoms also faced the Portuguese and the influx of other African populations. The Mutapa Kingdom lasted the longest, enduring until 1760. Overall, this rewritten history of southern African statehood acknowledges the significance of the Bantu expansions that brought agriculture and iron to many regions. It also celebrates the African origins of great civilizations and demonstrates how Africans shared technologies and cultural practices across the Zimbabwean plateau.

17.9.8.1: Endnotes

14 As quoted in Brizuela-Garcia, Esperanza and Trevor Getz, *African Histories: New Sources and New Techniques for Studying African Pasts*. Boston: Prentice Hall, 2012: 43.

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17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)

In the tenth century CE, a grand Persian sultan, Sultan Ali ibn Sulaiman al-Shirazi sailed to Kilwa Kisiwani, an island off the East African coast. When he arrived, he was generous and people liked him, which enabled him to marry the daughter of Mrimba, the local headman. The newlyweds were set up to live more or less happily ever after. However, Sultan Ali and Mrimba made a deal, brokered by Mrimba's daughter. The deal gave Sultan Ali control of the island in exchange for enough cloth for Mrimba to "walk on it from the island to his new abode on the mainland."[15] The deal went through and Mrimba moved to the mainland, but then Mrimba regretted relinguishing his position and plotted to militarily retake the island from his son-in-law. In response, Sultan Ali used magic from the Qur'an to stop Mrimba's plot. By reading the Qur'an in a special way, Sultan Ali kept the sea levels high, which confined Mrimba to the mainland, where he gave up and retired. Upon Mrimba's death, his mainland territory passed to the son of Sultan Ali who also ruled Kilwa Kisiwani. In this oral tradition, the union of Mrimba's daughter and Sultan Ali forged a new Muslim family, with Persian and African ancestry, that ruled Kilwa Kisiwani and the mainland coast.



Map **17.9.9.1**: The Swahili Coast of East Africa | From 1000 to 1500 CE, numerous Swahili states emerged along this 1,000 mile stretch from Mogadishu in the north (present-day Somalia) to Sofala in the south (present-day Mozambique). (Public Domain; George McCall Theal via Wikimedia Commons)

The above version is just one account of Kilwa Kisiwani's origins; nevertheless, it conveys some very important elements of Swahili identity. Starting at least by the thirteenth century CE, in response to resident Arab merchants who scorned non-Muslims and some African practices, African elites in East Africa claimed descent from Shirazis (Persians) and to have been early converts to Islam. In some cases, the connections may have been exaggerated or inaccurate from a historical standpoint. However, regardless of their accuracy, these stories demonstrate some of the defining features of Swahili identity.

As it controlled gold coming from Great Zimbabwe, Kilwa Kisiwani became one of the most prosperous of the **Swahili city-states**. From 1000 to 1500 CE, Swahili city-states were wealthy urban areas connected both to the African interior and the larger Indian Ocean World. Dozens of Swahili city-states running down the East African coast from Mogadishu to Sofala, and including islands off the coast, were commercial centers, tied together by a shared identity, not an overarching political structure. In addition to Islam and claims to Persian ancestry, Swahili identity also became associated with Indian Ocean trade, an urban style, and a shared language (Swahili).

Historians of Africa trace the origins of the Swahili city-states to the Bantu expansions, explaining that by the first century CE, Bantu farmers had built communities along the East African coast. They traded with southern Arabia, southeast Asia, and occasionally Greece and Rome. Although trade contracted after the fall of the Roman Empire, it rebounded several hundred years later. At that time, residents of the Swahili city-states played a pivotal role as middlemen, selling gold, timber, ivory, resins, coconut oil, and slaves from the interior regions of Africa to traders arriving from throughout the Indian Ocean World. In return, Swahili elites bought imported glass, porcelain, silk, spices, and cloth. The seasonal **monsoon winds** that allowed trade between the Swahili coast and southern Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and southeast Asia also facilitated cultural exchange. Blowing towards the East African coast three to four months of the year and reversing several months later, the monsoon winds stranded traders for months at a time, encouraging intermarriage and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the wealth of the Swahili coast attracted Persian and Arab immigrants. With African, Arabian, and southeast Asian influences, Swahili culture became a blended culture as, for example, the Swahili language incorporated loan words from Arabic and Hindi.

One of the quintisessential features of the Swahili city-states from 1000 to 1500 CE was their urban style. A few families made up the elite, ruling classes, while most people in the cities were less wealthy, working as craftsmen, artisans, clerks, and sailors. People in villages along the coast could also identify as Swahili. Claimants of Swahili identity spoke the Swahili language and were Muslim. Archaeology shows that emerging Swahili cities had mosques and Muslim burial grounds starting in the eighth century CE. By their height, the Swahili city-states were distinctly Muslim; they had large mosques built of local coral stone. The Swahili, regardless of their economic status, drew a distinction between themselves as Muslims and the “uncultured,” non-Muslim Africans of the interior.

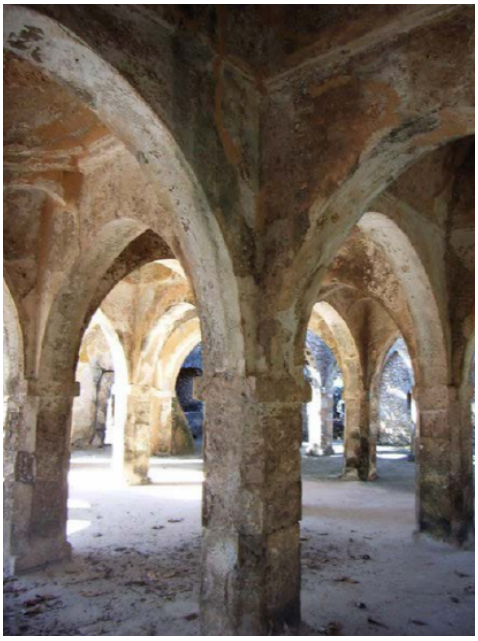


Figure **17.9.9.1**: The Great Mosque at Kilwa Kisawani | Sultan Suleiman ibn Muhammed (r. 1421 – 1442 CE) improved the mosque. The mosque was constructed of coral blocks, which became a defining feature of urban Swahili architecture. (Public Domain; Claude McNab via Wikimedia Commons)

The elite families played a role in fashioning Swahili urban style. In addition to tracing their descent back to some of the earliest Muslim settlers from Persia, they embraced Islam, financing mosques, practicing purdah (the seclusion of women), and hosting large religious celebrations. Their Muslim identity stimulated trade, as visiting Muslim merchants felt comfortable extending credit to them and living with their Swahili host families while waiting for the winds to turn. By 1350 CE, the urban style of Swahili city-states exhibited a distinguishing architecture. Many of the cities became “stone towns” with wealthy Swahili families constructing multi-level homes out of the coarse coral. The Swahili elite used their stone houses to establish themselves as prominent, creditworthy citizens. They wore imported silk and cotton and ate off imported porcelain to further display their status. Like other Swahili, the ruling classes distinguished themselves from non-Muslims of the interior. They may have been partially moved to draw this distinction by their desire to sell as slaves people captured in the neighboring, non-Muslim communities.

Slavery within the **Indian Ocean World**, the zone of contact and interaction connecting people living adjacent to the Indian Ocean, began well before the spread of Islam in the seventh century CE. During the high point of the Swahili city-states, Muslim traders controlled the slave trade within the Indian Ocean World. Slaves tended to be captives of war sold to the Arabian Peninsula and regions near the Persian Gulf. Slaves were put to work as sailors, agricultural laborers, pearl divers, domestic workers, concubines, and musicians. Our information about the everyday lives of slaves in this region is very limited.

In one famous revolt, slaves from East Africa (the Zanj), who were forced to work on sugar plantations and salt flats near Basra (in present-day Iraq), seriously challenged the power of the Abbasid Caliphate. Led by Ali ibn Muhammad, the Zanj rose up in the **Zanj Rebellion**, a guerrilla war against the Abbasids. For fourteen years, the Zanj and their supporters, altogether an estimated 15,000 people, raided towns, seized weapons and food, and freed slaves. They captured Basra and came within seventy miles of Baghdad, the Abbasid capital. The rebels created their own state with fortresses, a navy, tax collection, and their own coinage. At enormous cost, the Abbasids finally put down the revolt in 883 CE using a large army and by offering amnesty to the rebels. Scholars have used the Zanj Rebellion to examine the scope of the Indian Ocean trade in East African slaves, the conditions of slavery in the Indian Ocean World, and the agency (the ability to exert their own will) of slaves. Some of these scholars suggest that the Zanj Rebellion led Muslims in Arabia to largely abandon the practice of using East African slaves as plantation laborers. The rebellion helps them explain why the Indian Ocean slave trade developed differently than the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

While there were some similarities between the trans-Atlantic trade that brought slaves to the Americas and the slave trade within the Indian Ocean World, there were important differences. Both slave trades took Africans, contributing to an **African diaspora**, or a dispersal of African peoples and their descendants, all over the world. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, which lasted approximately 300 years and reached its peak in the eighteenth century CE, forced approximately 12 million people, mostly from West Africa, into the Americas. The slave trade within the Indian Ocean lasted much longer, about 2000 years, and was generally smaller in scale. Scholars suggest that African slaves in the Indian Ocean World had more social mobility, especially since many of them were skilled soldiers. Also, according to Islamic precepts, slaves had some basic rights and could be incorporated into the households that they served. Theoretically, a freeborn Muslim could not be enslaved. Unlike slavery in the Americas, slavery within the Indian Ocean World was not racially codified, so freed slaves did not automatically face racial discrimination. And due to their reproductive capacities, women were more sought after as slaves within the Indian Ocean World, while the trans-Atlantic slave trade had the highest demand for young men. Despite these general trends, there was great individual variation within the slave experience.

Moving up the East African coast in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese sacked some Swahili cities and tried to tax trade. In 1498, when they happened upon the Swahili coast, the Portuguese were trying to establish a direct sea route to the riches of India and China. After using an East African guide to reach India, the Portuguese began to set up a **Trading Post Empire**, which intended to tax trade within the Indian Ocean. The Trading Post Empire consisted of a series of forts along the Indian Ocean coast where Portuguese administrators collected taxes and issued trade permits. In the early 1500s, the Portuguese returned to the Swahili city-states to enforce their will. As the Swahili city-states did not have a unified political structure or large armies, the Portuguese successfully looted and destroyed some Swahili cities. However, the Portuguese cultural influence and their ability to enforce tax collection was very limited north of Mozambique. The Portuguese did not move inland beyond the coastal cities and, by and large, trade within the Indian Ocean continued without a great deal of Portuguese interference. However, the Portuguese presence encouraged Swahili leaders to ally with the Omanis from southern Arabia. In 1699, the Omanis, working with some Swahili rulers, seized Mombasa from the Portuguese, and began an era of Omani dominance of the Swahili coast.

17.9.9.1: Endnotes

15 John Middleton, The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994): 31-32

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17.9.10: Conclusion

These African states showcase the continent's connections to the rest of the world, a multitude of African innovations, and the importance of using a variety of methodologies to interrogate long-held assumptions about Africa.

Africa was not isolated. Instead, oceans and deserts were "highways" in these periods. Aksum, the Western Sudanic states, Great Zimbabwe, and the Swahili coast were all commercially linked to Europe, the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, southeast Asia, and even China. Although there were local differences, the ruling classes in each of the states collected tribute from outlying areas and participated in long-distance trade. The wealth of these states supported labor specialization, urbanization, and other innovations.

African states contributed to great cultural change. As just one case in point, Ethiopia, the Western Sudanic states, and the Swahili city-states all experienced religious transformations. Not only did Ethiopia serve as a sanctuary for both Christians and Muslims, but Ethiopians also established their own Church, the Ethopian Orthodox Church. Starting in the thirteenth century CE, Western Sudanic rulers converted to Islam, maintaining some of their pre-Islamic beliefs while building their connections with the rest of the Islamic World. Medieval African cities like Timbuktu benefitted from these connections. They attracted traders as reports of African gold circulated far and wide. Taxing the gold trade, Western Sudanic rulers developed these cities as both trading depots and places of scholarly learning. The Swahili in coastal East Africa also embraced Islam as one of the defining features of their identity. Their urban style reflected the centrality of Islam, which they believed distinguished them as cultured and refined. All four states also developed numerous other innovations, such as those in art, architecture, metal-working, agriculture, and political organization.

Before the twentieth century, foreigners recorded much of Africa's written history. There are limitation to their accounts, meaning that a number of written documents about Africa are misleading, at best. Many African societies remembered their own histories orally, using professionalized classes of historians, storytellers, and musicians, in addition to proverbs and the teachings of elders. Over the past fifty years, historians of Africa have done more to incorporate Africa's oral traditions into their examination of the ancient past. They have also used linguistics and archaeology to create a more accurate written history of the continent and reclaim African civilizations.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.10: The Americas

17.10.1: Chronology

17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas

17.10.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.10.4: Key Terms

17.10.5: Mesoamerica

17.10.6: The Maya

17.10.7: The Aztec

17.10.8: Early Andes

17.10.9: North America

17.10.10: Conclusion

17.10.11: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.10.12: Links to Primary Sources

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17.10.1: Chronology

18,000 – 15,000 BCE First humans migrate to the Americas

c. 13,000 BCE Big game hunters inhabit the Great Plains

c. 10,000 BCE Mesoamericans begin to cultivate squash

10,000 – 3,500 BCE Paleo-Indian Period

5600 – 3000 BCE Early Plains Archaic Period

2000 BCE – 250 CE Preclassic or Formative period in Mesoamerica

c. 1900 BCE Mesoamericans begin to make pottery

1800 – 800 BCE Late Initial Period in Peru

1500 – 400 BCE Middle Formative Period in Mesoamerica. Peak of Olmec statue carving

c. 1000 BCE Maize becomes widespread in North America

400 BCE – 100 CE Late Formative Period in Mesoamerica

200 BCE The Moche begin their conquest of Peru's north coast

200 BCE – 400 CE The Hopewell culture flourishes in North America

100 BCE – 600 CE The Nazca culture flourishes in Peru

400s CE Tiwankau founded

550 CE Teotihuacán reaches 125,000 residents

700 CE The Huari Empire reaches its height

700 – 1400 CE Cahokia

750 CE Tikal reaches 80,000 residents

800 CE The Toltec city of Tula reaches a population of 35,000

1000 CE The Chimu establish the capital city of Chan Chan

1050 CE The population of Chaco Canyon's five great pueblos reaches 5,000 inhabitants

1325 CE Tenochtitlán founded

1471 CE Death of Inca Pachacuti

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17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas

> This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porticoes, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying, and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise that the world affords, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers. …There is also an herb street, where may be obtained all sorts of roots and medicinal herbs that the country affords. There are apothecaries' shops, where prepared medicines, liquids, ointments, and plasters are sold; barbers' shops, where they wash and shave the head; and restaurateurs, that furnish food and drink at a certain price. There is also a class of men like those called in Castile porters, for carrying burdens….Painters' colors, as numerous as can be found in Spain, and as fine shades; deerskins dressed and undressed, dyed different colors; earthenware of a large size and excellent quality; large and small jars, jugs, pots, bricks, and an endless variety of vessels, all made of fine clay, and all or most of them glazed and painted; **Maize**, or Indian corn, in the grain and in the form of bread, preferred in the grain for its flavor to that of the other islands and terrafirma; pâtés of birds and fish; great quantities of fish, fresh, salt, cooked and uncooked ; the eggs of hens, geese, and of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great abundance, and cakes made of eggs; finally, everything that can be found throughout the whole country is sold in the markets, comprising articles so numerous that to avoid prolixity and because their names are not retained in my memory, or are unknown to me, I shall not attempt to enumerate them.[1]

The above is from Hernán Cortez's description of **Tenochtitlán**, the Aztec capital he and his Tlazcalan allies conquered in 1521. As the Spanish explorers in the Americas, and later the French, English, and Dutch, saw monetary gain from reporting their exploits to their respective monarchs, we often end up with a stilted or incomplete version of the Americas before 1500. Part of this can be attributed to the bias of European explorers, and misinterpretation of Native American beliefs and practices.

Undoubtedly the most misunderstood practice was that of human sacrifice witnessed by the Spanish conquerors of the Aztec Empire. Among Mesoamerican and Andean peoples alike there was a belief that all life, cosmic, human, animal, and plant alike, grew beneath the soil and sprung forth above the surface. Furthermore, humans had a role in nurturing that life cycle. In many of the cultures we will discuss, shamanism was an important religious tradition whereby shamans or religious specialists could control the forces of the natural world. Often shamans would conduct ceremonies requiring sacrifice from members of his community to ensure cosmic and earthly order. While the Spanish (and Hollywood) tend to focus on more dramatic ceremonies where hearts are cut from living warriors, other kinds of sacrifices in Mesoamerica and the Andes were integrated in hundreds of ways into daily life. For many cultures ritual bloodletting was a widespread practice, but one where the injured party survived to perform the ceremony the next year. Often times, human-shaped grain cakes would serve as stand-ins for actual human participants. Most sacrifices in fact were actually offerings or prayers to Mesoamerican or Andean deities. For example a Nahua newborn might be named in honor of Maya rulers. Or the first corn tortilla of the day might be consumed in honor of the sun.[2] These beliefs would eventually be manifest in physical structures like a cave under Teotihuacán's Pyramid of the Sun in Mexico or sunken plazas at Chavín de Huantar in Peru and Tiwanaku in Bolivia. These sacred spaces were constructed beneath the earth's surface to allow the cultures aboveground easier access to the Earth's creative capacity.

As historians, it also is helpful to point out some of our myopic tendencies regarding the peopling of the Americas. In Chapter One we talked about discrepancies regarding the date at which *Homo sapiens* arrived in the Americas. While there is evidence supporting an overland migration from Beringia, and geographically speaking the Beringia migration is the most logical explanation, some scholars argue that this approach has become "dogma" and even "ideology," leaving no room for evidence that may challenge this explanation. While we cannot argue that we are close to abandoning the Beringian migration as the most likely theory, there is mounting evidence that suggests a seaborne migration from Asia or even a "Solutrean" migration from Europe ten thousand years before an ice-free corridor opened up in North America.[3] Considering new theories may help us explain how the Americas came to be populated and how civilizations developed so quickly here.

A third weakness in our narrative of the Americas involves the demographic collapse of the indigenous population that occurred after the arrival of European diseases. Especially in the Circum-Caribbean, millions of indigenous peoples succumbed to European disease and overwork in the first decades of the sixteenth century, giving them little opportunity to construct their own historical narrative apart from the one that Europeans were writing.

Keeping these limitations in mind, our task in this chapter is to admire a pre-Columbian history where in a little over 15,000 years migrants from Asia (probably) populated the Americas by foot, built hundreds of major cities, supported a population in the tens of millions, and constructed two of the most impressive empires the world has ever known. Fortunately recent advances in archaeology and calendrics have helped us uncover much of this pre-Columbian past that had been largely clouded by our obsession with the triumph and tragedy of the European conquest.

17.10.2.1: Endnotes

1 Hernán Cortez. Second letter to Charles V, Mexico, 1520. https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/ classroom-content/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-conquest-of-mexico/letters-from-hernan-cortes/cortes-describes-tenochtitlan

2 Kay Almere Read and Jason J. Gonzalez, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 25-26.

3 Bruce Bradley and Dennis Stanford, "The North Atlantic Ice-Edge Corridor: A Possible Palaeolithic Route to the New World," *World Archaeology* 36:4 (December 2004):460.

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17.10.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. What crops were first domesticated in the Americas and where?
2. What did we learn from the **Olmec** about the transition from chiefdoms to states?
3. How did the Maya support such rapid urbanization?
4. What were some of the features of urban life in **Teotihuacán** and **Tenochtitlán**?
5. How did **The Moche**, **Huari**, and **Chimu** build their regional influence?
6. How did the Inca use local resources to build their empire?
7. What was the role of Macchu Picchu within the Inca Empire?
8. How were cultures of the North American West able to overcome limited rainfall?
9. What traits did mound building cultures of North America share?

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17.10.4: Key Terms

- Aspero
- Ayllu
- Cahokia
- Chaco Canyon
- Chan Chan
- Chavín de Huantar
- Chiapas
- Chumash
- Coricancha
- Cuzco
- Great Bison Belt
- Hopewell
- Huaca de la Luna
- Huaca del Sol
- Huari
- Huayna Capac
- La Venta
- Machu Picchu
- Maiz de Ocho
- Maize
- Mesoamerica
- Norte Chico
- Olmec
- Pachacuti
- Pithouses
- San Lorenzo
- Tenochtitlán
- Teotihuacán
- The Aztec Empire
- The Chimu Kingdom
- The Moche
- The Nazca
- Tikal
- Tiwanaku
- Toltec

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17.10.5: Mesoamerica

This discussion of the Americas before 1500 begins in the "middle." Although scholars believe that man migrated to Beringia and hence North America first, **Mesoamerica** was the first section of the Americas where scholars have found evidence of large settlements, agriculture, and unique cultural traditions, so this chapter starts there. The Mesoamerican culture area is found in what are now the modern countries of Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, and eastern Honduras. The region's frequent volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and hurricanes gave it quite a staggering amount of ecological diversity including mountains, coastal plains, and a peninsular limestone platform (the Yucatán). The region's climatic diversity is attributable to the fact that it sits in both tropical and subtropical latitudes.

Less is known about migration to Mesoamerica than for North and South America during the Paleoindian period, but many scholars put people in the region by 15,000 BCE. These early residents hunted large and small game alike and consumed a wide range of plant resources. The Archaic period in Mesoamerica stretched from 8000 to 2000 BCE, during which scores of cultures adapted to the region's ecological diversity by domesticating wild food sources like "beans, squash, amaranth, peppers, and wild Maize (*teosinte*)."[4] The maize of large kernels of today took thousands of years of domestication for Mesoamericans to produce, but by the formative period it was a staple crop supporting tens of thousands. Groups living closer to the coast could also take advantage of wetland crops, such as manioc.

17.10.5.1: Early Farming in Mesoamerica

Just as early farmers in Southwest Asia turned wild plants into domestic crops, so too did their contemporaries in Mesoamerica with maize, squash, and tubers. Foragers in the southern Mexican highlands lived on a diverse diet of plants and animals, including cactus fruit, corn, squash, beans, fish, deer, and rabbits. Their contemporaries in the tropical lowlands further south consumed tubers like manioc, sweet potato, arrowroot as well as fruits like avocadoes. While Mesoamericans did domesticate most of these crops, they did so before becoming sedentary, a fact revealing the existence of regional variations in the path to agriculture. Around 10,000 years ago, Mesoamericans began to cultivate squash, both as a food source and as storage containers. Rather than staying near their cultivated land, however, early planters formed mobile "agricultural bands" that still hunted and would return to harvest mature squash or chilies. Over time, these bands planted more and hunted less until eventually they formed sedentary agricultural villages. But that process took at least 2,000 years. In fact, it may have been in the much denser tropics in and around Panama where residents first left foraging behind for agriculture. Around 10,000 BCE, after the extinction of megafauna, these tropical peoples begun to cultivate their forest environment. Tropical cultivation tended to be cramped, but tropical residents did manage to domesticate the tubers like manioc, sweet potato and arrowroot that we mentioned above.[5]

Over the next several centuries, village dwellings themselves revealed a growing emphasis on permanence and increasing sophistication. Brick walls and plaster floors began to replace hides and sticks. Unlike round huts, new rectangular houses allowed for expansion by extending walls and adding a perpendicular end wall. Expanding permanent dwellings allowed villages to grow through natural population increase. Permanent dwellings also helped establish distinctions between public and private space and public and private activities, effecting communal and private property. Not only did villages have to decide where and how to build, they also had to organize around when to plant, where to settle, when to harvest, and where to store the food. The invention of pottery during this period served storage needs tremendously. Tasks in construction, gathering, defense, and food production became more specialized and supervised, leading to the beginnings of class. The elite developed, a strata usually comprising warriors, priests, and administrators.

17.10.5.2: The Formative Period

By the beginning of the Formative Period around 2000 BCE, most residents of Mesoamerica were sedentary, many living in small bands that moved only seasonally.[6] However, by 300 CE many of these small bands had been replaced by quite common large urban centers. This was a rapid transition, to say the least. This rapidity was possible because of greater use of domesticated crops and storage and improved technology, like pottery vessels. Pottery appeared between 1900 BCE and 1750 BCE on the Pacific coast of **Chiapas** in highland valleys and on the Gulf coast. After about 1400 BCE, scholars start to see widespread sharing of obsidian, shell, jade, and iron artifacts, a sharing which denotes significant interaction by this point. A social hierarchy also began to develop in Chiapas, where there was a two-tiered settlement hierarchy of small centers and villages. In other words, the elite had bigger

houses. Over time and in more areas, plastered floors and dirt floors appeared in different dwellings and altars in others. Burials too indicated social differentiation.



Map **17.10.5.1**: Map of the Formative Era Sites, c. 600 BCE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Madman2001" via Wikimedia Commons)

The **Olmec** were the earliest civilization in Mesoamerica and, therefore, drove much of this rapid development. The Olmec developed along the Gulf of Mexico and flourished during the Early Formative and Middle Formative (1500 – 400 BCE), while the Late Formative (400 BCE – 100 CE) saw their evolution and transformation. Scholars use this timeline with the caveat that Mesoamerica houses a number of unique cultural traditions, and there are variations within this timeline in terms of when they developed urbanization, states, agriculture, and certain technologies. The Olmecs' most notable accomplishment was their monumental stone sculpture. Other Mesoamerican cultures had stone monuments, but the Olmec versions were unique in their sophistication, size, and number. A common theme occurs during the coherent tradition spanning 1400 BCE to 400 BCE. Statues were carved out of thrones or in low relief on stelae. The largest of them weighed over forty tons. Stones had been transported as much as ninety km from their sources. The labor required to do this demonstrates the power of these rulers. Aside from statue carving, Olmec elites also commissioned carved columns, drains, and embellishments in large houses. An inordinate amount of iron trade also occurred, and objects like polished iron mirrors were found in the tombs of high-ranking individuals. The import of jade sculptures was perhaps even more prominent with thousands of tons of "serpentine blocks" buried in massive offerings at the Olmec center of **La Venta** in southern Mexico.[7]

Many of these monuments were commissioned by or for elite members of an increasingly sophisticated socio-economic hierarchy first seen in the Early Formative Olmec of **San Lorenzo**. San Lorenzo itself stood at the apex of a three- or four-tiered settlement hierarchy which included subordinate centers, villages, and special purpose sites. This increasing sophistication became solidified through Olmec politics as well. Early in the Formative Period most groups were organized in tribes, but the Olmec soon began to form a set of chiefdoms that allowed for organized leadership across generations, albeit through kinship ties. The Olmec also became the first civilization in the region to develop a state, where the same hierarchy became more stratified and institutions became more specialized.

Some scholars even call the Olmec an "empire," but most say it falls short for a few important reasons. First, the Olmec never had a large enough population at their disposal to form a conquering army. Second, while there existed a number of significant urban Olmec sites, such as La Venta and San Lorenzo, none of them has been identified as an Olmec capital. Finally, the art and archeological records of surrounding societies don't indicate an Olmec domination but rather the existence of something of a theocratic state, as elites seemed to have both political and religious authority and a considerable amount of influence.

Final questions related to our understanding of the region are: Why did the Olmec evolve at all, and why did they evolve when they did? One theory involves the ecological relationship to Mesoamerica's lowland environment. Another holds that increasing productivity led to high population growth, which caused a pressure to organize politically. Control of these resources as well as the limited use of warfare accounted largely for the authority of individual chieftains. Other scholars have added to this observation, pointing out that the abundance but lack of diversity of Olmec area agriculture forced them to develop a competitive advantage vis-

à-vis societies that lived closer to obsidian, salt, and stone deposits. (The Olmec would need to trade for these resources that were central for hunting and food production). A more sophisticated society would have that advantage.

Once the Olmec did manage to organize as states, they began to plan for their permanence. From the above-mentioned stone deposits, the Olmec produced their cultural hallmark: monumental stone sculpture. Around 1650 BCE, the Olmec began to produce stone effigy bowls, but these are much smaller than the monumental sculptures that followed. Over 200 known monumental stone sculptures remain; one-third are from San Lorenzo and the surrounding area. The colossal heads are the largest; some stand up to three and a half meters tall. Each head is unique, containing its own ear ornaments, headdress, specific facial features, and expressions. Most scholars think they are portraits. Table top altars have been found in a range of sizes across Olmec sites. Most now believe they served as thrones but others believe they served as altars as well. They often show humans emerging from a niche in front of the monument. The Olmec also crafted smaller sculptures in the round. These sculptures incorporated human and supernatural themes or humans in ritual or symbolic postures. A fourth sculptural style, one that corresponds to later periods, was stelae. These stelae often depicted supernatural beings and elaborately dressed individuals engaged in specific actions. These stone sculptures would be impressive for modern humans to achieve but are made more impressive considering the fact that the Olmec possessed no metal tools with which to cut them.



Figure **17.10.5.1**: Olmec Colossal Head, La Venta, Mexico (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Hajor" via Wikimedia Commons)

The purpose behind these sculptures, outside of their artistic value, seems to have involved monumentality. Stone as a whole gave a sense of order, stability, and equilibrium. The harmonic proportions in the works enhanced those ideas. The sculptures also contained a good enough mix of naturalism and abstraction to give a nod to the spiritual world as well. For the Olmec as shamanists, a direct connection existed between order on earth and order in the spiritual world. Olmec shamans, through ritual and through the assistance of their *nagual* (also referred to as *nagualo*) or "animal spirit companions," could travel to the supernatural world or guard against spirits who desired them harm.[8] Therefore, a number of altars and smaller sculptures show human-jaguar or human-dragon anthropomorphs, particularly those that reflect the existence of a gateway or portal between worlds. La Venta Altar 4, for example, had an earthly purpose as a throne and a symbolic one as a cosmological model. When the Olmec ruler sat on the throne he could be present in both the natural and supernatural realms. This journey between worlds was aided by the intercession of the ruler's animal spirit companion (in this case a jaguar).[9]

The Olmec undoubtedly left a lasting legacy on the Caribbean coast of Mesoamerica, but the legacy can be difficult to trace, as much of it has been subsumed into a debate about its being a "mother" culture for the Aztec and Maya. (Recent scholarship has given less credence to the Olmec as a "mother culture" and argues that it developed independently of Maya and Valley of Mexico cultures). Hopefully as scholars and students examine the Olmec as an independent cultural entity, its legacy will continue to become clearer.

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17.10.6: The Maya

The importance of the influence of the Olmec on the Maya may seem superficial, but it is quite important, as the Maya's rise to sophistication was so fast and so complete that it almost defies explanation. After settling at the base of the Yucatán Peninsula around 1000 BCE, the lowland Maya learned how to deal with drought, feed tens of thousands of people, and organize politically —all before 250 BCE.

The Late Classic period was one of tremendous growth. The city of **Tikal**, in present day Guatemala, had reached a population of 80,000 by CE 750, while the population of its rival Calakmul reached 50,000. To support these large populations, the Late Classic Maya had almost a totally engineered landscape that included water management projects, flattened ridge tops, and terraced hillsides. The population was fairly dense in cities and in surrounding countryside. Their leaders had tombs built in their honor, imported luxury items like jade statues, feathers, cacao, and other items from the Mexican Highlands. These activities all demonstrate real sophistication.

The Late Classic Maya also had an advanced numerical annotation system of dots and bars and used zero. Maya writing began as pictographs and blended into quite artistic symbolism. In addition to their more than seven hundred carved monuments, the Maya culture produced wooden carvings, incised jades, and pottery.



Figure **17.10.6.1**: Mayan Stela | Stela with Mayan Script, Anthropological Museum in Mexico City. (Public Domain; User "Wicki" via Wikimedia Commons)

Politically speaking, the Maya were never unified under one ruler or even a set of rulers. Instead, the Maya were a civilization that shared a set of cultural traits, a language family, but no single ruler or sense of common identity. Individual Maya Kingdoms rose and fell, but none was ever able to dominate the entire Maya area.

While their rule was perhaps not widespread, Maya rulers did hold tremendous power and prestige within their kingdoms. Rulers were kings at the top of a "steep" social hierarchy that was reinforced by religious beliefs. The king was a hereditary ruler chosen by the gods and a member of one of several elite bloodlines. The Maya priestly class organized a complex pantheon of both gods and deified ancestors.

This ancestor worship required not only ceremony and temple building, but a complex understanding of calendrics as well. Both the Maya and the Olmec understood time as "a set of repeating and interlocking cycles instead of the linear sequence of historical time,"[10] much as the concept is understood today. Long cycles alternated with short cycles; the long periods involved the repeated creations and destructions of the world in their creation stories—with an emphasis on repeated. Since cycles are by definition repeated, certain dates are more important than others because they are attached to good and bad events in the past. Calendar priests determined what those dates were and so had considerable power. They also had the power to rewrite the course of events if this benefited the ruler. [11]

17.10.6.1: Teotihuacán and the Toltec

While the Olmec and Maya accomplished incredible things, urbanization to the north in Mexico's central valley may have left the most permanent legacy. To the north of the Maya culture area, the Valley of Mexico was the most "agriculturally desirable" zone in Mesoamerica. Climate was temperate, and rainfall, although not abundant, was predictable—in contrast to the drenching rains of tropical Mesoamerica. Lesser amounts of rainfall of course required aqueducts, reservoirs, and canals if a city were to thrive. Cuicuilco was such a city that rose to prominence in the Valley of Mexico by 150 BCE, only to be badly damaged by a volcanic eruption around 400 CE. The subsequent decline of Cuicuilco allowed a competing city, **Teotihuacán**, to rise to prominence in the area, and by 100 CE, its population reached 60,000 inhabitants. By 550 CE, Teotihuacán was one of the six largest cities in the world, with a population of 125,000. Teotihuacán covered more than 20 square kilometers, had a marketplace, an administrative center and several different types of housing. Its largest buildings seem to have had both a functional and a spiritual use. The Pyramid of the Sun, the largest building in the city was built over a sacred cave likely connected with creation myths. By the fourth century CE, Teotihuacán had the modern equivalent of neighborhoods; new houses were laid out on a rough grid with many homes organized into apartment compounds.[12] The dwellings were constructed of volcanic rock, mortar, and wood for the roofs. The compounds also had a system of underfloor drains. Many of the dwellings in these complexes are decorated with "polychrome wall murals" containing multiple religious themes and military themes, some depicting play or everyday life, while others being much more abstract.[13]

To support its massive population, Teotihuacán needed to secure supplies and tribute from surrounding areas. Many neighboring areas were conquered through a combination of trade and military conquest. Force was used to secure trade routes to the south and thus have access to goods as diverse as cacao beans, tropical bird feathers, salt, medicinal herbs, and honey. Once the city's influence had expanded and they had become the region's undisputed merchant power, its subsistence base increased to include the entire Basin of Mexico and some neighboring peoples like Tlazcala. The reach of Teotihuacán's leadership even extended into Maya kingdoms like Tikal where it influenced, and may have even ousted, a Maya ruler in the late fourth century. Tikal's position within its own region may in fact have been strengthened by this subordination to Teotihuacán.[14]

Teotihuacán was able to sustain impressive growth and expansion for more than five centuries, but ultimately its size and complexity seemingly contributed to its decline. At about 650 CE, roughly half of Teotihuacán's public buildings and a number of temples, pyramids, and palaces were burned. Many were knocked down and torn apart as well. This does not seem to be the work of invaders, but instead internal and external groups who attacked declining symbols of power.

The Late Classic Maya would also experience a collapse of their cultural systems around 840 CE. Years of population growth and demands on and from the elite came to a head with a period of prolonged drought in the early ninth century. Resulting famines and infighting caused population losses in Maya settlements nearing eighty-five percent and in many areas abandoned farmlands were retaken by the forest.[15]

While many of these Late Classic Maya sites would never recover from their demographic decline, Mesoamerica remained fertile and southern Mexico remained temperate, so a number of polities rose to prominence in the area after the abovementioned declines. Tula, which had been founded by Teotihuacán leaders as an administrative center, emerged in the Valley of Mexico after 650 CE. Tula would become the capital of the Toltecs, who saw their principal city grow to a population of 35,000 by 800 CE. Like all Mesoamerican cities at the time, Tula would expand its influence through trade. Toltec ceramics were found in regions ranging from Costa Rica to Guatemala; while Toltec style I-shaped ball courts and rain dances were adopted by cultures like the Anasazi and Hohokam in modern day Arizona and New Mexico. One of these ball courts still sits near the modern city of Phoenix, Arizona.[16] While much of the Hohokam culture area sits in what is now the United States, it was heavily influenced by the culture of Mexico. Not only did the Hohokam build ball courts, they also erected platform mounds and dug irrigation canals like those found in Mexico.

One important difference that the Toltec developed from their predecessors was their desire to conquer. Perhaps influenced by the rapid decline of Teotihuacán, the Toltec wanted to rise to prominence quickly. Their construction of Tula was hasty and conflict with neighbors went beyond typical captive taking or territorial gain. The Toltec viewed their conquest as a "sacred war" where man would aid the gods in their fight against the powers of darkness. The Toltec eventually merged their sacred war with that of the northern Maya in the Puuc Hills of the Yucatán. The northern Maya elites had already adopted "divine war" when the Toltec invaded the Yucatán city of Chichén. Chichén would become the Toltec administrative center in the peninsula in the late tenth

century but they did not completely drive out the city's Maya founders. In fact, the Itza Maya ruled the region under the Toltec and continued to do so well into the post-Columbian period.[17]

17.10.6.2: Endnotes

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17 Ibid., 69-75.

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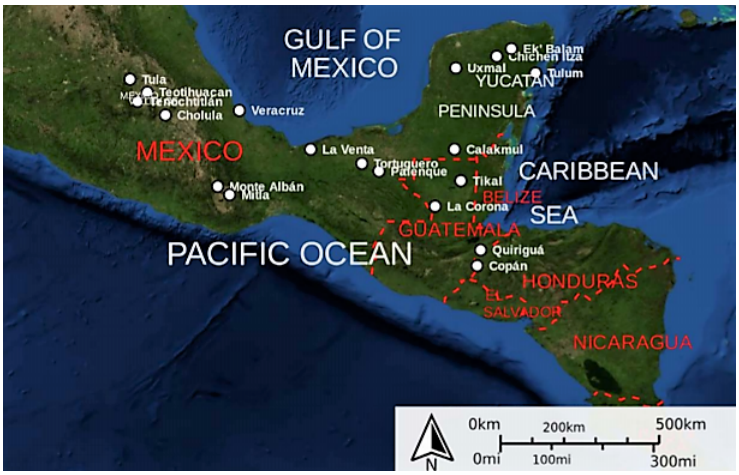
17.10.7: The Aztec

While the Itza were one of the last unconquered native civilizations in the New World, another post-classic kingdom drew the most attention from Mexico's Spanish conquerors: the Aztec. The Aztec capital was the magnificent city of **Tenochtitlán**, founded around 1325 CE by a Nahuatlspeaking, previously nomadic group called the Mexica. Tenochtitlán was composed of a network of dozens of smaller city states who used the lake environment to plant wetland gardens and used raised causeways to separate the gardens and move around the city. Some fields were raised as well, a feat which drained them and helped them contribute to supporting a population that totaled around 300,000 people (including the population of the neighboring city of Texcoco). Eventually a network of canals was created that drained fields, fed crops, and provided for navigation with canoes. Not only were these raised fields a source of multiple crops, but also the lake provided wildfowl, salamanders, and algae.



Figure **17.10.7.1**: Map of Tenochtitlán and Gulf of Mexico | Drawn by member of Hernán Cortés expedition, 1524. (Public Domain; User "Lupo" via Wikimedia Commons)

However, as the population grew to over a million, other means of support were needed, so the people looked to outside tribute. Beginning in 1428, the Mexica sought independence from their Tepanec patrons and allied with other outlying towns to form the Triple Alliance, which by 1431 dominated the basin where they made their home. The unified Aztec people were led by the Mexica ruler Itzcoatl and his advisors. In making an alliance with Texcoco, the Aztec were able to build a causeway between the cities and help improve the infrastructure of Tenochtitlán. They then began construction on the Great Temple, a central market, and a larger network of gardens or *chinampas*. The Great Temple would become the orienting point for the entire city and would become the site of thousands of human sacrifices.



Map **17.10.7.1**: **Mesoamerican Historical Sites** Author: User "P Miles" Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

The Aztec are perhaps best known, and may even have grown infamous (like the Toltec and others before them), for practicing human sacrifice. However, the context in which these sacrifices take place reveals that they were not conducted in a wanton or random manner. First of all, for the new Aztecs, there was little tradition of and, therefore, little opportunity for community building to draw upon. Their rise to power had to have been quick and dramatic. Furthermore, they possessed a worldview that held that even though they had achieved greatness, decline was inevitable. This view was present in their philosophy and their ceremonies—including those of sacrifice. This view was also important for ritual victims, because upon their death, they believed that they would be freed from the burdens of the uncertain human condition and become a carefree hummingbird or butterfly.

For the Aztec, ritual provided a kind of protection against excess; there was order in it, even if it was violent. Men had no independent power, and gods were very abstract in their doling out of gifts. Finally, in the Mexica worldview, the earth receives rather than gives, much like it does in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Through fertility and death, humans satisfy that hunger. The process of birth and death is not “dust to dust” but the transition from one form of flesh to another. All man can do is order his portion of this natural cycle.

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17.10.8: Early Andes

Humans arrived in South America after migrating through North and Mesoamerica; they began to craft small campsites and fishing villages along the Pacific coast. Around 3,000 BCE, the small campsites villages were replaced by residential and ceremonial centers. This transition was made possible through a new focus on irrigation and communal agriculture.

These Pacific coast and Andean cultures left an incredible amount of material culture (much of it well-preserved because of the dry climate) for archeologists to analyze. Their work shows that parts of the Classical Andes—modern Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia—possessed the same level of cultural complexity as did China, Persia, and India during the same period. Through this material culture, the Classical peoples begin to separate themselves from their ancient and often less complex ancestors.

While it is tempting to lean heavily on artifacts for knowledge of the period, there is a danger of overreliance. For example, pottery of the Moche culture (see Figure **17.10.8.1**) is well known for its often quite graphic images of female fertility and sexuality. These pieces are important works for archaeologists and historians alike, but one must keep in mind that little is known about how much these representations of Moche female sexuality in art actually tell us about gender relationships in their society. In other words, "shock value" or aesthetic quality should not be confused with universality.

This section begins with the end of the archaic period and the rise of a group of civilizations referred to as the **Norte Chico**.

17.10.8.1: Norte Chico

The Pacific coast developed large ceremonial and residential centers, which were organized around distinct status and rank among citizens. This area resembles other "crucible" areas like the Deh Luran Plain of Iraq, the Nile in Egypt, and the Olmec heartland. While similarities with the aforementioned early civilizations exist, the Norte Chico stands out for three reasons. First, it was politically "pristine." Scholars find no evidence that any outside polity influenced its development. Second, it endured for more than 1,300 years. This longevity gave the Norte Chico great influence in what would ultimately become a distinct Andean civilization. For example, large platform mounds of Norte Chico would also appear later in the highland center of **Chavín de Huantar**. The final reason Norte Chico stands out from other early civilizations is its development happened very quickly. By 2800 BCE, there were a number of similar large sites all with residential complexes, plazas, and platform mounds.[18]

The **Aspero** site is the archetype of these large sites. It covers fifteen hectares and contains six platform mounds. While there are a number of large sites like Aspero, there doesn't seem to have been a central Norte Chico chiefdom or state. There was no Norte Chico capital and no real evidence of conflict or warfare. This absence of conflict may be connected with the fact that scholars find no indication of differentially-distributed sumptuary goods, such as jewelry, clothing, and exotic trade materials, in Norte Chico. Even shell beads and stone are extremely rare to find in these sites so near to the Pacific.

Usually a cultural area requires some centralization and large scale agriculture before scholars refer to it as a civilization. The Norte Chico earns that distinction, however, because the level of cultural complexity indicates that they at least tried to centralize. Complexity is tricky. In the Norte Chico, there occurred episodic attempts at non-egalitarianism which were eventually abandoned. Many scholars also argue that Norte Chico did in fact become sophisticated and sedentary, not through agriculture but through fishing; this argument is known as the maritime theory. While unique, the maritime theory has trouble supporting the idea that the Norte Chico advanced merely through fishing, as insufficient archaeological evidence of communal labor sites centered on fishing exists to support it. Instead, a more likely explanation of Norte Chico complexity involves agriculture and fishing meeting at the middle, in a "shared labor" theory. A number of coastal sites contain not only remnants of cotton fishing nets, but other inland products like avocadoes and corn as well. These remnants mean that the canal building that took place between 4,000 and 3,000 BCE in the interior was likely only possible with the assistance of the coast's more plentiful labor force. This assistance was paid for with cotton nets and other agricultural products that in turn helped the coastal population feed itself and grow year after year. A larger temporary labor force would produce more canals and aqueducts, a cycle that explains much of the Norte Chico's economic expansion. Some of this cooperation may have even taken the form of pilgrimages to Norte Chico sites and the construction of monuments within Aspero, Caral, and other sites to commemorate them. The dry season of July and August presented a lull that would have been a good time for such pilgrimages. Evidence of communal cooking and eating exists, along with that of communal building.



Map **17.10.8.1**: Map of Peru Site Locations | Archeological Site Locations Within Peru, including El Paraiso, Caral, and Aspero (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Ontrvet" via Wikimedia Commons)

17.10.8.2: Chavín de Huantar

While the Norte Chico is the oldest identifiable civilization along the Pacific Coast, Chavín de Huantar has also captured much attention as a crucible site for Andean culture. Chavín de Huantar is the iconic representation of The Late Initial Period (1800 – 800 BCE), where Peru saw the beginnings of a mix of Andean, coastal, and Amazon cultures. Chavín is located at an altitude of more than 3,000 meters in the Callejon de Conchucos, the easternmost basin between the Cordilleras Negra and Blanca in the Peruvian Andes. It is also midway between the coast and jungle, giving it access to the culture and resources of the greater Andean region. This access made it a pilgrimage center, an importer of luxury goods, and a disseminator first unifying Andean style.[19] Chavín's "Old Temple" is 330 feet across the back and more than fifty feet high at its highest. The temple is U-shaped with a sunken court in the middle, and harpy eagle, jaguar, and parading shamans surround it. The temple is also built around the *lanzón* (great lance) which was a kind of supernatural conduit. The lanzón is similar in style to the Tello Obelisk which was found in a corner of the Old Temple courtyard. The obelisk contains carvings on all of its sides, carvings which primarily represent tropical and mythical origins or "gifts of the cayman."[20] Many dualities appear on the obelisk: male-female, plant type, ecological zone, sky-water, life-death, etc. These dualities and their meaning were reinforced by the pilgrimages made to Chavín and the ceremonies contained within them. It seems that Chavín architects used all of the symbolic value of the site available to them. The mixed human-animal features of the sculptures, the ingestion of hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus (also represented in sculpture), and even including acoustic symbolism were all important parts of the pilgrimages. Archaeologists have found marine shell trumpets in the tunnel complex under the city and have attempted to replicate how sound would contribute to the mind-altering rituals undertaken at the complex.[21]



Map **17.10.8.2**: Map of Chavin Culture Extent (Public Domain; User "Roarjo" via Wikimedia Commons)

The images and rituals at this site help establish what scholars refer to as the "Chavín cult."[22] The Chavín cult presents a universalist message based on the combined elements of coast and highlands that helped bring people to sites like this for ceremony and construction. In other words, these ideas helped move the Andes into the state phase. At Chavín, it also seems that there was a leader/priest, like in Egypt. It was, therefore, through spiritual power that the state congealed and grew, as well.[23]

17.10.8.3: Moche

Chavín de Huantar was not a developed civilization, but it did help create the importance of religion and ceremonial life in the Andes, both in every day practice and in sacred sites. Later, other groups in Peru, groups like the **Moche**, would build on religion and ceremony to help with state formation. The Moche began to conquer the North coast valleys in 200 BCE and, by 250 CE, had begun to construct the **Huaca del Sol** or temple of the sun and the **Huaca de la Luna** or temple of the moon at their capital, which bore the same name. The Huaca del Sol seems to have been a royal residence and the Huaca de la Luna a place of worship. The Huaca del Sol contained over 143 million bricks, arranged into columns and marked with symbols perhaps of who made them.[24] Each column probably represented a tax-paying **Ayllu** (kinship-based community), meaning that the Huaca or temple was a literal representation of how the empire was held up by its individual units.

There is still some debate about how much centralization there was at the upper echelons of Moche politics, but there was undoubtedly a leadership class with several administrative levels. The first administrative level was that of the divine kings who are depicted in murals and ceramics from this period. The second was of noble administrators. Below that were bureaucrats who organized the already extant clan system. Below them were the long-standing clan leaders. The lowest level was composed of commoners, many of whom lived in single story adobe houses. Most commoners mastered some craft like metallurgy or weaving. Others were highly skilled and perhaps worked exclusively for the rulers.



Figure 17.10.8.1: Stirrup-spout Vessel, Peru North Coast, Moche Culture, 100-500 CE (Public Domain; Unknown via Wikimedia Commons)

Residents living outside of the capital were almost exclusively farmers who lived along the Moche's extensive irrigation canals—in the Chicama Valley, there is a 120 km long canal still in use today. The Moche found a very practical application of the previously mentioned coastal-mountain symbiosis through the llama. The llama is a domesticated mountain pack animal that the Moche used to journey to the coast and gather guano at the Chincha Islands for fertilizing their valley farms.

By 600 CE, the city of Moche covered an area of a square kilometer and probably had a population of 15,000. Each conquered valley outside of the capital had its own huaca, and each one was connected to Moche by relay runners who carried messages written in the form of lines and dots on Lima beans.

Perhaps the most notable Moche legacy was their art. Their buildings, their murals, and their pottery alike reflected their great skill and the high level of societal stratification. The Huaca del Sol at Cerro Blanco for example contained millions of bricks and more than 100 types of geometric symbols. Moche murals contained a unique series of squares depicting both abstract and mythological concepts involving themes of creation, combat, sacrifice, and men-jaguars. As already mentioned, this sacrifice may not have always been violent, may not have been literal, and always has a functional explanation. In this case, sacrifice is designed to terrify or at the very least impress a subject population. While it is important to contextualize this sacrifice, we must also remind ourselves that this is not a modern civilization with a middle class or even a democratic tradition. It was archaic in the sense that a small group of people was supported by a large population underneath them. This kind of relationship required brutality.

17.10.8.4: Huari

While the Moche were notable because of their art and material culture, their use of violence to achieve and hold power threatens to cloud our image of the north coast peoples. The **Huari**, on the other hand, were able to build a successful empire in nearby areas combining intimidation and militarism with diplomacy, trade, and ideology. The Huari ruled over more territory than any previous Andean polity, partially by coopting neighboring groups through taxation, distribution of goods, feasting and religious ceremonies. There is also evidence that the Huari used sacred mummy bundles or trophy heads to incorporate outgroups and maintain a ritual relationship with these outgroups. Huari textiles and ceramics were found far from the capital, and Huari architecture was highly influential throughout the region.[25] The Huari Empire carved out a centralized state in a region where none had previously existed by coordinating local irrigation and labor systems. By 700 CE, Huari maintained a population of 25,000 and an over 700 kilometer-wide "zone of influence" connected by a road network that may have been the model for the Inca road system. In fact, it was ultimately Huari diplomacy and organization, rather than Moche violence in ritual killings, that provided a more useful precedent for the Inca.[26]



Map **17.10.8.3**: Map of Huari-With-Tiahuanaco (Public Domain; User “Huhsunqu” via Wikimedia Commons)

17.10.8.5: Chimu

The **Chimu** Kingdom was perhaps influenced more directly by remnants of the Moche, occupying as they did more or less the same geographic area. The Chimu capital of **Chan Chan** was established at about 1000 CE. Through their system of split inheritance, the Chimu forced the newly-ascended ruler to build his own material wealth. This expectation meant conquest of new territory and an increase in taxes. It also meant the construction of a new palace where each ruler would be buried along with hundreds of his attendants and llamas who were sacrificed to accompany him in the afterlife. A Chimu ruler was also buried with a sample of the wealth he had accumulated in his lifetime in the form of textiles, wood carvings, pottery, or jewelry. While earthquakes meant that the Chimu had to work hard to reclaim or make any use at all of Moche irrigation canals, they did manage to revive and extend the Moche system to eventually provide Chan Chan with diverse agricultural products from maize to cotton to peanuts. The Chimu also employed violence in their rise to power; however, their conquest by the Inca cut short any means for scholars to see if they intended to follow or rather eventually break from the Moche legacy.[27]

17.10.8.6: South Coast peoples

The south coast of Peru developed somewhat distinctly because it is extremely arid. In certain areas along the coast there has never been recorded rain. Surviving there meant accessing and controlling Andean runoff that sometimes went underground. As a result, the south coast’s population was much smaller, but in many ways was culturally richer

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17.10.9: North America

While most evidence points to human migration through North America to South America, the hallmarks of civilization would arrive later in what are now the United States and Canada. Many of us refer to the areas connected by Panama simply as "The Americas," but the Panamanian land bridge first linked the two continents only two million years ago. This was prior to human arrival in the Americas, but this separate development meant that North and South American flora and fauna experienced millions of years of separate development and evolution. This distinct development would influence the pace and patterns of human settlement in the Americas a great deal.

17.10.9.1: The West

The arrival of maize, beans, and squash from northern Mexico helped mark the transition to sedentary culture in the Southwest of what is now the United States. There is some evidence of primitive maize dating back to the middle of the second millennium BCE, but it would not become widespread until about 1000 BCE. A newer, drastically different maize, "**Maiz de Ocho**," is believed to have been the key to the flourishing of sedentary villages across the Southwest and to the eventual appearance of large pithouse villages around 500 BCE. **M**aiz de Ocho is better suited to arid conditions and yields larger kernels which are more easily milled. **Pithouses**, dwellings whose name indicates that its walls were in fact the sides of an excavated pit, became widespread across the Southwest because they were "thermally efficient." They lost less heat than aboveground structures in winter and, as they were built into the ground, were cooler in the summer. Pithouses remained in wide use in the area until about 700 CE, when more complex exchange networks and social organization led to more diverse settlement patterns.[32]

One of these new settlement patterns was the "great pueblo" that appeared as part of the "Chaco Phenomenon" around 900 CE. To deal with unpredictable summer rainfall, the Chaco Anasazi people of New Mexico built three "great houses"—Peñasco Blanco, Pueblo Bonito, and Una Vida," a large structure situated at natural drainage junctions. The semi-circular town of Pueblo Bonito grew out of a pithouse village to eventually form a semi-circular network of more than 600 rooms and reached a height of five stories along the canyon's rear wall. The complex's walls were built of sandstone blocks whose surfaces and cracks were smoothed and shored up by a clay-sand mortar. Construction of the high ceilings also involved complicated ashlar masonry patterns that could be covered with "adobe plaster or matting."[33]

Each of the larger **Chaco Canyon** sites also had at least one great kiva. Kivas were subterranean gathering places which were used by individual kin groups for work, for education, and for ceremonies. Larger kivas were gathering places for more formal ceremonies where political decisions affecting the entire community were often made.

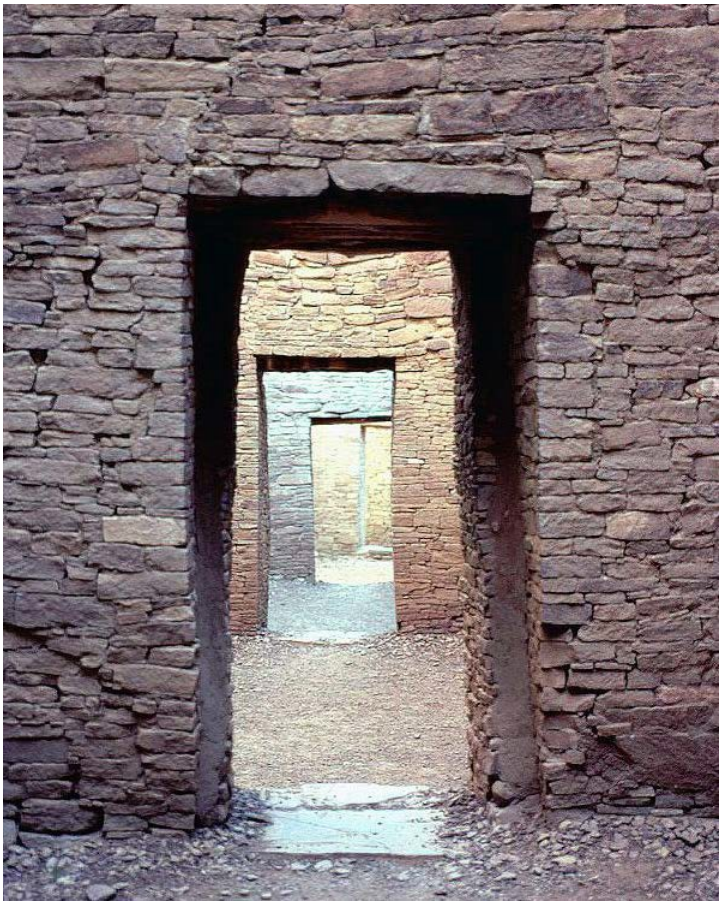


Figure **17.10.9.1**: Chaco Canyon Pureblo Bonita Doorways. ((Wikimedia Commons; Saravask; Public Domain))

By 1050 CE, five great pueblos in Chaco Canyon supported a total population of around 5,000 people. While most lived within the relatively compact canyon area, the influence of this populace reached well beyond the immediate pueblo complex. Evidence indicates that the Chaco Canyon people may have had exclusive access to sources of turquoise all over New Mexico and used the stone in their workshops where they produced vases, human effigy vessels, incense burners, bells, trumpets and painted tables. By the early twelfth century, Chaco Canyon's influence extended to much of northwest New Mexico and southern Colorado, where more than seventy outlying sites contained kivas, Chaco pottery, and similar architecture to what was found in Pueblo Bonito. The Chaco also developed a road system that may have been for the distribution of resources or pilgrimages. Either way, the road construction involved considerable cooperation to craft, at different stages, stairways and ramps carved out of bedrock and other pathways lined with boulders. After 1130 CE, drought and growing population densities led to a 100-year decline of the Chaco sites. By the 1200s most of the pueblos of the Chaco system were empty, their population dispersed and away from the canyon.[34] While this was the height of Anasazi village life, they continued to thrive culturally and are recognized as the precursors of the modern Pueblo peoples.

17.10.9.2: The Pacific coast

Further west, cultures along North America's Pacific coast were also sedentary, but did not derive their existence from farming. Instead, multiple Pacific coast cultures took advantage of abundant ocean resources, such as various fish species, sea mammals, timber, shellfish, waterfowl, game, and wild plants. The abundance of these resources often suggests that coastal cultures were less complex than their contemporaries in the interior, but the ravages of climate required tremendous adaptation over time. During the Late Holocene period alone, from 2000 BCE to the present, periodic colder episodes may have led to consequences as disparate as lakeside flooding, lowering of tree lines, drought, and a reduction of available marsh areas. Northwestern Coastal peoples, for example, addressed this volatility by never putting their eggs in one basket. While they may have primarily eaten acorns or salmon, they made sure to always maintain a secondary food source. Further south, the **Chumash,** a people inhabiting the central and

southern California coast, developed ceremonial centers, provinces incorporating several villages, sophisticated “watercraft,” and vibrant trade with the interior. In fact, this trade helped the Chumash avoid scarcities as well.[35]

17.10.9.3: The Plains

The Great Plains represented perhaps the largest area of pre-Columbian North America, but it is also one of the least understood. The Wild West shows of the nineteenth century produced the lasting yet erroneous impression that the Plains Indian culture remained unchanged for centuries. Big game hunters in the Clovis Culture first inhabited the area as early as 13,000 years ago. As big game became extinct around 9000 BCE, Paleo-Indian groups on the plains turned to foraging and fishing in river valleys and to hunting of primarily bison as well as deer and fowl. By 9000 BCE, the Ice Age had left behind a vast expanse of “arid grassland” from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico, an expanse known as the “**Great Bison Belt**.” Long before European explorers introduced horses, people on the Great Plains had developed sophisticated processes of hunting bison on foot that involved some hunters disguised as bison, others orchestrating movements among hunting groups, and others shouting to drive the bison toward pre-selected “traps” or “jumps.” Dozens of bison would fall over a precipice to their deaths. By 6000 BCE, plains hunters had more sophisticated projectiles that could penetrate the skin of a surrounded animal or one that had become stuck in mud or sand. Findings at the Olsen-Chubbock site in Colorado indicate that by 6500 BCE, Paleo-Indians had also begun to butcher seventy-five percent of the animals they killed, which could sustain a group of 100 people for more than a month.[36] Early Plains Archaic (5600 – 3000 BCE) activity, while still largely dependent on bison, shows some increasing reliance on fish, fowl, and berries, possibly indicating warmer and drier conditions that “diminished grass cover throughout the Central Plains.” Middle Plains Archaic peoples (2900 BCE to 1000 BCE) adapted their bison hunting to allow for a more sedentary existence, returning to the same hunting ground year after year, and making much of the bison meat into pemmican (a brick of pounded flesh and fat), that could be stored for seasons when bison were less plentiful (Fagan 123). By 550 CE, the Late Plains Archaic people had fully incorporated the bow and arrow into their hunts, which tended to be less frequent but more productive, often incorporating “mass kill sites” that were used for hundreds of years in some cases.[37]

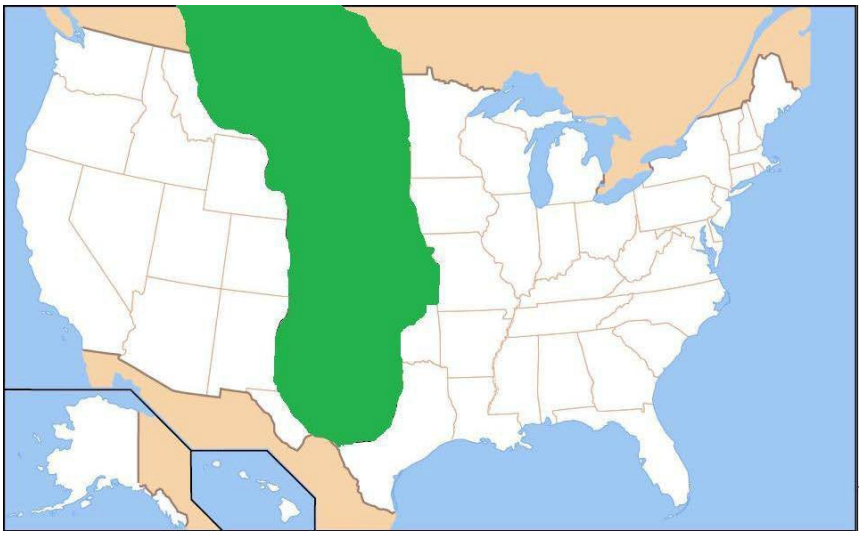


Figure **17.10.9.2**: Map of the Great Plains. (Wikimedia Commons; Before My Ken; Public Domain)

17.10.9.4: The Eastern Woodlands

The term ‘Middle Woodland’ is occasionally used to refer the period between 200 BCE and CE 400; this coincided with the influence of the **Hopewell** culture over much of eastern North America. Previous to the Hopewell ascendance, the Adena people built hundreds of burial mounds in and around central Ohio (2300 – 2100 BCE). Accompanying the burials were dozens of types of “grave goods” including spear points, stone pipes, and sculptures of animals and human hands. Hopewell mound building (1000 – 200 BCE) and culture as a whole certainly had antecedents in the Adena and early Woodland cultures as a whole, but the Hopewell tradition stands out in its grandiosity. With their center in the Ohio Valley, the Hopewell created hundreds of hectares of earthworks with regionally specific styles of craftsmanship. Copper, shells, obsidian, and shark and alligator teeth were all used to create personal adornments, containers, pipes, and figurines. Much of this artifact diversity can be attributed to the size and vitality of the Hopewell exchange zone which extended across much of eastern North America from Florida to the Great Lakes. While there is

evidence that areas as far away as North Dakota participated in this exchange network, the so-called “core areas” were in the Mississippi, Illinois, Scioto, and Miami river valleys in Illinois and Ohio. As trade picked up, so did the ceremonial and political significance of the artifacts received by local leaders and ultimately included in burial mounds. Some artifacts were buried with their owners at death as symbols of their power in life. The expansion of ceremony through these objects also meant that many of the Hopewellian centers shared physical characteristics such as both platform and conical mounds, structures for cremation, and burial vaults. The local populations who participated in these ceremonies seem to have lived near, but not in, the ceremonial centers themselves in single or multiple family households. Although close to other residents, Hopewell communities were scattered across the area, subsisting through a mix of foraging and horticulture.[38]

17.10.9.5: Cahokia

Other North American mound builders established their center at **Cahokia**, across the Mississippi River from present day Saint Louis. Cahokia was inhabited from about 700 to 1400 CE. At its peak, the city covered nearly six square miles and 10,000 to 20,000 people lived there. Over 120 mounds were built over time, and most of the mounds were enlarged several times. Houses were arranged in rows and around open plazas, and agricultural fields were cultivated nearby. Other mound centers and communities were located in the contiguous “American Bottom” region. Centralization and the beginning of the Mississippian period happened around 1050 CE, and the transition to the Moorehead phase—marked by decreasing mound building—happened about 1200.[39]

What scholars still don’t know about Cahokia is why there was decreased mound building after 1200, during the so-called Moorehead Phase. While scholars usually associate decreased construction with societal decline, recent scholarship suggests that the opposite may be true for Cahokia. Instead of declining, Cahokia might have gone through a transition to a lesser focus on staples and storage and greater focus toward prestige goods and economic power. Their decreased mound building may have coincided with their energy being more focused on controlling trade across the Mississippian Southeast. Scholars see evidence of this shift with an increase in nonlocal raw materials and “prestige goods” at Cahokia during this period, such materials and goods as minerals, igneous rock for axeheads, ceramics, marine shell, quartz crystal, and copper.[40]



Figure **17.10.9.3**: Monks Mound in July. (Wikimedia Commons; Skubasteve834; CC BY-SA 3.0)

17.10.9.6: The Arctic

The Arctic’s harsh climate meant that it was one of the last areas in the Americas to be permanently settled. The first Paleo-Eskimo populations appeared around 4,000 years ago emanating from Eastern Siberia. They were left behind by the original American colonists. The Arctic colonists expanded rapidly across Alaska, through Canada, and into Greenland as they all possessed arctic small tool kits including the important toggle headed harpoons to kill walrus and seal. In general, their evolution was from reindeer hunters to seal hunters, but both types of societies continued to exist side by side.

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17.10.10: Conclusion

Humans migrated to the Americas by 15,000 BCE and perhaps as many as 3,000 years before. The earliest recognizable civilizations in the Americas were in Mesoamerica and began during the Archaic period, ten thousand years ago. Farmers in Mesoamerica began to cultivate crops such as corn, squash, beans, chilies, manioc, and sweet potatoes. During Mesoamerica's more recent Formative Period, the rise of the Olmec Civilization occurred. They would be followed by several others, most notably the Maya, and further to the north the Aztec Empire that was at its height when the Spanish arrived in 1519.

Around 3,000 BCE, small campsites and fishing villages began to appear in Peru. These were eventually replaced by more permanent structures and agriculture communities which would be the antecedents to the incredibly complex cultures of the Classical Andes in Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia. Among these Pacific Coast cultures were the Moche, the Huari, the Chimu, and the Nazca. Many of these cultures had their political and cultural centers in large urban areas like Tiwanaku**,** which had a population of about 40,000 people around 100 CE. More than 1,000 years later, it was the Inca Empire that would build on these cultural traditions, extending its rule over more than 5,000 kilometers from Ecuador to Chile.

Sedentary culture first began in North America when people in the desert southwest of the continent began to cultivate maize about three thousand years ago. Groups like the Chaco Anasazi in New Mexico would eventually construct massive complexes of aqueducts, homes, and ceremonial spaces by about 1000 CE. There were other major cultural areas all over North America, from Florida to the frigid Arctic.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their late arrival in the Americas, humans developed at an incredible pace all across the region. The residents of the Americas developed remarkable political sophistication, infrastructure, religion, art, economic integration, and technology that Europeans marveled at when they arrived in the late fifteenth century.

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17.10.12: Links to Primary Sources

17.10.12.1: Mesoamerica

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Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: The Ancient Codices
http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/codices/index.html

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http://www.mesoweb.com/publications/Christenson/PV-Literal.pdf

17.10.12.2: The Andes

Moche Decorated Ceramics
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/moch/hd_moch.htm

Tiwanaku
http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/567

Nazca
http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/700

Machu Picchu
http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/274

17.10.12.3: North America

Chaco Canyon
https://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/chcu/index1.html

Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks
http://worldheritageohio.org/hopewell-ceremonial-earthworks/

Cahokia Mounds
http://cahokiamounds.org/explore/

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.11: Central Asia

17.11.1: Chronology

17.11.2: Introduction to Central Asia

17.11.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.11.4: Key Terms

17.11.5: Turkic Migrations

17.11.6: Islam

17.11.7: The Mongol Era

17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai

17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)

17.11.10: Timur

17.11.11: Conclusion

17.11.12: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.11.13: Links to Primary Sources

Expansion of the Mongol Empire 1206–1294 superimposed on a modern political map of Eurasia. (CC BY-SA 2.5 Generic; Astrokey44 and Sting via Wikipedia).

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17.11.1: Chronology

1206 – 1368 CE Mongol Empire

1240s – 1502 CE Khanate of the Golden Horde

1225 – 1370 CE The Khanate of Chagatai 1

265 – 1335 CE The Khanate of the Ilkhans

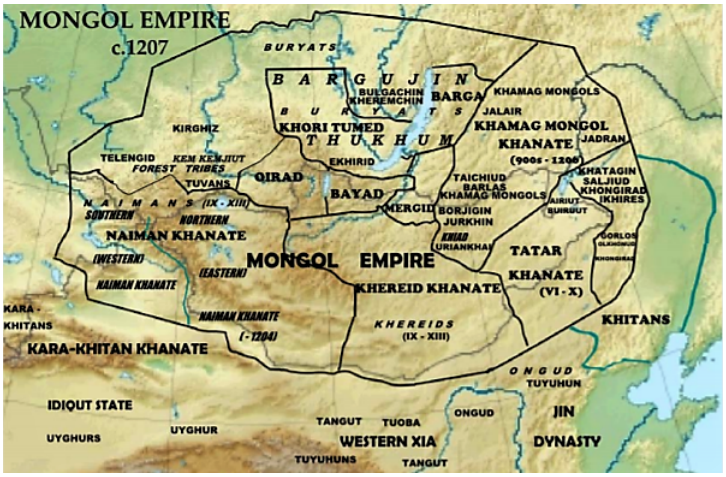
1370 – 1507 CE Timurid Dynasty

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17.11.2: Introduction to Central Asia

The year was 1216 CE, and a detachment of Mongols campaigned westward out of Mongolia and into Central Asia. They were in aggressive pursuit of the leader of the neighboring Naiman tribe, a certain Küchlüg, who had the misfortune of allying with Jamukha, the principle rival of Genghis Khan. The khan had quickly dispatched with their combined armies, forcing Küchlüg to seek refuge among the Qara Khitai, located to the southwest. In the intervening years, Küchlüg somehow managed to usurp the Qara Khitai throne. Not long thereafter, he attacked a Karluk tribal confederacy that appealed to Genghis Khan for protection. The Mongol leader deployed 30,000 troops to track down this troublesome renegade. By 1218 the inveterate adventurer had fled south towards the Pamir Mountains in modern day Afghanistan. Eventually, the Mongol general Jebe, along with the help of some local hunters, caught up with Küchlüg and executed him. And yet it was the pursuit of the fugitive Küchlüg that inadvertently brought the Mongols into Central Asia. Their conquest of the region was one without the forethought of empire, yet the area absorbed, adopted, and integrated the Mongols, just as it had incorporated external forces many times before.



Map **17.11.2.1**: Map of the Mongol Empire c. 1207 CE (CC BY-SA 4.0; User “Khiruge” via Wikimedia Commons)

Central Asia displayed a remarkable ability to embrace foreign influences, such as the Turkic migrations, expansion of Islam, and Mongol conquest, internalizing them and making them its own, much like an interesting stew. Situated at the crossroads of many empires, Central Asia was tucked in between the Chinese, Europeans, Arabs, and Indians. There, in the middle of these grand civilizations, just along the Great Silk Road, the region connected the Orient to the Occident and linked it to major patterns in world history. It was from there that these external forces saturated the area and shaped the course of its history.



Map **17.11.2.2**: Map of the Silk Road (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Captain Blood” via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.11.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. How did the geography of Central Asia have an impact on its history?

2. In what way did the Turkic migrations change the culture of Central Asia?

3. How did the nomadic way of life facilitate the Turkic conquest of the region?

4. The process of Islamization took place over centuries. What helped to expedite the conversion process?

5. How did Genghis Khan differ from his predecessors? What enabled him to unite all of the Mongol tribes?

6. What was the significance of Inju to the history of the Chagatai Khanate?

7. What role did religion play in the Ilkhanate?

8. Why did Timur attempt to externalize the violence of the steppe?

9. Has Central Asia been an interesting stew of foreign influences, or has it been the product of internal forces?

10. Should the modern day states of Afghanistan and Iran be considered a part of Central Asia? Going back to the Mongol conquest of the region, what similarities do these states share with the core of Central Asia? What are some of the differences?

11. Should the conflict that has existed between nomadic and sedentary societies be considered the primary force determining the course of Central Asian history?

12. What has been the legacy of the conquests of Central Asia? How have the various empires shaped the region since the Turkic migrations?

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17.11.4: Key Terms

- Abaga Khan
- Battle of Talas River
- Batu
- Berke Khan
- Börte Üjin
- Chagatay
- Chaghatay Khanate
- Gaykhatu Khan
- General Jebe
- General Sübedey
- Genghis-Khanid Legitimacy
- Golden Horde
- Grand Duchy of Moscow
- Great Hunt
- Güyük
- Heights of Baljuna
- Hülegü Khan
- Inalchuq
- Inju
- Islamization
- Jalal al-Din Manguburti
- Jin Dynasty
- Juchi
- Jurchen
- Kublai Khan
- Khuriltai
- Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad II
- Küchlüg
- Mahmud Ghazan
- Möngke
- Mongol Horse
- Naqshbandi Order
- Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud Shah Tughluq
- Nomad Battle Strategy
- Ögedey
- Orkhon Steppe
- Pastoral Nomadism
- Qaghan
- Qutayba ibn Muslim
- Rashid al-Din Hamadani
- Recurve Bow
- Samanids
- Shihihutug
- Silk Road
- Sufism
- Tax Farming
- Temujin (Genghis Khan)
- The Khanate of the Ilkhans

- Thumb Ring
- Timur
- Tokhtamysh
- Toluy
- Transoxiana
- Turkification
- Ulus
- Xiongnu
- Yasa
- Yasaviyah Order

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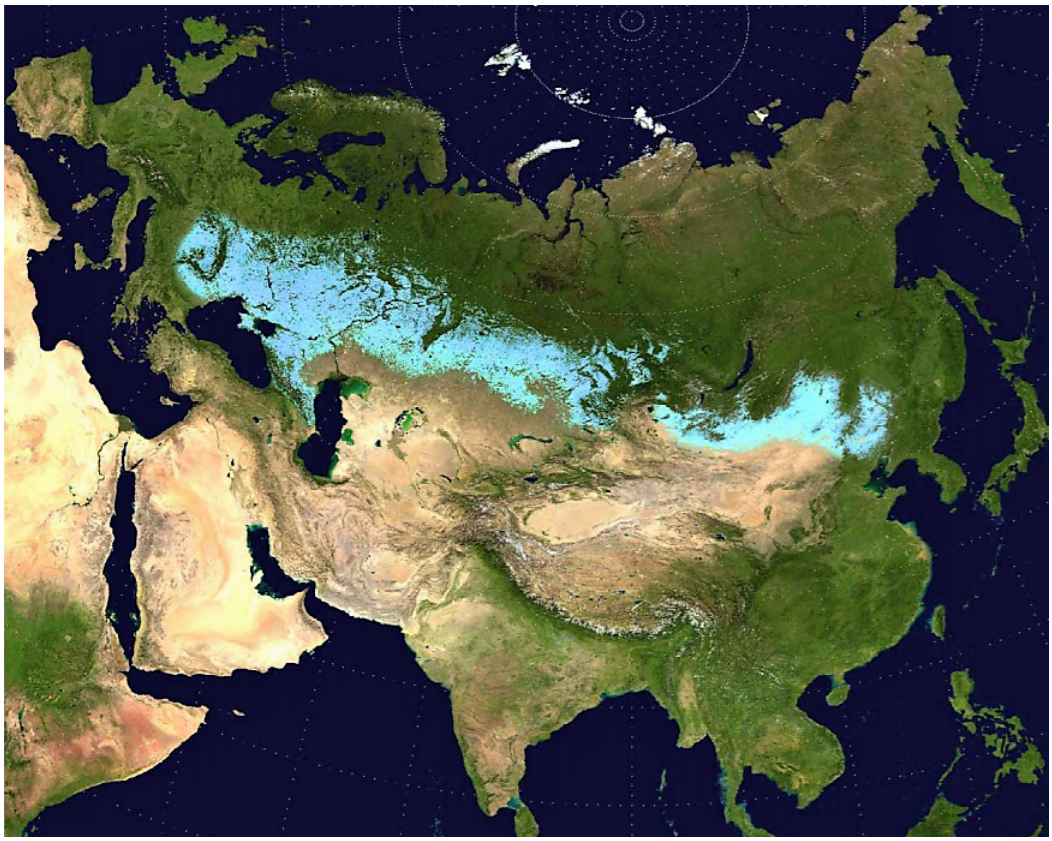
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations

Nomadic migration was the first major external influence that would be integrated into the culture of the region, as steppe peoples imparted a lasting impression to Central Asia. Beginning with the **Xiongnu** (209 BCE – 93 CE), a long-term exodus of steppe peoples spread out of Mongolia and into Central Asia. For millennia prior to the rise of Genghis Khan, the winners of the tribal battles for predominance on the **Orkhon Steppe**, prime pastureland located in western Mongolia, forced the vanquished off to the west. These periodic mass departures of Turkic tribes out of the area progressed southwest into Central Asia in a migration conquest, not a trade diaspora, as happened to Africans during the slave trade. These new arrivals forever altered the ethnic makeup of Central Asia. Previously, the region had been predominantly Persian and Indo-European; when the waves of Turkic tribes penetrated into the area, though, they occupied the great steppe and agricultural basin of Central Asia and pushed these Persian groups to the fringes. Over time, they slowly Turkified the area, endowing it with a more nomadic character.



Map **17.11.5.1**: Map of the Xiongnu Empire in 205 BCE (Public Domain; User “Postmann Michael” via Wikimedia Commons)

These Turkic tribesmen divided their society into five strata. Members of the royal tribal clan presided over the social order. This dominant group bestowed its name on the tribal confederation, a collection of tribes. Positioned below them were their allies and associated tribes. Next were the common herders who did not participate in struggles for power. Lower still were the artisans, such as blacksmiths and leatherworkers. And finally, we find slaves at the bottom of the hierarchy. They usually acquired their lowly position in society by means of capture in times of war.



Map **17.11.5.2**: Map of the Great Eurasian Steppe (Public Domain ; User “Shattered Gnome” via Wikimedia Commons)

These Turkic wanderers belonged to an unstable confederation of clans and tribes roaming the steppe, loosely bound under a **khagan**, a charismatic monarch who laid claim to some sort of divine providence. Khagan made use of their personal charisma, as well as their political and military smarts, in order to maintain group cohesion and ward off challenges to their authority. Under strong khagans, tribal confederations were capable of wielding incredible power, but, more often than not, they were notoriously volatile and often imploded upon the death of their leader, collapsing into a brutal struggle for power. The winners in this struggle forced the losers out of the area, and while many went to the north or south, most to the west. Victorious tribes remained in Mongolia on the highly-prized Orkhon Steppe, located near Lake Baikal.

Although the khaganate was a diarchy, or system of dual rule, with the oldest son controlling half of the land, it lacked a clear transition of power, like hereditary succession. Because the khagan theoretically ruled over a series of tribal confederations, any member of the tribal confederation could ascend to the position of monarch by demonstrating their personal charisma and martial skills on the battlefield. This often resulted in a fight to prove oneself that could erupt into broader inter-tribal strife.

Periodic Turkic migrations into Central Asia transformed the sedentary culture of the region. These steppe peoples lived by practicing pastoral nomadism, a way of life centered around herding that most likely predated the Turks but was eventually adopted by them. Their culture was utilitarian in nature and provided all the necessities for life on the great plains of Central Asia, including food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. In order to maintain their pastures, these horsemen followed a fixed, seasonal pattern of migration because they did not want their flocks to overgraze. During the winter, for instance, they camped in foothills and mountain valleys, where it was warmer at lower altitudes. There they built fixed shelters with one main objective: survival. The oral tradition, which included songs, epic narratives, and parables, flourished during the inhospitable winter months.



Figure **17.11.5.1**: A Naadam Boy Riding a Mongol Horse on the Mongolian Steppe (Public Domain; User “invictsHOG” via Wikimedia Commons)

In the spring, the nomads made a ten-day trip to the prairieland to graze their herds on fresh grass that just emerged from mountain runoff. There the women and children erected a central camp, usually comprising four yurts, while the men divided the flocks into their specific pastures. They established about ten satellite camps around the central camp, with each herd positioned about ten to twenty miles from the center. This separation of camps minimized the potential threat that their enemies posed to their herds. During the summer, they traveled to mid-mountain fields, where it was cooler and offered access to water. Covering about ten miles per day, it took them approximately fifty days to reach this campground. Finally, in the fall, they returned to the steppe in order to make provisions for the harsh winter. These preparations included drying and preserving their meat, and taking milk from their animals.

Enhanced mobility was the key to the survival of pastoral nomads. They actually spent a good portion of their lives on horseback and were accustomed to moving over long distances, taking all of life’s necessities with them. This allowed them to retreat quickly from rival attacks or areas afflicted by natural disaster. Though their way of life appeared seemingly innocuous, it enhanced the ability of these horsemen to expand rapidly and conquer neighboring groups. It was in this manner that pastoral nomadism accorded its practitioners certain martial advantages. The annual **Great Hunt** served as a military proving ground that helped them hone their fighting skills. In preparation for winter, tribes deployed groups of mounted men, who dispersed in different directions, with the intent of driving every animal within a set perimeter inwards to converge at a pre-established central point. With great coordination taking place over vast distances, these migrants learned how to coordinate their movements based on a color scheme of arrows and whistling patterns. Their herding tactics easily translated to military tactics and proved devastating in combat.



Figure 17.11.5.2: Archers on the Mongol Horse (Public Domain; Sayf al-Vâhidî via Wikimedia Commons)

Nomad society was certainly capable of waging war. Their ability to shoot from horseback provided them with a mobile and lethal means to overcome slower, infantry-based armies. These horsemen carried portable, three-foot-long **recurve bows** capable of piercing enemy armor from over 450 meters. Metal **thumb rings** enabled a rapid rate of fire without damaging the archer's fingers. Raised hunting and herding from horseback, nomads even learned how to sleep in the saddle of the **Mongol Horse**, their indigenous horse. Though not tall in stature, these sturdy mounts displayed impressive endurance and allowed groups to traverse great distances, often up to 160 kilometers per day. The speed with which they could cover territory on their steeds often confused sedentary forces and multiplied the terror factor. Native to the region, these horses were able to forage for themselves and survive on their own. Nomads did not require supply lines and could, therefore, remain on campaign for an average of three years. The combination of the skills acquired from herding, the double-compound bow, and the Mongol Horse, translated to a formula for political domination of Central Asia, at least until the arrival of Genghis Khan and the Mongols.

Turkic domination of the region began on the battlefield, where the strategies of steppe warfare proved devastating to infantry-based armies. The first stage of the **nomad battle strategy** often commenced with a feigned retreat, in which a group of their cavalry engaged the adversary, retreated, and encouraged their opponents to follow them. This technique lengthened the lines of their challengers, as they pursued the "retreating" Turkic cavalrymen, who were busy shooting backwards from horseback. The next stage of battle involved outflanking the enemy and enveloping them. They then showered their foes with arrows, the objective being to pin the opponent in place. This alone was often enough to break a sedentary power. When fighting against another steppe power, their reserves charged the opponent's lines so as to break their forces into pieces and finish them off piecemeal. Most importantly, because of their limited numbers, the Turkic horsemen were reluctant to risk fighting an enemy that they did not believe they could defeat, instead, they would poison water wells, scorch the earth, and retreat. The Mongols would later employ similar battle tactics that allowed them to conquer the whole of Central Asia.

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17.11.6: Islam

Islam was not the first foreign religion to arrive in Central Asia. In fact, the region had already been exposed to many foreign systems of belief prior to the coming of Islam in the seventh century. Local merchants conducting long-distance trade along the Silk Road came into contact with many different religious doctrines; the trade route served as a conveyor of not only goods but also concepts. Generally, intellectual diffusion is not a one-way street, as western ideas traveled eastward and eastern concepts filtered into the west. In this manner, the Silk Road carried Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism (an Iranian religion with both monotheistic and dualist elements), Siberian Shamanism, and even Nestorian Christianity to Central Asia. The great number of religions found in the area at the introduction of Islam testified to the great tolerance of the region. By the tenth century, however, all of the non-monotheistic faiths had disappeared from Central Asia in the aftermath of Islamic conquest.

It was **Qutayba ibn Muslim** (669 – 716) who expanded the presence of Islam in Central Asia during the eighth century, as the general's forces swept into the area, defeated the Persians, and by 715 CE completed their conquest of **Transoxiana**, the region located beyond the Oxus River. A decisive Arab Muslim victory over the Chinese at the **Battle of Talas River** in 751 secured Central Asia and repulsed the only major challenge to Islamic rule. The triumph over the Chinese made it possible for Islam to become entrenched in the region. The Persian **Samanids (**819 – 999) made Islam the official state religion and established a school of theology in Bukhara. But Islamization did not take place overnight; instead, it took centuries. Transoxiana slowly Islamicized, though it never Arabized. The peoples in the area remained culturally Turkic and Persian. Central Asia retained its Turkic and Persian languages, albeit with a heavy Arabic influence in religious vocabulary.

It took generations for Islam to become fully ingrained in the culture of Central Asia. Unlike other places, where the religion filtered into society from the bottom up, as was the case in Southeast Asia, Islamization in the region occurred from the top down. The process incorporated native peoples, who took part in the process of conversion. Local leaders submitted to the faith in order to maintain their social status and elite position in society. The conquerors offered the Central Asian nobility important positions in the administration so long as they professed Islam, providing the opportunity for the native elite to rule in their own right.

Islam also displayed a remarkable ability to assimilate indigenous Central Asian frontier customs as it advanced through the area, allowing some traditional practices to remain so long as it accelerated conversion. By accepting certain harmless practices in order to Islamicize Central Asia, these Muslims mirrored Christian efforts to Christianize Eastern Europe.

17.11.6.1: Sufism

The Islam of Central Asia differed greatly from that which originated in the Arabian Peninsula. This vast region embraced Islam, remaking it into a syncretic faith that was culturally its own. Essentially a sort of mysticism, or folk Islam, Sufism in the area emerged from the fusion of Islamic sedentary civilization and Buddhist nomadic culture. Central Asians were generally receptive and tolerant of foreign beliefs, but in order for the faith to take root in the area, missionaries had to make some concessions to the native, specifically pastoral-nomadic culture. The urban-dwelling and agricultural populations of the region generally accepted Sunni Islam and the law of the Sharia; however, the culture and lifestyle of the itinerant peoples of the steppe did not readily conform to the rigors of Islamic law. Sufism helped convert these tribes to Islam, in part due to its doctrinal flexibility. What arose from the mix of orthodox Islam and Turkic pastoral nomadism was a uniquely Central Asian brand of Sufism.

In this context, Sufis evangelized to groups on the frontier of Central Asia. Actually, Sufi merchants were largely responsible for bringing Islam to the region. Central Asian Sufi orders such as the **Yasaviyah** established themselves along trade routes in order to reach out to travelers. These missionaries also proselytized to the Turkic communities on the steppe. Meanwhile, the **Naqshbandi Order**, operating in travel lodges, spread Sufism by ministering to Iranian and Tajik peoples. The followers of these Sufi orders believed that they could better disseminate a form of the faith that was more loving and caring.

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17.11.7: The Mongol Era

The Mongols greatly expanded into Central Asia during the thirteenth century. There they reunited with the Turkic groups who had been expelled from the Orkhon Steppe over the course of a millennia. The Mongols confronted many Turkic peoples who had radically altered their existence since their days on the plains and adopted a stationary way of life.

At this point in time, forces indigenous to the region shaped the world around it; foreign influence waned as a consequence of nativism. The Mongols created the largest empire in history, as Central Asia externalized the violence of the steppe, yet it was with enormous difficulty that they even united as a people. Perhaps the greatest obstacle for them to overcome was their own divisiveness. Inter-tribal strife was commonplace, but once they united, the Mongols expanded deep into Russia, China, India, and the Middle East.

17.11.7.1: A New System for Unity

It was **Temujin**, later known as **Genghis Khan,** who brought this fractured people together and developed a method of governance and expansion that lasted long after his death. Born into the aristocratic Borjigin Clan, most likely in 1167, Temujin's success related to his convictions. Inspired by oral tales of past glory, his personal charisma and sense of fate enabled him to survive a youth of life-threatening privation, eventually bringing the various Mongol tribes together.

With a keen awareness of his own destiny, Temujin was inspired to achieve greatness. He had a clear vision that God predestined him to function as His temporal ruler on Earth and exhibited a desire to claim universal lordship. Through a series of fights, he eventually subjugated local clans in eastern Mongolia. He then expanded his political control of the region through a marriage alliance to **Börte Üjin**, a member of the Olkhonut Tribe, which maintained friendly relations with Temujin's Khiyad Tribe. The Merkit Tribe kidnapped his wife not long thereafter. Temujin heroically rescued her from this rival tribe, but she had been held in captivity for eight months and soon gave birth to their first son Juchi, who suffered from an uncertain parentage. Some historians believe that Temujin acquired the notion of conquering all of the Mongols from his liberation of Börte.



Figure **17.11.7.1**: Temujin (Genghis Khan) (Public Domain; Anonymous via Wikimedia Commons)

Despite his early successes, Temujin remained greatly outnumbered by his opponents and was forced to retreat to the **Heights of Baljuna**, located in modern day Manchuria, where he convinced his followers to swear an oath of total allegiance to him who called for them to fight unto death for him. For their unwavering loyalty, he promised his supporters a share in his glory upon their victory. Some Mongol tribes yielded to Temujin by 1204 and agreed to recognize him as their leader, thus paving the way for a period of final unification of the Mongols.

Temujin demanded a high level of commitment from his people, endowing his forces with a coherency and unity of purpose. He also promoted allies based on merit, rather than by the traditional Mongol method of advancement based on position within the

tribal hierarchy. His opponents, on the other hand, lacked his force of will and entered into a series of squabbles. Temujin took advantage of their internal fights, emerging victorious by 1206. The culmination of his ascendency took place that year at a Mongol assembly, or **khuriltai**, which appointed him as the first undisputed ruler of the Mongols, uniting them under the authority of his position. Temujin adopted the name of Genghis Khan, or universal ruler in this context.

Genghis Khan presided over peoples who had experienced near-constant warfare since 1160. Previously, tribal confederations were loose alliances held together under charismatic khagans and punctuated by tribal warfare. He consolidated all of these diverse tribes and reshaped them into a single "nation," endowing Mongol society with more cohesiveness, a key element to future expansion. He did this by developing a new political order that deviated from tradition.

Restructuring Mongol society into new administrative military units that provided the necessary impetus for expansion, Genghis Khan charged each of his commanders with a tribal unit that was responsible for controlling a particular pasture and fielding soldiers when needed. His system had the added effect of assuaging previous conflicts by assigning the members of one tribe to military detail with other rival tribes, thus emphasizing collective responsibility. By forcing the men from one tribe to stand guard over the pastures of other tribes, he weakened loyalty to ancestral lines and homelands, thereby reinforcing his own leadership.

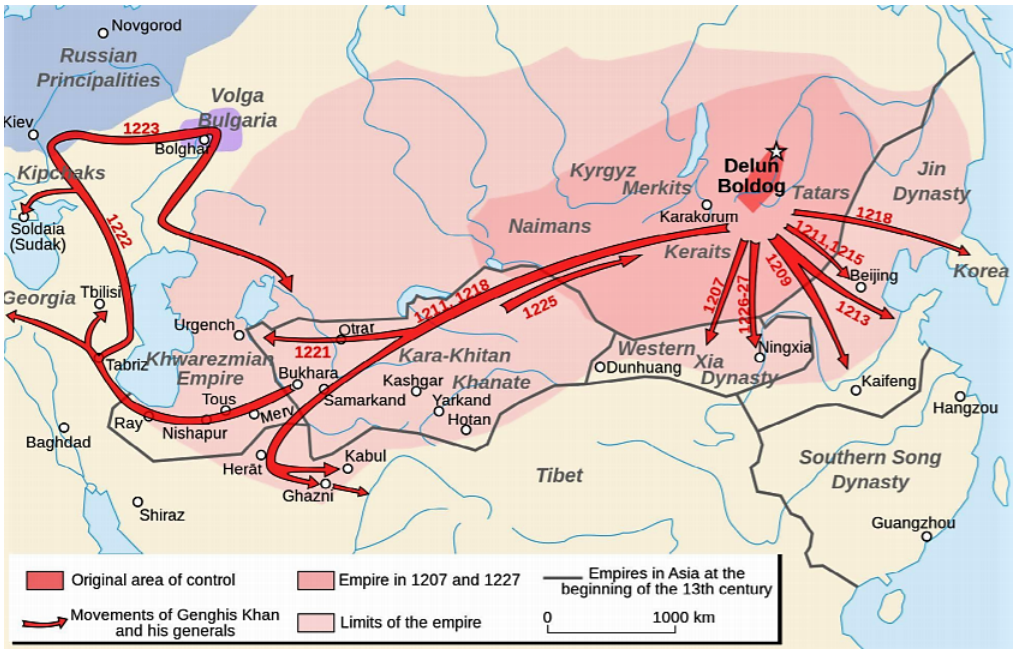
Genghis Khan represented the ultimate source of justice in his newly-formed state, consolidating his position and making it more authoritarian. By embodying autocracy in the position of the khan, he made the title of khan institutional, not personal, building a new foundation for legitimacy. Previously, tribal leadership rested on charisma. Furthermore, the great khan could not be self-proclaimed but had to be recognized at a khuriltai.

His law, known as **Yassa**, originated as decrees delivered during war. Yassa remained secret, which allowed Genghis Khan to adapt it to changing circumstances. For example, he later incorporated cultural elements indigenous to Mongol society into the law. He based his code on shamanist principles, and it served as the social and political formula binding all Mongols together. It also strengthened Mongol, rather than clan or tribal identification. It is believed that Genghis Khan himself directed the law, while his stepbrother **Shihihutag** served as the high judge, and his son **Chagatai** administered its execution.

17.11.7.2: Expansion

Genghis Khan encouraged Mongol expansion and the conquest of Central Asia. After subduing inter-tribal warfare, he followed tradition and exported the violence of the steppe. He offered incentives to his soldiers; the spoils of victory went to those who followed him into battle. Genghis Khan received ten percent of the loot and divided the remaining ninety percent between his commanders, who, in turn, distributed their portion amongst their retinue. This plunder also included the inhabitants of all subjugated lands, which resulted in the dramatic depopulation of conquered territory, as the khan received his share of artisans and craftsmen to be sent back to the itinerant Mongol capital.

In 1208, Genghis Khan targeted northern China for pillaging, but he quickly encountered considerable difficulties overcoming well-fortified Chinese municipalities. The Chinese had ringed their principle metropolises with moats and connected these major urban centers to several smaller satellite towns via underground tunnels. The Mongols had attempted to starve these cities into submission, but they lacked the military technology necessary to overcome walls forty-feet high and fifty-feet wide. To counter these challenges, they imported the technology necessary to defeat Chinese cities. Genghis Khan also compensated for a lack of native talent by incorporating foreign engineers into their army. He utilized Arab, Persian, and Chinese experts to solve the problem of defeating Chinese municipalities. Their knowledge of siege warfare enabled them to construct the siege engines capable of subjugating cities.



Map **17.11.7.1**: Map of Mongol Conquests Under Genghis Khan (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Bkkbrad" via Wikimedia Commons)

Adding these new sedentary peoples to the khan's army inevitably caused problems, for these men hailed from distinctly different cultures and did not interact well with the Mongols. Genghis Khan, therefore, combined the mobility of his forces with the slow, bulky siege engines of the sedentary armies. While he kept his cavalry independent from the foreign engineers, mostly comprised of mercenaries, he blended these two disparate groups on the battlefield to his strategic advantage.

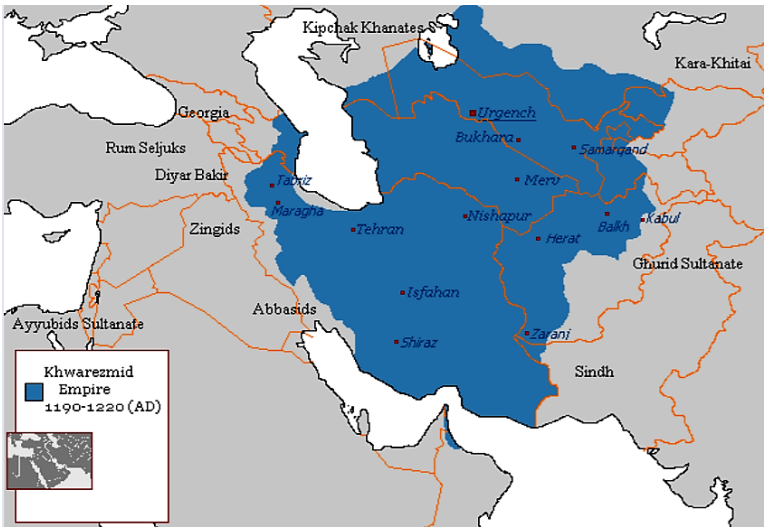
For the Mongols, building an empire proved much easier than maintaining one. The nomads possessed an inherent need to loot and plunder cities, and Genghis Khan took advantage of this innate desire by remaining on campaign. But the Mongols had difficulty understanding settled civilization and did not know how to maintain order in that new and different cultural milieu. Although they were able to instill fear in their enemies and easily forced many cities to capitulate, the Mongols co-opted local officials to ensure that taxes and tribute flowed freely back to their capital.

With his newly-constructed army, Genghis Khan returned to northern China again in 1210 and began a continuous campaign of destruction, primarily directed against the **Jin Dynasty** (1115 – 1234), an empire ruled by a **Jurchen** minority, a Tungusic people from Manchuria who would later call themselves the Manchu. In an early battle, the Jin put their Turkic cavalry up front to confront the Mongol horsemen. The Mongols managed to convince the Jin Dynasty's cavalry to defect to their side. Genghis Khan subsequently advanced on the Jin capital of Zhongdu and entered into a prolonged siege. In November of 1211, the khan withdrew his troops to their winter pastures, only to return again in 1212. Genghis Khan attempted a rash assault of the city. He failed and was wounded in the process. His Mongols had to retreat once again.

Genghis Khan returned a fourth time in March of 1213, this time with the goal of conquering Korea, Manchuria, and all of northern China. Early difficulties campaigning against the Jin Dynasty prompted him to adjust his strategy. By laying waste to all of northern China, he aimed to annihilate their way of life, turning the region into vast pastureland for his herds. The Mongol leader surrounded Zhongdu and starved the city's inhabitants into submission. He systematically obliterated everything in order to send a message to the inhabitants that it was futile to resist him. He even considered taking the city, brick by brick, and dumping it into the Yellow River. Fortunately for the residents of Zhongdu, a captured Chinese bureaucrat intervened and convinced Genghis Khan that it would be better to "sack" them every year through the collection of tribute. Mongol interest in rebuilding the city began soon thereafter, as Genghis Khan incorporated northern China into his state and opened the region to trade. This campaign represented the first significant addition of territory to the Mongol Empire.

As this chapter began, it was with the tenacious pursuit of the fugitive **Küchlüg** in 1216 that originally brought the Mongols into Central Asia. There they aroused the disdain of the local ruler in the area, **Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad II**. Ruling over a loose confederation of disparate peoples, Ala al-Din Muhammad lacked security in his position as the Khwarazmshah. Even his own mother was in intrigue against him. It was he who provoked the wrath of the Mongols. It all began when Genghis Khan sent a

trade caravan, which probably included some spies dressed incognito as merchants, to the frontier post of Otrar, located along the Syr Darya. The shah believed that the trade mission was a mere deception meant to obscure an eminent invasion. **Inalchuq**, uncle of Ala al-Din Muhammad and governor of Otrar, improvidently convinced the Khwarazmshah to have the entire party executed. An enraged Genghis Khan quickly dispatched another envoy and demanded that the governor of the city be put to death and have his head sent back to Mongolia as proof that Genghis Khan's wishes were fulfilled. The shah executed this emissary too, a rash decision that precipitated the Mongol onslaught of Central Asia, which resulted in brutal massacres and a drastic depopulation of the region.



Map **17.11.7.2**: Map of the Khwarezmian Empire, 1190-1220 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; Arab League via Wikimedia Commons)

Ala al-Din Muhammad prudently fled the area, leaving the citizens of Khwarazmia to defend themselves against the forces of Genghis Khan. A total of five Mongol armies approached the Khwarazm capital of Samarkand from different directions, converging in 1220. The Mongols slayed the inhabitants of the city and constructed pyramid-like edifices out of their severed skulls. In 1221, they seized the city of Urgench and dumped it into the Amu Darya, piece by piece, diverting the course of the waterway. And yet, Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad still inexplicably escaped capture and absconded south. Genghis Khan deployed another force of some 30,000 troops under the generals **Jebe** and **Sübedei** to track him down and put him to death. The shah eventually sought refuge on an island in Caspian, where he died of pleurisy.

Meanwhile, **Jalal al-Din Manguburti**, the son of the Khwarazmshah, assembled an army of resistance. Genghis Khan sent his stepbrother Shihihutug to apprehend Jalal, but he escaped to the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan. Jalal's forces managed to defeat the Shihihutugled Mongols on the field of battle at Parwan in the spring of 1221, a rare loss. The Mongols actually respected Jalal for his display of valor and willingness to resist them. Jalal fled to India via the Khyber Pass with his pride intact. The khan headed south himself and defeated Jalal al-Din along the banks of the Indus River. Following their defeat of Jalal, the Mongols descended into India but quickly found the hot and humid climate inhospitable; they decided to return to Mongolia, arriving home by 1225. The Central Asia campaign had started as a punitive expedition but in the process had wiped out any type of resistance in the region.



Figure **17.11.7.2**: Death of Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad II | From Jami' al-tawarikh by Rashid al-Din Hamadani (Public Domain; Sayf al-Vâhidî via Wikimedia Commons)

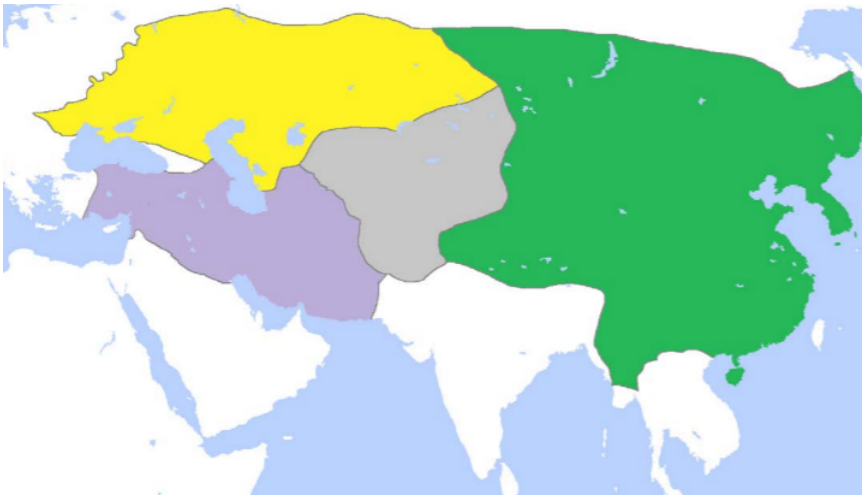
In the interim, Genghis Khan had ordered Jebe and Sübedei to explore and reconnoiter the west. Between 1221 and 1223 the two most gifted of the khan's generals traveled towards Russia. In the course of their journey, they defeated the Georgians, Armenians, princes of Rus, and Kipchak Turkic tribes. Then they abruptly returned home. The purpose was not to annex the territory but to gather intelligence, which proved to be important to their campaign against the princes of Rus between 1236 and 1240. Meanwhile, Genghis Khan had died on expedition in southern China in 1227. Upon his death, the Mongols participated in a year of mourning, halting expansion.



Figure **17.11.7.3**: Jalal al-Din Fords the Indus River While in Flight from the Mongols (Public Domain; Banwarí Khúrd and Dharm Dás via Wikimedia Commons)

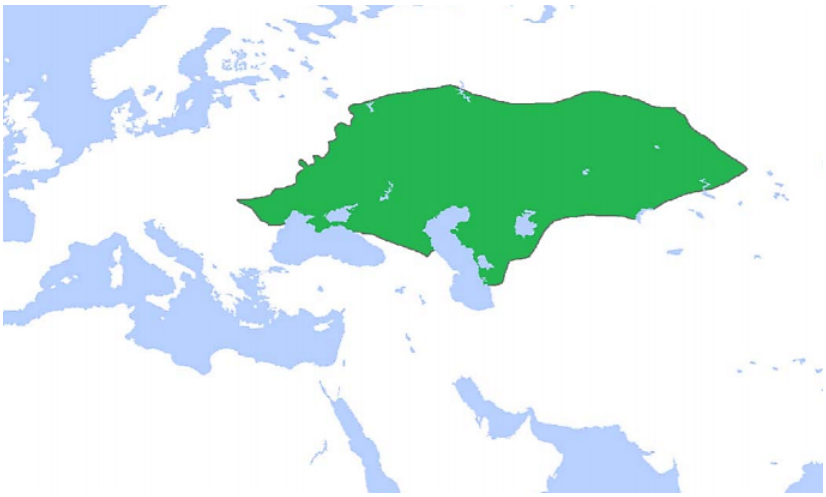
17.11.7.3: Succession

The Mongols were the only steppe tribes whose empire actually expanded upon the death of its founder. In fact, most of the Mongol conquests actually transpired after the passing of Genghis Khan. Unlike previous tribal confederations, it did not implode because Genghis Khan had invented a safe and reliable means of transferring power. He also stabilized Mongol society and made it less fractious, constructing a framework for subsequent generations to follow. To maintain political legitimacy and inherit the throne under this new system, one had to trace their ancestry back to Genghis Khan through his wife Börte and her four sons, Juchi, Chagatai, Ögedei, and Tolui. This concept dramatically limited contenders for the khanate, mitigating future competition for succession. Only they possessed the required **Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.**



Map **17.11.7.3**: Map of the Empires of the Four Patrimonial Ulus Author: User “Gabagool” Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

The khan’s plan to transfer power upon his death also fused older steppe traditions with his new vision. He bequeathed to his sons parts of the world yet unconquered, so that they had to win these new areas. This stipulation produced an incentive for his sons to cooperate in order to collect their patrimony. Genghis Khan had divided the four patrimonial **ulus**, or states, amongst his sons. The four subsequent empires that grew out of these ulus included the Golden Horde, who were the descendants of **Juchi** and controlled Russia; the Chagatai Khanate, which traced its lineage to **Chagatai** and governed Central Asia; the Mongol-founded Yuan Dynasty in China, the progeny of **Tolui**; and the Ilkhanate of Persia, inheritors of the House of Hülegü and also the successors of Tolui.



Map **17.11.7.4**: Map of the Khanate of the Golden Horde, 1300 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Gabagool” via Wikimedia Commons)

Prior to his death in 1227, Genghis Khan expressed a desire that his son Ögedei succeed him, a decision that affronted **Juchi**, his eldest, whose lineage was questioned. Fortunately for the Mongols, Juchi’s death preceded that of his father’s, narrowly averting a potential civil war. A khuriltai in 1229 confirmed the khan’s wishes, and it was under Ögedei that the Mongols realized their destiny of world domination. Between 1230 and 1233, Ögedei’s troops defeated the remnants of the Jin dynasty in central China. Then they focused their attention on Russia, as they had actionable intelligence on the divisions among the Russian principalities dating to a 1223 reconnaissance mission that utterly crushed a coalition of Russian and Kipchak princes. In 1236, Ögedei launched his campaign in the dead of winter and used rivers as frozen ice highways. By end of 1237, they had taken the Black Steppe, Vladimir, and Riazan. It was only some fortuitous flooding that prevented the complete destruction of Novgorod. The Prince of Novgorod was, however, sufficiently impressed by the Mongol onslaught so voluntarily agreed to pay their tribute. The Mongols commenced a devastating attack on the city of Kiev in December of 1240, culminating in a nine-day siege. They ultimately destroyed the city as retribution for its resistance. The Mongols steamrolled the Hungarians soon thereafter and left the region in ruins en route to Vienna. By December of 1241, their forces were approaching the outskirts of the city. No military power in Europe was capable of withstanding a Mongol attack.



Figure **17.11.7.4**: Güyük at the Partyc | From Tarikh-i Jahangushay-i by Juvaini (Public Domain; User “Bahatur” via Wikimedia Commons)

Fortunately for the Viennese, Ögedei died that very same month, and a one year period of mourning ensued. The Mongols were summoned home in order to choose the next great khan. What was supposed to be a quick election turned into a five-year ordeal because **Batu**, son of Juchi and grandson of Genghis Khan, refused to return to Mongolia for the khuriltai. This founder of the Golden Horde believed that he would not be chosen and knew that his relatives could not officially convene a khuriltai without him, thus preventing the body from proclaiming the next great khan. It was Ögedei’s death and Batu’s independence of thought that saved Europe from Mongol conquest.



Figure **17.11.7.5**: Audience with Möngke | From Tarikh-i Jahangushay-i by Juvaini (Public Domain; User “Bahatur” via Wikimedia Commons)

The khuriltai finally proclaimed **Güyük**, eldest son of Ögedei, the next khan in 1246. This was not a legitimate election though because of Batu's conspicuous absence. Güyük quickly dispatched an army to punish Batu for meddling in the political process of succession, but Batu had already arranged for his cousin's assassination in 1248. Güyük's death led to another period of paralysis. A khuriltai eventually nominated **Möngke**, Tolui's oldest son, as the next great khan in 1251. Now Möngke had to deal with the problem that Batu presented. He was willing to allow for Batu's autonomy so long as he recognized Möngke as the legitimate khan. It was at this point that Batu's horde become the **Golden Horde**. He adopted the moniker of "golden" because he was asserting his independence.

Batu died in 1256, and his younger brother **Berke** became the first khan of the Golden Horde to accept Islam. This sudden conversion to Islam caused systemic problems in the Mongol Empire because different parts of the four lines of Genghis Khan would adopt different faiths, resulting in political divisions that aligned with religious divisions. As a Muslim, Berke spurned his Buddhist cousins and established firm links with the Turkic Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, thus making an alliance based on faith with a power outside of the Mongol Empire.

Genghis Khan's empire had exceeded normal steppe expectations, and, with potential fault lines emerging already, his vision of a politically unified empire was never truly realized. A series of civil wars erupted not long thereafter that fractured the Mongol Empire. First came the Toluid Civil War (1260 – 1264), then the Berke-Hülegü War (1262), and finally the Kaidu-Kublai War (1268 – 1301). These three wars had the combined effect of undermining the great khan's authority, and the empire ended up breaking apart on along the lines of the patrimonial ulus, with each moving in their own direction. In fact, the successors of **Kublai Khan** (1260 – 1294), who presided over the Yuan Dynasty in China, could not even convene a khuriltai to appoint a great khan following his death. By 1294, there was neither fiction nor façade of a unified Mongol Empire. It was the end of a unified political unit.

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17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai

Chagatai (1226 – 1241), the second son of Genghis and his wife Börte, had participated in his father's campaigns, and in 1227 he claimed his patrimonial territory designated as between the Caspian Sea and the Tarim Basin. The origins of the **Chagatai Khanate** shaped its political and demographic character; Chagatai obtained the core of Central Asia, a personal pastureland located along the Kazakh steppe. He also received the settled lands to the south in modern day Uzbekistan. Chagatai never demonstrated ambition for the position of great khan; rather, he played an important role helping his brother Ögedei exercise authority and uphold Yassa. In doing so, Chagatai served as the glue that helped hold the Mongol Empire together.



Map **17.11.8.1**: Map of the Khanate of Chagatai, 1300 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Gabagool" via Wikimedia Commons)

As was the case with his father, Genghis Khan, Chagatai had trouble coping with the cultural differences that existed between steppe and settled societies. His solution to the conflict between these two civilizations was known as **Inju**, a dual-administrative system and a form of indirect rule. Inju was a political concession designed to separate the two incompatible cultures, allowing both to maintain their own traditional laws yet remain subject to the authority of Chagatai and his descendants. Chagatai was conscious not to force Yassa on sedentary Muslim cities; however, it continued to be exercised on the plains. In agricultural and urban areas, a bureaucratic tradition with a Muslim administration persisted. So long as these Muslims did not openly resist Mongol control, they could go about their daily business, free from Mongol interference in their life. It was in this way that the steppe continued to abide by customary Mongol law, while in the south the people of the cities lived according to the Sharia, or Quranic law.

Inju was also an economic arrangement granting the Mongols a share of the resources produced in sedentary lands. The Mongols rewarded those who cooperated in governance with a portion of the profits; those who participated in Inju were entitled to their allotment of the common imperial settled possessions. At first, all of the conquered towns remained the property of the khan, but over time access to the wealth of the urban areas extended to the nomads who took part in Inju.

Although Inju was a practical solution to the difficulty of governing the two separate societies, it ultimately did not resolve the problem of uniting the sedentary Turkic population and the nomadic Mongols since it failed to accommodate the needs of either society. Actually, it encouraged friction between the two civilizations because it placed hardships on both peoples. While the horsemen benefited handsomely from Inju, they considered it incompatible with their traditional practices because it forced them to climb down from their steeds and settle down in the cities. Yes, the Mongols did receive tribute, slaves, and status as compensation for the inconvenience of ruling over settled lands, but the costs of sustaining this empire were heavy. It was just too demanding for them to uphold. First, the maintenance of empire disrupted the nomadic way of life because they often had to join in exhaustive campaigns, lasting years at a time. Second, the nomads were unaccustomed to a considerable amount of government interference in their daily routine. Increasingly, they viewed the prospect of governing an empire as a burden and preferred to revert to a pastoral

lifestyle on the prairie. They sought more independence and stability, so they consciously began to defect from the system and return to their pastures.

Those living in the settled lands to the south chaffed under Inju as well. Though they recognized that government remained an essential part of life, Inju encumbered urban-dwelling and farming peoples too. The Mongols stressed this population by raising additional taxes in an unpredictable and disruptive manner. This annoyed the city folk, who were accustomed to more regular taxation. Ultimately, Inju did not mesh well with either lifestyle. The practice rested on force, not utility. The Mongol state sustained two different societies that often remained in conflict, so it stayed in a state of permanent instability.

17.11.8.1: Turko-Mongol Fusion

The Mongols were the first to unify the Eurasian steppe, and their occupation of the region corresponded to a wholesale takeover. As they migrated southwest down the steppe, they failed to displace the Turkic peoples already established in Central Asia. Early on, the dominant Mongols offered these Turkic groups a deal to either merge with them or suffer harsh reprisal. So as the Mongols progressed westward, their armies gained strength, as more and more of the Turkic tribesmen joined them, resulting in armies that were mostly comprised of Turkic peoples, not Mongols. In this manner, the Turkic groups absorbed and assimilated the invading Mongols, a process known as **Turkification**; the conflict between the two cultures faded over time and eventually led to a fusion of Turkic and Mongolian societies. Over time, these Mongol pastoralists presiding over a sedentary Islamic culture slowly Turkified. They quickly became a Mongol minority governing a Turkic majority.

There were numerous points of contention between the two groups but also many commonalities. Both societies had originated on the steppe in modern day Mongolia, and, while the Turkic groups had settled down over the years and adopted more of a sedentary existence, many of the principles of pastoral nomadism still lingered in their culture. Both adhered to a patrimonial distribution of inheritance. Also, both the Turkic groups and the Mongols organized along tribal lines, and each followed a pattern of co-opting one tribe into another, thus facilitating a fusion of the Mongols with their Turkic hosts. For this system to work though, the Mongols had to speak the idiom of the people they ruled. So instead of the Mongols imposing their language on the majority of the population, the Mongol elite learned Chagatai, a Turkic tongue.

For many years, religion remained the only major distinction between the two societies, but once the Chagataids converted to Islam in 1333 this conspicuous difference disappeared. While the Mongols adopted the creed and language of the Turkic Chagatai, these Turkic peoples incorporated the Mongol political concept of Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.

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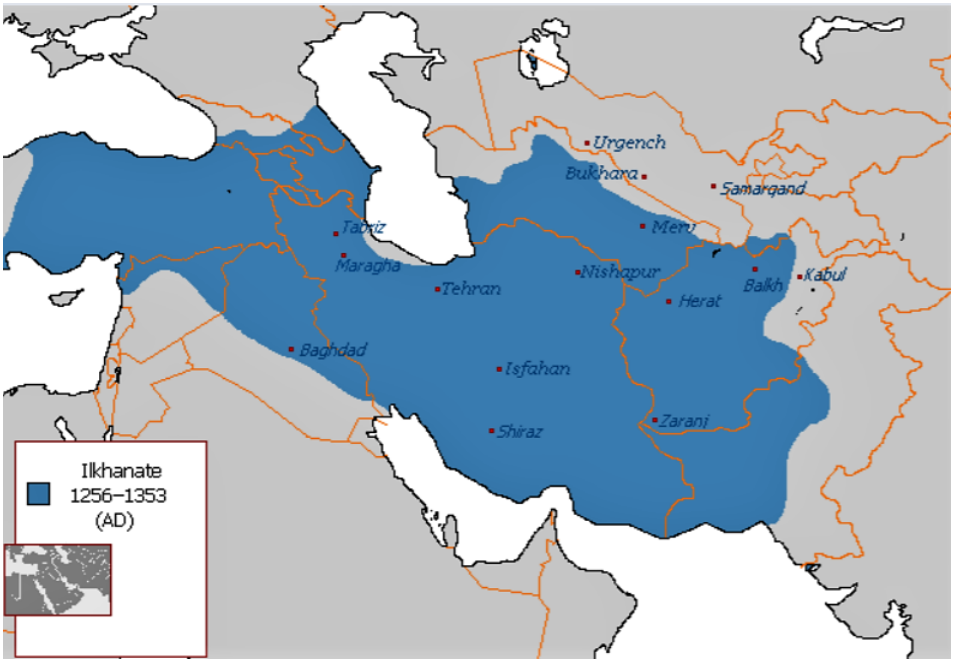
17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)

Hülegü Khan (1256 – 1265), grandson of Genghis Khan and son of Tolui, served his brother Möngke (1251 – 1259), the great khan, and campaigned through the Middle East, where he whipped out the Assassins, a secret order of schismatic Shia entrenched in the mountains of Gilan province in 1256. He also destroyed the Abbasid capital of Baghdad in 1258, putting an end to the Caliphate. By 1260 Hülegü controlled parts of Armenia, Iraq, Anatolia, all of Azerbaijan, and all of Iran. Kublai Khan (1250 – 1294) had awarded his brother Hülegü the title of Ilkhan, a secondary khan who remained subordinate only to the great khan in Mongolia. This portion of the empire became known as the Khanate of the Ilkhans.



Figure **17.11.9.1**: Hülegü Khan and Dokuz Khatun | From Rachid Ad-Din's "History of the World" (Public Domain; Rachid Ad-Din via Wikimedia Commons)

The Ilkhans were a Mongol minority ruling over a Muslim majority; religious problems plagued the Ilkhanate for much of its existence. To begin with, Hülegü, a Nestorian Christian, who later converted to Buddhism on his deathbed, had sacked Baghdad, one of the most politically important cities in the Islamic world, an act that alienated him from his Muslim cousin Berke Khan, ruler of the Golden Horde. The conversion of the Golden Horde to Islam had presented a real problem, for the Ilkhans had initially championed Buddhism in Iraq and Iran. As animosity continued to mount between the two parts of the Mongol Empire over religious differences, we see growing ties of alliance between the Muslim Golden Horde and their coreligionists, the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, against the Ilkhans. Belief transcended blood, as one part of Mongol Empire allied against another with an outside source. Faith-based civil wars consumed much of the reign of Abaga Khan (1265 – 1282). These wars were rooted in the Ilkhanate's inappropriate treatment of their Muslim population. The Golden Horde's alliance with the Mamluks threatened the Ilkhanate, and yet no longer could Abaga rely on the full might of centralized Mongol power; he was forced to appeal to Kublai Khan to assuage the hostilities between the Ilkhans and the Golden Horde.



Map**17.11.9.1**: Map of the Khanate of the Ilkhans at its Greatest Extent, 1256 CE (Public Domain; Arab League via Wikimedia Commons)

Much of the religious conflict during the early Ilkhanate related to doctrinal differences between Islam and the traditional Mongol way of life. The most stubborn problem for the two was the contradiction between the traditional Mongolian method of animal slaughter, which required that no blood be spilled, and the Islamic code of cleanliness, which necessitated that all blood be drained. Each side was appalled by the other's customs. Furthermore, as practitioners of rigid monotheism, Muslims found the Mongol worship of religious images repulsive, a ritual strictly forbidden in Islam.



Figure **17.11.9.2**: Conversion of Ghazan to Islam | From Rashid al-Din "History of the World" (Public Domain; Rachid Ad-Din via Wikimedia Commons)

While spiritual troubles remained a persistent problem for the Ilkhans, the economic situation deteriorated too. **Gaykhatu Khan** (1291 – 1295) practically emptied the royal treasury with profligate spending. He experimented with paper money recently adopted

from China to compensate for his wasteful expenditures, but overprinting resulted in massive inflation. The Ilkhans also tried to extract the maximum amount of tribute from the countryside to offset declining revenues. This led to an abuse in tax gathering, known as tax farming, in which rulers sold contracts for the collection of revenues to the highest bidder. This method of tax collection provided a strong incentive to despoil peasants.

It was **Mahmud Ghazan** (1295 – 1304) who solved the Ilkhanate's continued religious and economic problems. He was the first Ilkhan to convert to Islam, thus rehabilitating their image in the eyes of their Muslim subjects and making their rule much more acceptable. Their new public stance towards Islam moderated persistent conflict and paved the way for cultural flourishing. Ghazan patronized Ilkhanid art, scholarship, and science. Ilkhanid art reflected Chinese influence and helped contribute to Persian artistic development. In terms of scholarship, the first true history of the world was completed under the sponsorship of Mahmud Ghazan. Written by **Rashid al-Din Hamadani** (1247 – 1318), the book was richly illustrated with watercolors and portraiture in the Chinese style. Through his travels in the service of the Mongols, Rashid al-Din had become perceptively aware of Ilkhanid Persia's cosmopolitan culture. It was Rashid al-Din, a Jewish convert to Islam, who had convinced Mahmud Ghazan to adopt the faith in order to be more attuned to the beliefs of his peoples. Regarding science, the Ilkhands attempted to amass large amounts of astronomical data from China to Europe. With unprecedented accuracy, they became very good at predicting lunar eclipses. Their data was used throughout Eurasia.

Despite the early looting and plundering indicative of a Mongol conquest, the Ilkhans eventually reactivated the Silk Road and promoted transcontinental trade. The newfound safety of the route throughout Eurasia stimulated trade and encouraged many different kinds of cultures to come together. Ghazan attempted to reform the tax policies that had led to the maximization of taxation. Cities did revive, but the long term negative consequence of conquest continued to be felt by the peasants who suffered from prolonged violence.

Much like the Mongols in Chaghatai Central Asia, eventually Ilkhans went native too. Here we see a Persian-Mongol fusion, as they began to identify with Persian culture and speak the Persian language. As they bonded with Persia, they adopted Islam and began to promote Persian as the written language of their land.

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17.11.10: Timur

It was under Timur (1370 – 1405) that Central Asia moved to the fore of world events. He attempted to soothe the persistent differences that existed between the steppe and sedentary societies and actually developed a political arrangement that could harness the best attributes of each society, without the dangerous side effect of communal violence associated with combining the two civilizations. He also constructed a new political and military machine that was deeply ingrained in the political background of the Chagatai Khanate, even while he acknowledged that Inju satisfied neither the nomad nor the settled society and eliminated the practice. Astutely recognizing that serious conflict existed between these two incongruent cultures under his control, Timur provided a framework for both societies to live in harmony.

Born in 1336 near Kesh in modern day Uzbekistan, Timur came out of Central Asia and was a product of the Turko-Mongol fusion. He descended from an aristocratic Mongol clan, but he was raised as a Muslim and spoke a Turkic language. Although Timur himself was a native to Transoxiana, he could not assert Genghis-Khanid legitimacy. Unable to trace his ancestry to Genghis Khan, he could not take the title of khan in his own right. Timur understood that because he did not have the correct pedigree, he would have to earn it. His solution was to take the title of emir, meaning commander, and rule through a Chagatayid puppet khan acting as a figurehead. The emir also married into the family of Genghis Khan. While the law of descent was not intended to work this way, Timur changed it to accommodate his children, who would be able to claim Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.



Map **17.11.10.1**: Map of the Timurid Empire, 1400 CE (CC BY-SA 3.0; User “Gabagool” via Wikimedia Commons)

To strengthen the security of his position as emir, he constructed a system of support that ordered his political connections in a series of concentric rings. In his primary circle resided his family and close allies. The second ring consisted of loyal tribes and Timur’s own Barlas Clan, from which he traced his lineage. The third circle was made up of those peoples Timur had defeated on the battlefield; the second and third rings balanced one another. The outermost bands included Timur’s hereditary professional administrators and bureaucrats, soldiers from the plains serving in his cavalry units, and finally the Persian urban and agricultural populations, from which he recruited his infantry and siege units.

Like many transitional figures in history, such as Suleiman the Magnificent, Timur bridged the medieval and modern worlds. He attempted to imitate Genghis Khan’s success in the field and designed a novel military machine that was well adapted to the environment in which he lived. His military was the product of a Turko-Mongol fusion, employing Turkic siege techniques and the Mongol cavalry. Unlike Genghis Khan, however, Timur increasingly combined his cavalry, siege, and infantry units, placing his heavy cavalry at the center of formations. His army also utilized an early form of artillery. He ventured to monopolize the market on gunpowder technology so that other powers could not benefit from it.



Figure 17.11.10.1: Timur Facial Reconstruction | Forensic Facial Reconstruction by M. Gerasimov, 1941 (CC BY-SA 3.0; Shakko via Wikimedia Commons)

Timur was determined to keep his volatile army occupied, so they would not be a burden to the sedentary population in his realm. It was in this context that he developed a formula for success that promoted peace at home and war abroad, a policy that best served the interests of the merchants and townspeople. He externalized the violence of the steppe and destroyed all of the other trade routes that bypassed his territory. Timur attempted to reactivate and dominate the Silk Road and diverted trade to his lands in order to help rebuild the cities that had been damaged from years of Mongol and nomad rule. He did not aim at permanent occupation or the creation of new states; he just wanted to devastate, even going so far as to campaign against the Golden Horde, Delhi Sultanate, and the Ottoman Empire, all in an effort to redirect trade in his direction.

Timur began his military campaigns attempting to secure the back door of the steppe. During this period, which lasted from 1370 to 1385, he conquered and subdued Mogholistan to the northeast, with the aim of securing the core central land route of the Silk Road. (The Chagatai Khanate had already been divided into two parts by the 1340s, Transoxania in the west, and Mogholistan in the east.) Then he engaged the Golden Horde between 1385 and 1395. The Golden Horde had been the master of the northern trade route that bypassed Timur's territory. In order to eliminate this option, he went to war against them in order to divert trade to toward his lands. Timur showed his strategic genius in these expeditions. He defeated a steppe power on the steppe. He put the pieces of his army together in such a way so that he could take his enemies on in their arena and on their terms. In this manner, Timur crushed **Tokhtamysh**, leader of the Golden Horde, in 1395. During the course of this campaign, Timur destroyed their principle trade cities of Astrakhan and Sarai. An interesting byproduct of Timur's campaign against the Golden Horde was that it precipitated the rise of the **Grand Duchy of Moscow**. He had weakened the Golden Horde to such an extent that it made it possible for Moscow to throw off the Mongol yoke.

Timur raided into India from 1398 to 1399 and dealt a blow to the southern sea route that connected the Occident to the Orient. This expedition was primarily for looting, since he never intended to conquer and annex the territory of **Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud Shah Tughluq**, the last member of the Tughluq Dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. During this campaign, Timur's tactical brilliance was on full display; he had an uncanny ability to adapt to any martial environment that he confronted. For instance, when threatened with a cavalry of war elephants, Timur responded by unleashing a pack of camels laden with incendiary material to charge the enemy lines. Shrieking dromedaries with their backs ablaze incited utter pandemonium among Nasir-ud-Din's cavalry of elephants, who rampaged through the sultan's own lines. Timur easily routed the sultan's forces. When faced with the townspeople of Delhi rising up against their aggressors, Timur brutally sacked the capital of the sultanate and justified the violence in religious terms. His was a Muslim victory over the Hindu unbelievers of India.

In Timur's final period of conquest, which lasted from 1400 to 1404, he campaigned against the Islamic far west, directing his army against the Ottomans. Actually, Timur had initially attempted to avoid conflict with the Ottomans, whose forces had earned an impressive reputation on the battlefield. In fact, Timur had even tried to negotiate with Bayezid I, the Ottoman Sultan, offering him part of Golden Horde's territory west of Dnieper River. But these two expansionist realms inevitably came into conflict in eastern Anatolia. The conflict between the two empires began as the Ottomans expanded to the east and took control of some Turkmen tribes in eastern Anatolia already under the protection of Timur. The emir responded by taking some other Turkmen tribes under Ottoman suzerainty. Offensive missives replete with insulting incriminations ensued. Timur bided his time, waiting for the perfect moment to attack the Ottomans. In 1402, he launched a devastating attack into the heart of Anatolia, as the Ottomans were preoccupied with campaigning against the Hungarians. During the Battle of Ankara in 1402, Timur managed to convince many of the Ottoman forces to defect to his side. He captured the Ottoman sultan, who died in captivity three months later. Timur had not attempted to conquer the Ottomans; he just wanted to punish them for their unwillingness to cooperate. His Levantine expedition also seems to have been designed to weaken the western terminus of the Silk Road in Aleppo, Syria.

Timur died in 1405 while on a campaign against the Ming Dynasty. He had built an empire that spanned the breadth of Central Asia. Unlike Genghis Khan, whose empire continued to expand after his death, the sons of Timur and their followers squabbled over succession, leading to a series of internecine battles. Members of the Timurid Dynasty competed among themselves, with commanders switching loyalties. The empire consequently fragmented. The successors of Timur could not manage the difficulties of governing an empire, and it withered away quickly. The political situation resembled that which Chagatayids had to contend with, the steppe military that had been redirected, but with Timur's death, they returned. A number of Timurid rulers followed; a weak state emerged from all this strife.

17.11.10.1: Terror and Destruction

Timur certainly committed what we would describe today as war crimes; there definitely was an element of terrorism to his campaigns. In fact, as an admirer of architecture, he is known to have constructed pyramids of human skulls. Extant accounts describe him slaughtering 100,000 Indian prisoners following the Delhi uprising. But not all destruction was the same; and there was a definite difference between that of Genghis Khan and Timur. The emir's annihilation of the region was not meant to serve a utilitarian purpose so much as to inflict suffering. Genghis Khan's used terror as a method to protect his troops, whereas Timur engaged in terror and destruction for pleasure.

17.11.10.2: Legacy

A product of the Turko-Mongolian fusion, Timur had been the first to reunite the eastern and western parts of the Chagatai ulus. His empire represents the construction of the political boundaries passed down to posterity; the maintenance of this space would define boundaries of modern day Central Asia up to the twentieth century. Under Timur we see growing political and cultural distinctions between Iran, Central Asia proper, and India begin to cement. In this context, we see a split taking place on the steppe that will lead to a differentiation of the Uzbeks and Kazaks. By the late fourteenth century, the tribes on the steppe to the north will become known to Muslim writers as Kazaks, whereas the tribes to the south will be increasingly referred to as Uzbeks, a differentiation that has continued to persist and helped to delimit modern borders.

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17.11.11: Conclusion

Three forces combined to shape the course of Central Asian history: the Turkic migrations, expansion of Islam, and the Mongol conquest. Beginning in the second century BCE, waves of Turkic migrations entered the region. It is debatable whether or not they Turkified the original Iranian inhabitants or permanently changed the ethnic makeup of the area. Turkic tribes occupied the great steppe, Turkifying the region and endowing it with a more nomadic character. They also populated the agricultural basin of Transoxiana, displacing the original Iranian inhabitants of the area. Many of these Turks slowly settled down over time. These Turkic peoples displayed a unique ability to absorb the Islamic faith and internalize the Mongol conquest.

Islam transformed the religious adherence of Central Asia and left a lasting mark on the region as well. Transoxiana gradually Islamicized, but Turkic and Persian cultures persisted. Islamization incorporated native peoples in the process of conversion. As Islam spread through the area, the faith demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to incorporate local traditions, permitting some customs to linger so long as doing so accelerated conversion. Sufi missionaries made some compromises with the Turkic nomadic culture in order to establish the religion in the area. Sufism's inherent flexibility helped to promote conversion, and the blend of orthodox Islam and Turkic pastoral nomadism created a uniquely Central Asian brand of the faith.

The Mongol conquest of Central Asia had the most immediate impact on the history of the region. Although the Mongols eventually Turkified over time, the legacy of Genghis-Khanid legitimacy remained. Genghis Khan had developed a secure and dependable means of transferring power, for Genghis-Khanid legitimacy reduced the number of contenders vying for the throne; the Mongols did not collapse as a "nation" following the death of their founder. Genghis Khan bequeathed a legacy of political legitimacy to the region that would last until 1920.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

17.12: Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE

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17.12.1: Chronology

17.12.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE

17.12.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

17.12.4: Key Terms

17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe

17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade

17.12.7: Growth in Agriculture

17.12.8: A Roman Empire?

17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation

17.12.10: Expansion of Christendom

17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century

17.12.12: The Crusades

17.12.13: The Twelfth Century in Western Europe

17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse

17.12.15: The Twelfth-Century Renaissance

17.12.16: The Third Crusade

17.12.17: The Fourth Crusade

17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe

17.12.19: Later Crusades and Crusading's Ultimate Failure

17.12.20: Scholasticism

17.12.21: Daily Life at the Medieval Zenith

17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises

17.12.23: War

17.12.24: Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages

17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy

17.12.26: The European Renaissance

17.12.27: States in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance

17.12.28: Iberia and the Atlantic- New Worlds

17.12.29: Conclusion

17.12.30: Works Consulted and Further Reading

17.12.31: Links to Primary Sources

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17.12.1: Chronology

962 CE Otto I crowned Holy Roman Emperor

987 CE Hugh Capet elected king of France

c. 1000 – 1100 CE Emergence of Western European feudalism

1031 CE Fall of the Cordoba Caliphate

1049 CE Pope Leo IX begins papal efforts at Church reform

1054 CE Schism between the pope and the patriarch of Constantinople

1066 CE Norman Conquest of England

1071 CE Battle of Manzikert annihilates Byzantine field army

1077 CE Henry IV repents to Pope Gregory VII at Canossa

1085 CE Fall of Muslim Toledo to the Christian kingdom of Leon-Castile

1088 – 1231 CE Foundation of Universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge

1091 CE Norman conquest of Muslim Sicily complete

1095 CE Council of Clermont, calling of the First Crusade

1099 CE Fall of Jerusalem to Christian Crusaders, establishment of Crusader States

1100 – 1135 CE King Henry I rules England

1118 – 1143 CE Emperor John II rules the Byzantine Empire

1122 CE Concordat of Worms

1125 – 1152 CE Raymond is archbishop of Toledo, begins sponsoring the translation of Muslim and Greek philosophy from Arabic into Latin

1143 – 1180 CE Emperor Manuel Komnenos rules the Byzantine Empire

1154 – 1189 CE King Henry II rules England

1176 CE Frederick Barbarossa defeated by Lombard League at the Battle of Legnano; Manuel Komnenos defeated by Saljuq Turks at the Battle of Myriokephalon

1187 CE Kingdom of Jerusalem defeated by Saladin at the Battle of Hattin, fall of Jerusalem, Pope Gregory VIII issues Audita tremendi, calling the Third Crusade

1189 – 1192 CE The Third Crusade, a rump (remnant of a larger government) Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem is re-established, but Jerusalem remains in Muslim hands

1203 – 1226 CE France's Capetian kings extend the control of lands directly ruled by the crown

1204 CE Crusaders sack Constantinople, break-up of the Byzantine Empire

1212 CE Almohad Caliphate defeated by Spanish Christian kingdoms at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa

1215 CE Magna Carta

1215 – 1250 CE Frederick II is Holy Roman Emperor

1224 – 1274 CE Life of St. Thomas Aquinas

1229 CE A treaty between Frederick II and Egyptian sultan al-Kamil returns Jerusalem to Christian rule

1240 CE Mongol Conquest of Kievan Rus

1241 CE Mongol invasion of Hungary

1244 CE Jerusalem falls to Ayyubid Egypt

1248 – 1254 CE The Seventh Crusade, France's King Louis IX defeated by Egypt, Egyptian Mamluk coup d'état

1250 – 1273 CE There is no Holy Roman Emperor

1261 CE Restoration of the Byzantine Empire

1291 CE Last Crusader territory in the Levant falls to Mamluk Egypt

c. 1300 CE Genoese sailors begin exploring the Atlantic Ocean

early 1300s CE Genoese sailors are visiting the Canary Islands

1309 CE Beginning of Avignon papacy

1314 – 1326 CE Civil war in the Holy Roman Empire

1315 – 1322 CE The Great Famine

1324 CE Mansa Musa's hajj

1331 CE Nearly all Byzantine territory in Asia Minor has fallen to the Ottoman Turks

1337 CE The Hundred Years' War begins

c. 1350 CE Beginning of Italian Renaissance and Humanism

1347 – 1351 CE The Black Death, nearly a third of Europe's population dies

1356 CE The Holy Roman Empire becomes an elected monarchy

1358 CE French peasant revolt

1378 CE Beginning of Great Schism

1385 CE Lithuania united with Poland, Lithuanian monarch converts to Christianity

1396 CE Ottoman Turks conquer Bulgaria

1397 CE Union of Kalmar unites Sweden, Denmark, and Norway under a single crown

c. 1400 – 1500 CE Renaissance Humanism spreads throughout Europe

1404 CE Castilian effort to conquer the Canaries begins

1415 – 1417 CE Council of Constance resolves the Great Schism

1440 CE Lorenzo Valla shows the Donation of Constantine to be a forgery

mid 1400s CE Iberians are settling the Azores, a plantation economy worked by African slaves begins to flourish in the Canaries and Azores

1453 CE Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, final fall of the Byzantine Empire; End of Hundred Years' War and English attempts to conquer France

1454 CE Treaty of Lodi brings nearly a half century of peace to Italy

1455 – 1485 CE Wars of the Roses in England

1459 CE Final Ottoman conquest of Serbia

1479 CE Marriage of Queen Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon creates a united Spanish monarchy

1492 CE King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella complete the Reconquista with the conquest of Granada, Christopher Columbus, sailing for the Spanish crown, makes landfall in the Western Hemisphere

1494 CE France invades Italy

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17.12.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE

15 July 1099: The Al-Aqsa mosque looked down on the city of Jerusalem, the light of the sun reflecting off of its golden dome. Down below the hill on which the mosque stood, a scene of slaughter was unfolding. Up against the northern wall of the city stood a wooden tower laboriously rolled into place hours earlier, over the top of which had poured a desperate band of European knights, the first over the walls of the Holy City.

Within the walls, the narrow, winding streets between the ancient stone buildings of the city rang with the clash of steel on steel and the cries of the dead and dying. Smoke from fires breaking out within the city mingled with the smell of death. In parts of the city, its defenders, Muslim Egyptians, were still fighting, going down under the sword strokes of the Christian soldiers fighting their way through the streets. In the southwest, a small group of defenders had retreated into the more heavily fortified citadel where they were negotiating a surrender with Count Raymond of Toulouse, a shrewd but irascible noble from the south of France.

Elsewhere in the city, the killing of the soldiers was giving way to a more horrific slaughter, as the mail-clad knights cut down men, women, and children where they stood, torturing some with fire, and threatening others with worse if they did not turn over their valuables. By the end of the day, the Christian soldiers hacking their way through the city streets waded through blood up to their ankles.

As the day went on, soldiers pushed through the piles of dismembered corpses to the golden-domed Al-Aqsa Mosque. The mosque stood where Solomon's temple had been millennia before, and the knights, smeared with the blood of slaughter, fell to their knees in prayer, grateful that God had delivered their enemies into their hands.

These men had traveled more than two thousand miles by land and sea. Tens of thousands of their comrades lay dead along the way from starvation, thirst, disease, or battle. But these warriors had made it from their European homelands to seize control of the city of Jerusalem, a city sacred to Jew, Christian, and Muslim, and bring it under Christian rule for the first time in more than four centuries

An army made up of many of the soldiers of Western Europe had managed to successfully make war on its Muslim enemies and seize territories in the Middle East, near the heart of Muslim culture and political power. How had they done so? And why? To understand, we must look to the how the European Christian world had developed over the eleventh century.

In the years between about 1000 and 1500, the culture and institutions of Western Europe took on a form that was distinct from the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms of the early Middle Ages and which would, in many ways, lay the foundations of Europe (and the Americas) into modern times. At the end of this period, thinkers seeking to bring about a new birth of ancient learning would look back on the thousand years that had come before as the Middle Ages, a period between the world of the Ancient Greeks and Romans and their own. But although these thinkers ostentatiously rejected the Middle Ages, they were in many ways its heirs. To see how this culture developed, we shall begin in Western Europe in the chaotic years of the early eleventh century.

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17.12.3: Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. Who held most political and military power in a feudal system?

2. What were some reasons that European towns started to grow in the eleventh century?

3. Why did Europe's agricultural output increase in the eleventh century?

4. What were some lasting results of the eleventh-century popes' attempts to reform the Church?

5. What did Pope Urban II call on Western Europe's nobles to do in 1095?

6. How did the thirteenth-century Capetian kings of France strengthen their authority?

7. Why did Frederick Barbarossa and Frederick II ultimately fail to establish control over Italy?

8. What was the Reconquista?

9. How did noble and peasant diets differ?

10. What caused the death of a third of Europe's population between the years 1347 and 1351?

11. Why were Genoese merchants in the service of Iberian kings exploring the Atlantic and western Africa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

12. Why did Christopher Columbus think he could sail directly from Europe to Asia?

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17.12.4: Key Terms

- Albigensian Crusade
- Alchemy
- Babylonian Captivity of the Church
- Bourgeois
- Capetian
- Chain mail
- Christendom
- Commune
- Concordat of Worms
- *Cortes*
- Council of Constance
- Crusade
- Crusader States
- East Francia
- Exchequer
- Feudalism
- Fiefs
- *Filioque* Controversy
- Great Schism
- Holy War
- Humanism
- Investiture Controversy
- *Iqta*
- Italian Renaissance
- Just War
- Legate
- Magna Carta
- Malthusian limits
- Papal bull
- Parliament
- Patriarch
- Pilgrim
- Population sink
- *Portolan* chart
- *Pronoia*
- *Reconquista*
- Scholasticism
- Simony
- *Taifa* states
- Thing
- Three-field System
- Tournament
- Twelfth-century Renaissance
- University
- Vassal States
- West Francia

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17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe

Out of the chaos and mayhem of the tenth and eleventh centuries, **East Francia**—the eastern third of Charlemagne's Empire that is in roughly the same place as modern Germany—and England had emerged as united and powerful states. In the aftermath of the Abbasid Caliphate's political collapse and the gradual weakening of Fatimid Egypt (see Chapter Eight), the eleventh-century Byzantine Empire was the strongest, most centralized state in the Eastern Mediterranean, and indeed, probably the strongest state west of Song China.

Most of the rest of Christian Western Europe's kingdoms, however, were fragmented. This decentralization was most acute in **West Francia**, the western third of what had been Charlemagne's empire. This kingdom would eventually come to be known as France. Out of a weak and fragmented kingdom emerged the decentralized form of government that historians often call **feudalism**. We call it feudalism because power rested with armed men in control of plots of agricultural land known as **fiefs** and Latin for fief is *feudum*. They would use the surplus from these fiefs to equip themselves with weapons and equipment, and they often controlled their fiefs with little oversight from the higher-ranked nobles or the king.

How had such a system emerged? Even in Carolingian times, armies in much of Western Europe had come from war bands made up of a king's loyal retainers, who themselves would possess bands of followers. Ultimate control of a kingdom's army had rested with the king, and the great nobles had also exercised strong authority over their own fighting men. The near constant warfare (both external attacks and civil wars) of the tenth and eleventh centuries, however, meant that the kings of West Francia gradually lost control over the more powerful nobles. Further, the powerful nobles often lost control of the warlords of more local regions. West Francia had little governmental authority and much war.

As a result of constant warfare (albeit warfare that was usually local in scope), power came to rest in control of fiefs and the ability to extract surplus from their occupants and to use this surplus to outfit armed men. The warlords who controlled fiefs often did so by means of armed fortresses called castles. At first, especially in northern parts of West Francia, these fortresses were of wood, and might sometimes be as small as a wooden palisade surrounding a fortified wooden tower. Over the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these wooden castles came to be replaced with fortifications of stone. A castle had two roles: it would protect a land from attackers (such as Viking raiders), but it would also serve as a base for the control and extortion of a land's people.



Figure **17.12.5.1**: A Wooden Castle of the Type that was Common in the Eleventh Century (CC BY-SA 3.0; Julien Chatelain via Wikimedia Commons)

The castle represented Europe's feudal order in wood and stone. Corresponding to the physical structure of the castle was the figure of the knight. Knights in the eleventh century wore an armor called **chain mail**, that is, interlocking rings of metal that would form a coat of armor. The knight usually fought on horseback, wielding a long spear known as a lance in addition to the sword at his side. With his feet resting in stirrups, a knight could hold himself firmly in the saddle, directing the weight and power of a charging horse into the tip of his lance.

Knights and castles came to dominate West Francia and then other parts of Europe for several reasons. The technology of ironworking was improving so that iron was cheaper (although still very expensive) and more readily available, allowing for knights to wear more armor than their predecessors. Moreover, warfare of the tenth and eleventh centuries was made up of raids (both those of Vikings and of other Europeans). A raid depends on mobility, with the raiders able to kill people and seize plunder before defending soldiers can arrive. Mounted on horseback, knights were mobile enough that they could respond rapidly to raids. The castle allowed a small number of soldiers to defend territory and was also a deterrent to raiders, since it meant that quick plunder might not be possible.



Figure **17.12.5.2**: Rochester Castle | A stone castle built in the twelfth century. (CC BY-SA 4.0; User "Prioryman" via Wikimedia Commons)

A knight's equipment—mail, lance, and horse—was incredibly expensive, as was the material and labor to construct even a wooden castle. Although knights had originally been whichever soldiers had been able to get the equipment to fight, the expense of this equipment and thus the need to control a fief to pay for it meant that knights gradually became a warrior aristocracy, with greater rights than the peasants whose labor they controlled. Indeed, often the rise of knights and castles meant that many peasants lost their freedom, becoming **serfs**, unfree peasants who, although not property that could be bought and sold like slaves, were nevertheless bound to their land and subordinate to those who controlled it.



Figure **17.12.5.3**: Eleventh-Century Knights (Public Domain; User "Myrabella" via Wikimedia Commons)

The regions of West Francia controlled by powerful nobles were nearly independent of the crown. But even at the Frankish monarchy's weakest, these nearly independent nobles were understood to hold their territories from the king and to owe allegiance to him if he called on them for military service. In this way, feudalism of the European Middle Ages resembled Western Zhou feudalism. The smaller fiefs that made up the territories of these great nobles likewise were understood to be held from these

nobles; the knight who held a fief was, at least in theory, required to render military service to the lord from whom he held it. In practice, though, the kingdom of West Francia (and other regions of Western Europe where such a system held sway) had little cohesion as a state, with most functions of a state like minting money, building roads and bridges, and trying and executing criminals in the hands of the powerful nobles.

17.12.5.1: Global Context

Thus far, we have discussed feudalism in eleventh-century Western Europe, but a decentralized state dominated by a warrior aristocracy could emerge anywhere that central authority broke down. A similar system emerged in Heian Japan of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when mounted soldiers (in this case samurai rather than knights) came to occupy the social role of a warrior aristocracy (see Chapter Four). Such an arrangement would emerge at the same time in the Middle East: the Great Saljuq Empire was dominated by mounted warriors in control of **iqtas**, units of land whose revenues (often from taxation) would fund these warriors, who in turn held their iqtas from the sultan.

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17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade

Although the eleventh century was in many ways Western Europe's nadir, it would also see the beginnings of Western Europe's re-urbanization. One reason for these beginnings was that in those lands that had been part of the Western Roman Empire, city walls often remained, even if these cities had largely emptied of people. During the chaos and mayhem of the tenth and eleventh centuries, people often gathered in walled settlements for protection. Many of these old walled cities thus came to be re-occupied.

Another reason for the growth of towns came with a revival of trade in the eleventh century. This revival of trade can be traced to several causes. In the first place, Europe's knights, as a warrior aristocracy, had a strong demand for luxury goods, both locally manufactured products and imported goods such as silks and spices from Asia. Bishops, the great lords of the Church, had a similar demand. As such, markets grew up in the vicinity of castles and thus caused the formation of towns that served as market centers, while cathedral cities also saw a growth of population. Moreover, Viking raids had also led to a greater sea-borne trade in the North Sea and Atlantic. Often, Viking-founded markets served as the nucleus of new towns, especially in those lands where the Romans had never established a state and which were not urbanized at all. The Irish city of Dublin, for example, had begun as a Viking trading post.

Further south, in the Mediterranean, frequent raids by pirates (most of whom were Arab Muslims from North Africa) had forced the coastal cities of Italy to build effective navies. One of the chief of these cities was Venice, a city in the swamps and lagoons of northeastern Italy. Over the eleventh century, the city (formerly under Byzantine rule but now independent) had built up a navy that had cleared the Adriatic Sea of pirates and established itself as a nexus of trade between Constantinople and the rest of Western Europe. Likewise, on the western side of Italy, the cities of Genoa and Pisa had both built navies from what had been modest fishing fleets and seized the strongholds of Muslim pirates in the islands of Corsica and Sardinia. This clearing of pirates from the Mediterranean led to an increase in maritime trade and allowed the renewed growth of the old Roman towns that had in many cases remained since the fall of the Western Empire. The cities of Genoa and Venice were able to prosper because they stood at the northernmost points of the Mediterranean, the farthest that goods could be moved by water (always cheaper than overland transport in premodern times) before going over land to points further north.



Figure **17.12.6.1**: Medieval Market, Fifteenth Century (Public Domain; Nicole Oreseme via Wikimedia Commons)

As goods moved north and south between the trade zones of the North Sea and the Mediterranean, nobles along that north-south route realized that they could enrich themselves by taxing markets. They thus sponsored and protected markets in regions of West

Francia like Champagne, which themselves would serve as centers of urbanization and economic activity.

The people living and working in towns came to be known as the **bourgeois**, or middle class. These were called a *middle* class because they were neither peasant farmers nor nobles, but rather a social rank between the two. Kings and other nobles would frequently give towns the right to self-government, often in exchange for a hefty payment. A self-governing town was often known as a **commune**.

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17.12.7: Growth in Agriculture

Eleventh-century Europe's economy was primarily agricultural. The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a massive expansion of agricultural output in the northern regions of Europe, which led to a corresponding growth in the economy and population. The same improvement in iron technology that allowed the equipping of armored knights led to more iron tools: axes allowed farmers to clear forests and cultivate more land, and the iron share of a heavy plow allowed farmers to plow deeper into the thick soil of Western Europe. In addition, farmers gradually moved to a so-called **three field system** of agriculture: fields would have one third given over to cereal crops, one third to crops such as legumes (which increase fertility in soil), and a third left fallow, i.e., uncultivated either to serve as grazing land for livestock or simply rebuild its nutrients by lying unused. More iron tools and new agricultural techniques caused yields to rise from 3:1 to nearly 8:1 and in some fertile regions even higher. Another factor in the rise of agricultural yields was Europe's climate, which was becoming warmer in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. As a result of both climate and new agricultural tools and techniques, food supplies increased so that Western Europe would go through the majority of the twelfth century without experiencing a major famine.

We should note that at the same time that agricultural yields were rising in Europe, so too were they on the rise in Song China (see Chapter Four). Indeed, compared to China, Europe's agricultural production was still relatively meager. It was nevertheless enough to bring about a dramatic growth in Europe's population.



Figure 17.12.7.1: A Heavy Plow (Public Domain; Unknown via Wikimedia Commons)

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17.12.8: A Roman Empire?

Although the Carolingian Empire had collapsed in the ninth century and West Francia remained fragmented, in Central Europe, the rulers of East Francia formed a new empire on the wreck of Charlemagne's. King Otto I of East Francia had defeated the Magyars in 955 (see Chapter Seven), and both Otto and his powerful nobles further subordinated the Slavic peoples to the east to his rule, forcing them either to submit to his direct rule or acknowledge him as their overlord. He followed up on the prestige gained from his victory over the Magyars by exercising influence in Northern Italy, intervening in a dispute between Pope John XII (r. 955 – 964) and Berengar, a petty king. On 2 February 962, Pope John XII crowned Otto as Roman Emperor in a ceremony meant to echo Pope Leo III's crowning of Charlemagne over a century and a half before. Further, Otto deposed Berengar and added Italy to his domains.

Otto was the most powerful ruler in Europe besides the Byzantine emperor. His empire covered most of the German-speaking lands of Central Europe: indeed, Otto and its subsequent emperors would be Germans and the power base of this empire would be firmly Central European. This empire also encompassed northern Italy and much of the territory west of the Rhine. The rulers of this empire would call themselves Roman Emperors and consider themselves the successors to Charlemagne and thus to the Roman Empire. This empire, however, was more modest than Charlemagne's. Although its emperors would claim that all Christian kings owed them obedience, most other realms of Western Europe were independent, especially West Francia (which we shall hereafter refer to as France). Likewise, this empire's control of Northern Italy was always somewhat tenuous, since its rulers' power was based in Germany, far to the north of the Alps.



Map 17.12.8.1: Europe and the Mediterranean in 1054 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

Because these emperors considered themselves to be Roman Emperors and also protectors of the Church—indeed, Otto I eventually deposed Pope John XII for improperly fulfilling his papal duties—historians call their empire the Holy Roman Empire and its emperors Holy Roman Emperors. The reader should carefully note that these emperors did not use either of those titles. They simply referred to themselves as Roman Emperors and their empire as the Roman Empire. We call the Empire the Holy Roman Empire and the emperors Holy Roman Emperors for the convenience of modern readers, so that they will know that they

are reading about neither the Roman Empire, which dominated the entirety of the Mediterranean world in ancient times, nor the Byzantine Empire, a regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean for most of the Middle Ages.

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17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation

Anthropologists speak of **secondary state formation,** a process by which people who live in a tribe or chiefdom on the periphery of a state will gradually adopt statehood and the ideological trappings associated with statehood. Oftentimes this state formation happens because a people will need to match the resources of a state for raising armed forces, or because a chief will seek the greater prestige and power that comes from being recognized as a king.

In Scandinavia and in Eastern Europe, state formation occurred on the margins of the Holy Roman Empire. In the late tenth century, the Danes, the Poles (a Slavic people), and the Magyars formed the kingdoms of Denmark, Poland, and Hungary, respectively. These kingdoms were often **vassal states** (i.e., subordinate states) of the Ottonian emperors, but they just as often fought to maintain their independence when they had the capability to do so. Another key factor in the move from chiefdoms to states was the adoption of Christianity: the Christian religion, as we have seen earlier (see Chapter Seven), often legitimated a king. The Christian Bible says that a prince is God's instrument of executing justice.[1] In exchange for their legitimation, monarchs would protect the institutional Church. We can see this relationship between Christianity and secondary state formation when King Stephen I of Hungary received his crown from the papacy in the year 1000.

Far to the north, in Norway, a land of narrow fjords and valleys surrounded by pine-covered mountains, King Olaf II was following a similar set of policies. A Christian who had converted in 1013 while fighting in France, he spent his reign as king of Norway (1015 – 1030) both consolidating Norway into a kingdom that recognized royal authority and converting that kingdom to Christianity.

17.12.9.1: Global Context

In Northern and Eastern Europe, secondary state formation had gone hand in hand with the adoption of Christianity, which legitimated kings and whose clergy, familiar with the written word, provided the skills of literacy to monarchs. A similar pattern occurred elsewhere in the world, particularly in the African Sahel (see Chapter Nine). In Africa's Sahel, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, as Ghana and then later Mali consolidated into states, their rulers converted their people to Islam, which provided a similar aid to state-building that Christianity did to the rulers of Northern and Eastern Europe.

17.12.9.2: Endnotes

1 Romans 13:4

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17.12.10: Expansion of Christendom

In the Middle Ages, the people of Western Europe did not think of Europe as a geographic and cultural area. Rather, they thought of **Christendom**, those peoples and nations of the world that embraced the Christian religion, as a community sharing common ideals and assumptions. We might compare it to the Muslim notion of Dar al-Islam (see Chapter Eight). And in the eleventh century, Christendom expanded. Not only had the peoples to the north and east embraced Christianity, but also Christian peoples and kingdoms in the Western Mediterranean expanded militarily at the expense of Islam. In Spain, the movement of the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain to expand their territory at the expense of Muslim al-Andalus would come to be known as the ***Reconquista***, the reconquest. It was known as the *re*-conquest because there had been a Christian kingdom in Spain in the sixth and seventh centuries that had fallen to Muslim invaders in 711. Christians would thus have assumed that Spain, even though much of it might be Muslim ruled, was rightfully Christian. The effort by the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula to dominate, conquer, and re-Christianize al-Andalus would become a key element in how Spanish Christians understood their identity both as Christians and Spaniards.

How did the *Reconquista* begin? From the Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 through the early eleventh century, al-Andalus was the dominant military power of the Iberian Peninsula, with Christian kingdoms confined to the marginal, mountainous regions of the peninsula's north (see Chapter Eight). But in 1008, Abd al-Rahman (also known as Sanjul), the caliph's chief adviser, sought to make himself caliph and replace the Umayyad dynasty with his own. The result was nearly three decades of civil war. The Cordoba Caliphate collapsed in 1031, fracturing into what we refer to as the ***taifa*** states, a set of small, politically weak states. These states were much weaker than the centralized Cordoba Caliphate and so were easy prey for potential conquerors from both the Christian north of the Iberian Peninsula and the Islamic Maghreb.



Figure 17.12.10.1: Twelfth-Century Spanish castle (CC BY-SA 3.0; User "Superchilum" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Christian kingdoms of Spain had several strengths that enabled them to expand at the expense of the *taifa* states. In the first place, the *taifa* states were not only politically weak, but they were also at odds with each other. In addition, the construction of stone castles in newly-conquered territories allow the Christian kings to secure their conquests. Moreover, the Christian kingdoms of Spain could draw on much of the rest of Western Europe for manpower. By the eleventh century, the knight who inherited a fief would usually be the oldest son of the fief's lord. This arrangement meant that Western Europe had many knights who, as younger sons, had not inherited from their fathers (inheritance nearly always passed to males). These landless knights were looking either for employment or fiefs of their own. New conquests along the frontier of Muslim Spain thus gave them the perfect opportunity to seize their own lands. As a result, French knights flowed south in a steady stream across the Pyrenees.

In Southern Italy, a group of knights from the region of France known as Normandy (and who were thus called Normans) had fought in the employ of the Byzantine emperors against the Muslim rulers of North Africa and Sicily. They eventually broke with the Byzantine Emperors and created the Kingdom of Sicily, a kingdom comprised of Sicily and Southern Italy, the lands that they had seized from both the Byzantines and Sicilian Muslims, with the last Muslim territory in Sicily conquered in 1091. These knights too had come south to the Mediterranean in search of new lands.

The Christian kingdoms of both Spain and Sicily were relatively tolerant of their Muslim subjects. Although Muslims under Christian rule faced civil disabilities similar to the dhimmi status of Jews and Christians in Muslim-ruled lands, they had a broad array of rights and protections. Indeed, the Christian kings of Sicily often employed Muslim mercenaries in their military service.

These victories by Christian forces over Muslims would be of great interest to the popes, who were seeking to reform the Church and to find ways that knights could be made to serve Christian society.

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17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century

By the eleventh century, Europe suffered from frequent violence and the Church itself was in a sorry state: Pope John XII, for example, the man who had crowned Otto I, was so infamous for his immorality that it was said that under his rule the papal palace (called the Lateran) was little better than a brothel. From the mid-eleventh century, both popes and other clergymen would seek to reform both the institutional structures of the Church and Christian society as a whole.

The Holy Roman Emperor Henry III (r. 1039 – 1056) set the reforming papacy into motion. In 1049, he had traveled to Rome to be crowned emperor. When he arrived in the city, he found three men claiming to be pope, each supported by a family of Roman nobles. The outraged emperor deposed all three and replaced them with his own candidate, Pope Leo IX (r. 1049 – 1054). Leo IX would usher in a period in which reformers dominated the papacy.

These popes believed that to reform the Church, they would need to do so as its unquestioned leaders and that the institutional Church should be independent from control of laypeople. The position of pope had long been a prestigious one: Peter, the chief of Jesus Christ's disciples had, according to the Christian tradition, been the first bishop of Rome, the city in which he had been killed. Eleventh-century popes increasingly argued that since Peter had been the chief of Jesus's followers (and thus the first pope), the whole Church owed the popes the obedience that the disciples had owed Peter, who himself had been given his authority by Christ.

Such a position was in many ways revolutionary. In the Byzantine Empire, the emperors often directed the affairs of the Church (although such attempts frequently went badly wrong as with the Iconoclast Controversy). Western European kings appointed bishops, and the Holy Roman Emperors believed that they had the right to both appoint and depose popes. To claim the Church was independent of lay control went against centuries of practice.

Moreover, not all churchmen recognized the absolute authority of the pope. The pope was one of five churchmen traditionally known as **patriarchs**, the highest ranking bishops of the Church.

The pope was the patriarch of Rome; the other four were the patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. With Jerusalem and Alexandria (and often Antioch) under Muslim rule, the patriarch of Constantinople was the most prestigious of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, dwelling in a city that was Rome's successor. The patriarchs of Constantinople believed that the Roman pope had a place of honor because Peter had resided in Rome, but they did not believe he had any authority over other patriarchs.

17.12.11.1: The *Filioque* Controversy and the Split between Rome and Constantinople

This difference of opinion as to the authority of the pope would eventually break out in conflict. The church following the pope (which we will refer to as the Catholic Church for the sake of convenience), had a creed in its liturgy that said that God the Holy Spirit proceeds both from God the Father and from God the Son. The Eastern Orthodox version of this creed spoke of God the Holy Spirit as proceeding only from God the Father. Representatives of both churches quarreled over this wording, with the popes attempting to order the Orthodox Churches to state that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son in their creed. We thus call this controversy the **Filioque Controversy** since Latin for "and from the Son" is *filioque*.class="lt-human-12423">On 16 July 1054, Humbert of Silva Candida, the pope's **legate** (i.e., ambassador) together with his entourage stormed into the Hagia Sophia as the patriarch was celebrating Communion and hurled a parchment scroll onto the altar; the scroll decreed the patriarch to be excommunicated. In response, the patriarch excommunicated the pope. Catholic and Orthodox churches were now split.

17.12.11.2: Simony and the Investiture Controversy

In spite of the schism between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the popes turned to reforming the Church in the Catholic west. Two pressing concerns of the popes were the elimination of **simony**, the buying and selling of Church offices, and the protection of the Church's independence from laypeople. The fight of the reforming popes to assert the Church's independence led to the **Investiture Controversy**, the conflict between the popes and Holy Roman Emperors (and other kings of Western Europe) over who had the right to appoint churchmen.

To understand the Investiture Controversy, we need to understand the nature of a medieval bishop's power and authority. A bishop in medieval Europe was a Church leader, with a cathedral church and a palace. A medieval bishop would also hold lands with fiefs

on these lands (and military obligations from those who held these fiefs), just like any great noble.

The Holy Roman Emperors believed that they had the right to appoint bishops both because a bishop held lands from the emperor and because the emperors believed themselves to be the leaders of all Christendom. The reforming popes of the eleventh century, particularly Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073 – 1085), objected to this belief. These popes believed that, since their authority as popes came from God, their spiritual authority was superior to the earthly authority of any king or prince. They further claimed their right to be independent rulers of the Papal States in Central Italy, based on the Donation of Constantine (see Chapter Seven).

Gregory VII was up against a man just as strong willed as he in the person of Emperor Henry IV (r. 1056 – 1106). From 1075, their relationship became increasingly adversarial as each claimed the exclusive right to appoint and depose bishops. Eventually, this conflict burst into open flame when Henry claimed that Gregory was in fact not rightfully pope at all and attempted to appoint his own pope. In response, Gregory proclaimed that none of Henry's subjects had a duty to obey him and encouraged his subjects to rise in rebellion.



Figure **17.12.11.1**: Pope Gregory VII (Public Domain; User "GDK" via Wikimedia Commons)

Without the Church to legitimate Henry IV, his empire collapsed into civil war. As a result, Henry took a small band of followers and, in the dead of winter, crossed the Alps, braving the snowy, ice-covered passes to negotiate with the pope in person. In January, he approached the mountain castle of Canossa where the pope was staying and begged Gregory for forgiveness, waiting outside of the pope's castle on his knees in the snow for three days. Finally, Pope Gregory forgave the emperor.



Figure **17.12.11.2**: Emperor Henry IV (Public Domain; Unknown via Wikimedia Commons)

In the end, though, after a public ceremony of reconciliation, Henry returned to Central Europe, crushed the rebellion, and then returned to Italy with an army, forcing Gregory VII into exile. This Investiture Controversy would drag on for another four decades. In the end, the Holy Roman Emperors and popes would reach a compromise with the 1122 **Concordat of Worms.** The compromise was that clergy would choose bishops, but that the emperor could decide disputed elections. A bishop would receive his lands from the emperor in one ceremony, and the emblems of his spiritual authority from the pope in another. Other kings of Western Europe reached similar compromises with the papacy.

The results of half a century of papal reform efforts were mixed. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches had split with one another, and tensions remain between the two to this day. Although the popes failed to achieve everything they sought, they did gain limited independence of the Church, and they succeeded almost completely in ending the practice of simony. Indeed, one contrast between Western Europe and much of the rest of the world is a strong sense of separation between secular and sacred authority. That separation of Church and state owes much to the troubled years of the Investiture Controversy.

The successes of the papacy in their efforts at Church reform, together with the military successes seen by Christians in the Western Mediterranean against Muslims, would inspire the popes to an even more ambitious effort: the Crusades.

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17.12.12: The Crusades

17.12.12.1: Background: Disaster at Manzikert

On the surface, the Byzantine Empire of the eleventh century looked like one of the world's great powers. It dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, with its emperors reigning from Constantinople, a city full of magnificent churches, splendid palaces, and centuries-old monuments of an ancient empire.



Map 17.12.12.1: The Eastern Mediterranean in 1096 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

But these outward signs of strength concealed several weaknesses. In the first place, the *theme* system (see Chapter Seven) had begun to break down. The plots of land used to equip soldiers had gradually given way to large estates held by powerful aristocrats. These powerful aristocrats often paid less and less in taxes, starving the state of key resources. The *theme* soldiers themselves were used less often (and when they did fight, they were often poorly trained and equipped), with the emperors relying on mercenaries for most of their fighting. The civilian aristocracy and the military were often at loggerheads.

The Byzantine emperors of the later eleventh century were nevertheless able to hold their own against external threats until the arrival of the Saljuq Turks in the Middle East (see Chapters Eight and Eleven). Both the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV (r. 1068 – 1071) and the Saljuq sultan Alps Arslan (r. 1063 – 1072) sought to control the Caucasus Mountains, whose passes controlled access to the Middle East from the Central Asian steppes. Control of this route was especially important as the steppes served as a source from which the Turks in the Middle East could recruit more fighters.

Byzantine and Turk finally clashed. Romanos sought to break the Turkish threat on his eastern flank and so mustered an immense army. This army consisted both of soldiers of the *themes* and mercenary units drawn from many different peoples: Western

Europeans, Cumans and Pechenegs from the steppes, Scandinavians, and Turks. Both the heterogeneity of this army and the dysfunctional politics of the eleventh-century Byzantine Empire would prove to be Romanos's undoing.

On 19 August 1071, the forces of the Byzantine Empire met those of the Great Saljuq Empire at the Battle of Manzikert near the shores of Lake Van in Armenia. The thematic troops were of indifferent quality, but worse for the emperor was the treachery of both the Byzantine commander Andronikos Doukas and the Byzantine force's Turkic mercenaries. The Byzantine field army was annihilated. The emperor himself was surrounded and taken captive after his elite guard of Norse mercenaries went down fighting in his defense.



Figure **17.12.12.1**: Alexios Komnenos (Public Domain; User "Eloquence" via Wikimedia Commons)

The result was a catastrophe for the Empire. Not only had most of the Byzantine Army been wiped out, but also competing Byzantine nobles took the opportunity of the emperor's captivity to launch their own bids for power. During the decade of civil war that followed, the Empire's holdings in Asia Minor almost all fell under the dominion of the Saljuq Turks. What had been the world's most powerful Christian state now faced destruction.

Eventually, Alexios Komnenos (r. 1081 – 1118) would seize control of the Byzantine Empire and laboriously rebuild its military strength. Alexios was an able and clever military commander who also possessed good long-term sense. He used the tax base of the Empire's Balkan possessions to fund a new army, one composed largely of foreign mercenaries and a small core of Greek soldiers. These indigenous soldiers were often granted out blocks of lands known as *pronoiai* (singular ***pronoia*** whose revenues they would use to equip themselves and their soldiers; a *pronoia* was similar to a fief in Western Europe. He also recruited steppe peoples, such as the Cumans and Pechenegs, into his forces. Another group of peoples from which he recruited mercenaries was Western Europeans, particularly from the Holy Roman Empire and West Francia. In March of 1095, he sent a request to the pope for military assistance. The long-term consequences of this request would be earth-shaking.

17.12.12.2: The First Crusade

The pope who received Alexios Komnenos's request for help was Urban II (r. 1088 – 1099), an associate of reformers like Gregory VII. Churchmen seeking to reform society had looked to quell the violence that was often frequent in Western Europe (especially in France): this violence was usually the work of knights. These reformers were considering how knights could turn their aggression

to pursuits that were useful to Christian society rather than preying upon civilians. Fighting against Muslims in Sicily and Spain showed the popes an example of knightly aggression directed towards Christendom's external enemies (see Chapter Eight).

In addition, the Church had long recognized Roman Law's concept of **Just War**: a war could be moral as long as it was defensive, declared by a rightful authority, and likely to cause less damage than if the war had not occurred. By the eleventh century, certain churchmen had further formulated this idea into one of **Holy War**, that is to say, that a war fought in defense of the Church was not only morally right, but even meritorious.

The final element that led to Pope Urban II's turning much of the military might of Western Europe to the Middle East was the idea of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was where Jesus Christ was said to have been crucified, to have died, and to have risen from the dead (see Chapter Six). As such, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on what was said to be the empty tomb from which Christ had risen was the holiest Church in the Christian world—and this Church had been under the control of Muslims since Caliph Umar's conquest of Palestine in the seventh century (see Chapter Eight). The city remained important to Christians, however, and, even while it was under Muslim rule, they had traveled to it as **pilgrims**, that is, travelers undertaking a journey for religious purposes.

Pope Urban thus conceived of the idea of turning the military force of Western Europe to both shore up the strength of the flagging Byzantine Empire (a Christian state), and return Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to Christian rule after four centuries of Muslim domination.

On 27 November 1095, he gathered several of the major nobles of Western Europe (as well as many lower-ranked knights) to an open-air sermon at Clermont, where he was presiding over a Church council. In this sermon, he proclaimed that it was the duty of these warrior aristocrats, as Christians, to defend the Byzantine Empire and to put the city of Jerusalem under Christian rule. The result was an enthusiastic response by those knights, who are said to have cried out, "God wills it!" and to have vowed to set off to Jerusalem and bring it under Christian rule. Furthermore, as word of Pope Urban's admonition spread throughout Western Europe, more and more of the knightly class answered the call, mustering under the leadership of several powerful nobles.

This movement of the knights of most of Western Europe to fight against Muslims in the Middle East is generally known as the first of a series of **Crusades**. A crusade was a war declared by the papacy against those perceived to be enemies of the Christian faith (usually, but not always, Muslims). Participating in a crusade would grant a Christian forgiveness of sins. We ought to note that such a concept in many ways superficially resembled the Muslim notion of the Lesser Jihad (see Chapter Eight).



Map **17.12.12.2**: The Crusader States | These regions were known to Western Europeans as Outremer, Old French for "across the sea" (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

As these forces mustered and marched south and east, the religious enthusiasm accompanying them often spilled out into aggression against non-Christians other than Muslims. One group of Crusaders in the area around the Rhine engaged in a series of massacres of Jewish civilians, traveling from city to city while killing Jews and looting their possessions before this armed gang was forced to disperse.



Figure **17.12.12.2**: Crusader Castle at Byblos (CC BY-SA 2.5; User "Heretiq" via Wikimedia Commons)

The Crusaders traveled in two main waves. The first traveled to the Byzantine Empire, and was ferried across the Bosporus but was wiped out by a Turkish army. The second wave, however, was better planned and coordinated, and, upon its arrival in the Byzantine Empire, reached an uneasy truce with the Alexios Komnenos (who had been expecting a modest force of mercenaries and not the armed might of most of Western Europe). The Crusaders were fortunate. After Nizaris had assassinated Nizam al-Mulk and the Fatimid caliph of Egypt had died (both in 1092), the Middle East fell into political chaos (see Chapter Eight). When the Crusaders marched east in 1096, they encountered not a unified Great Saljuq Empire, but a collection of independent and semi-independent sultans and emirs.

The Crusaders moved east, winning a string of victories in Asia Minor: when they could not be outmaneuvered, the armored knights of Western Europe often stood at an advantage against the lightly armored or unarmored mounted archers that mostly made up the bulk of Turkish forces. Following the path of the crusading army, Alexios was able to restore much of western Asia Minor to the control of the Byzantine Empire, although the central Anatolian plateau would remain under the dominion of the Saljuq Turks. The Crusaders advanced on Antioch, the largest and most prosperous city of the Levant, and, after a siege of nearly a year, both seized control of the city and defeated a Turkish army that attempted to relieve it. The army then marched south to Jerusalem and into territory controlled by the Fatimid caliphate—itself a Shi'ite state that was no friend of the Sunni Saljuq Turks. Venice and Genoa, meanwhile, transported supplies to the Crusaders by sea. The Crusaders rejected Fatimid overtures for a negotiated settlement and, in June of 1099, arrived outside the walls of Jerusalem. The Crusaders stormed the city's walls, and, as the city fell, it was subject to a brutal sack, with both the city's defenders and its civilian population subject to a bloody slaughter. We must note that there was nothing particularly unique about this massacre. The custom among most pre-modern peoples was that if a city resisted an attacking army, then it would be subject to sack and massacre of its population were it to fall.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the Crusaders established four states in the Levant: the County of Edessa, in northern Mesopotamia, the Principality of Antioch, centered on the city of Antioch and its environs; the County of Tripoli, in what is roughly Lebanon today; and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which occupied Palestine and whose capital was the city of Jerusalem. These states were ruled by men (and often women) who were Catholic in religion and ethnically Western European. The religion and institutions of these **Crusader States** were nearly the same as those of Western Europe.

These states attracted some settlers, in both their warrior aristocracy and even merchants and peasants. But many of the subjects of the Christian rulers of these kingdoms were Muslims (or Christian Arabs, who had special privileges over their Muslim counterparts, but fewer rights than Catholic, ethnically Western European Christians). Indeed, the Crusader States would consistently suffer from a lack of manpower: although the pope had spoken of rich lands for the taking in Palestine, most of the knights who had gone on the First Crusade (and survived) returned to Western Europe. The Crusader States relied on extensive networks of heavily fortified stone castles for defense. They were fortunate that the Middle East was politically fragmented and Fatimid Egypt was weak. Whether these states would be sustainable in the face of stronger Muslim powers remained to be seen.

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17.12.13: The Twelfth Century in Western Europe

In the twelfth century, many of Europe's kingdoms saw a gradual centralization of state power. England had long been Western Europe's most centralized state. In 1066, a group of Normans under their Duke, William the Bastard, invaded England. William defeated the English army, making himself the king of England: he was thus known as William the Conqueror. This conquest of England by French-speakers moved the culture, language, and institutions of England closer to those of France. Although England looked more feudal, it nevertheless retained a centralized bureaucratic apparatus. William was able to use this bureaucracy to conduct a nationwide census, a feat of which no European state outside of the Byzantine Empire was capable. Although England would suffer a civil war of nearly a decade and a half in the twelfth century, for the most part, its monarchs, particularly Henry I (r. 1100 – 1135) and Henry II (r. 1154 – 1189), were innovative and clever administrators, creating a network of royal courts and a sophisticated office of tax collection known as the **Exchequer**.



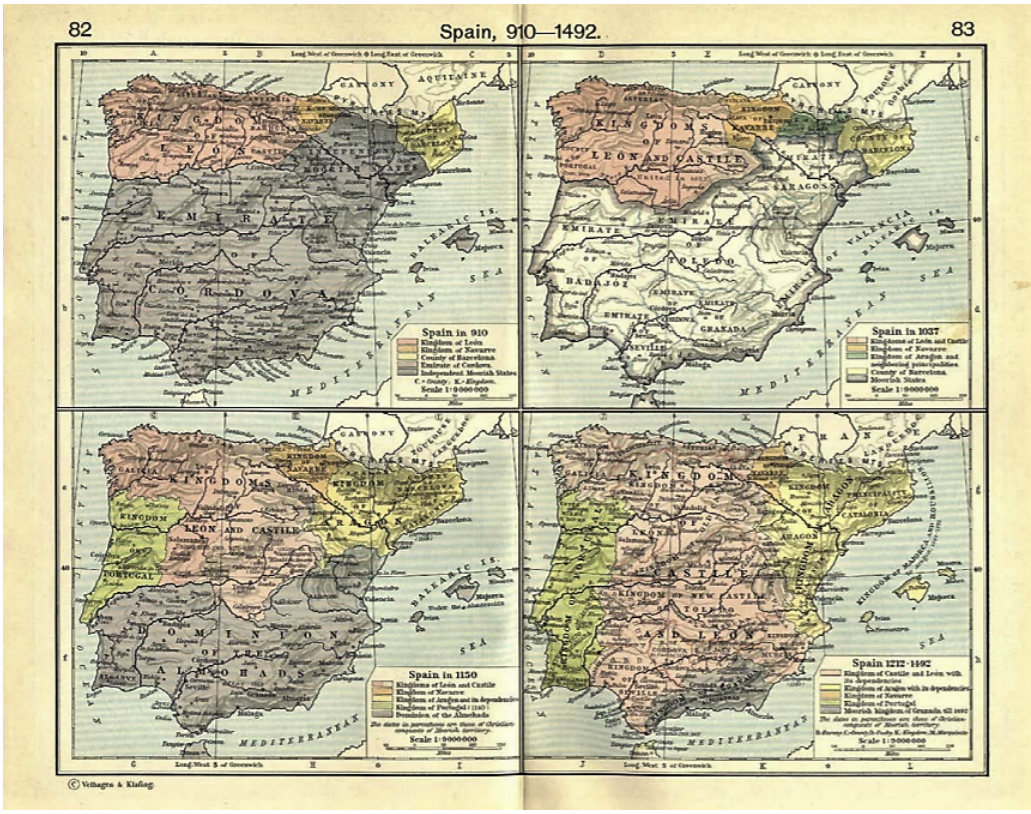
Figure **17.12.13.1**: King Henry II and his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine (Public Domain; Anonymous via Wikimedia Commons)

France had entered the tenth and eleventh centuries as the most loosely-governed kingdom of Europe. In 987, France's nobles elected Hugh Capet, the count of Paris, as king, effectively replacing the Carolingian dynasty. The **Capetian** Dynasty's kings, however, directly controlled only the lands around Paris. In addition, after the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the Norman kings of England were also dukes of large French territories. Thus, for the first part of the twelfth century, much of France was under the effective control of the English crown.



Figure **17.12.13.2**: Dover castle, built by King Henry II (CC BY 2.0; Jake Keup via Wikimedia Commons)

In spite of these challenges, the Capetian monarchs gradually built their kingdom into a functional state. They cultivated a reputation as defenders of Christianity in order to gain legitimacy from the Church. They also sought to enforce the feudal obligations that the powerful nobles owed to the crown, often calling on them to serve militarily so as to create a habit of obedience to the king.



Map **17.12.13.1**: Spain, progress of the Reconquista (Public Domain; William R. Shepherd via Wikimedia Commons)

To the southwest, the rise of the Muslim Almoravid Empire under the rule of aggressively expansionist Muslim religious reformers in North Africa briefly put the *Reconquista* in jeopardy, but, by the early twelfth century, it had resumed, with the Muslim

stronghold of Zaragoza falling to Christian armies in 1118. After the First Crusade, those knights who traveled to Spain to help its Christian kings fight Muslims received the same forgiveness of sins that the papacy granted to crusaders in the Levant. Over the twelfth century, four major Christian kingdoms would emerge in the Iberian Peninsula: Portugal, Leon-Castile, Navarre, and Aragon. These kingdoms would develop a sophisticated system of taxation in order to fund the *Reconquista*. In the later twelfth century, they faced the challenge of the Almohad Empire that emerged from the Islamic Maghreb to unite Muslim Spain and North Africa. By the 1150s, Christian Spain was on the defensive once again.

In Scandinavia, too, a set of strong monarchies had emerged in Denmark and Norway by the end of the twelfth century.

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17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse

17.12.14.1: Frederick Barbarossa and the Holy Roman Empire

The Investiture Controversy had weakened the power of the Holy Roman Emperors. In the early part of the twelfth century, power in the Holy Roman Empire decentralized in the same way that it had in tenth- and eleventh-century France, while the cities of northern Italy were increasingly governing themselves with little direct authority exercised by the Holy Roman Emperors. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1152 – 1190) sought to arrest this decline and make his subjects adhere to his authority.

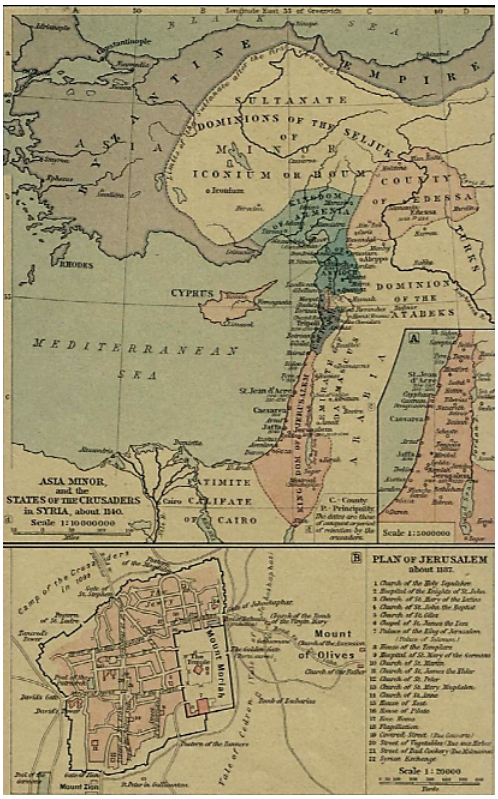
Frederick's two overriding goals were to ensure that the great princes of Central Europe and the city-states of Northern Italy acknowledged and submitted to his authority. Northern Italy was a particularly vexing challenge. By the middle of the twelfth century, many of the cities of northern Italy had gradually moved from rule by an urban nobility or bishops to self-government by an elected commune, and these communes were often reluctant to acknowledge imperial authority, especially with respect to the taxes that Barbarossa believed were owed him. Shortly after beginning his reign, Barbarossa sought to implement this authority.

class="lt-human-12426">Barbarossa had a great deal of initial success, but eventually the city-states of Northern Italy united into an organization called the Lombard League, and this League allied with the popes, who lent their moral authority to the cause of the northern Italian city-states. Indeed, part of the difficulties faced by Barbarossa was that any pope would be more likely to try to keep northern and central Italy as far from direct control of the Holy Roman Emperors as possible. If the emperors were too powerful in Northern and Central Italy, then they would threaten the papacy's independence, jeopardizing everything the eleventh-century reforming popes had struggled to accomplish. Eventually, this coalition of the papacy and Lombard League inflicted a military defeat on Barbarossa at the 1176 Battle of Legnano, after which Barbarossa was forced to concede a great deal of self-rule within the Empire to the Italian city-states.

Near the end of his reign, Barbarossa would lead an immense army on a crusade. In 1187, the kings of Western Europe found themselves forced to respond to a great catastrophe for Christendom: the city, and, indeed, most of the Kingdom of Jerusalem had fallen to a Muslim army under the sultan Saladin. These kings responded with the effort known as the Third Crusade.

17.12.14.2: The Komnenoi in Byzantium

The other empire claiming (with somewhat more justice) to be the rightful heir of the Roman Empire was the Byzantine Empire, and, after the disaster of Manzikert, the Komnenos emperors had managed to rebuild a Byzantine army based on the system of *pronoiai* and mercenary forces. Emperor John II (r. 1118 – 1143) followed up on Alexios's work and established effective Byzantine control over much of Western Anatolia, consolidated imperial hold on Southeastern Europe, and, indeed, forced the Crusader States to acknowledge him as their overlord.



Map **17.12.14.1**: The Eastern Mediterranean in the reign of John II (Public Domain; Alexander G. Findlay via Classical Atlas of Ancient Geography)

At the same time that Barbarossa sought to build the Holy Roman Empire as a credible power, in the east, Manuel Komnenos (r. 1143 – 1180) sought to do the same with his Empire. He managed to suppress the growing power of Venice in the Eastern Mediterranean, form an alliance with the growing kingdom of Hungary, and temporarily force the Turks of central Anatolia to acknowledge his overlordship. In the end, however, the emperor's reach exceeded his grasp. His attempt to conquer Fatimid Egypt in alliance with the Kingdom of Jerusalem failed when the military commander of Damascus, Saladin, outmaneuvered both Byzantium and Jerusalem and instead added Egypt to the territory of Damascus, which created a Muslim Empire in the Middle East that menaced the Crusader States (see Chapter Eight). And the emperor's effort to return central Anatolia to Byzantine rule ultimately failed when his army was defeated by the Saljuq Sultanate of Rum at Myriokephalon in 1176. Ultimately, the Byzantine Empire's undoing was not necessarily in individual battles, but rather in that the loss of the wealthy agricultural land of Central Anatolia to the Turks meant that its emperors never quite had the tax base necessary to put their ambitions of a restored Roman Empire into practice.



Figure **17.12.14.1**: Manuel Komnenos and his wife, Maria of Antioch (Public Domain; Anonymous via Wikimedia Commons)

In the end, the Komnenoi had managed to restore the Byzantine Empire as a regional power, but it was left with structural weaknesses that would eventually prove to be its undoing.

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17.12.15: The Twelfth-Century Renaissance

The twelfth century in Western Europe was a time of renewed vibrancy in intellectual activity, and much of this activity centered on Europe's towns and cities. We call this renewal of intellectual activity the **Twelfth-Century Renaissance** in order to separate it from both the Carolingian Renaissance of the eighth and ninth centuries and the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both monasteries and cathedrals were centers of education in Western Europe, even during the dark days of the tenth century. Over the eleventh century, thinkers in the monasteries of Western Europe had increasingly sought to apply the tools of logic (in particular Aristotelian logic) to the study of the Bible. But Western Europeans were familiar with very little of Aristotle's work aside from a small number of logical writings that had been translated from Greek into Latin in the sixth century. The twelfth century would see a massive shift, with an immense growth of interest in philosophy on the part of those men (and a few women) who had a formal education. The spur to this interest would come from events in Southwestern Europe.

Al-Andalus had been a major source of Muslim intellectual activity. As early as the tenth century, Christian scholars, such as Gerbert of Aurillac (who eventually became Pope Sylvester II[2] , r. 999 – 1003), had visited Muslim-ruled Spain to read the works of ancient Greek thinkers that were unavailable elsewhere in Western Europe. Gerbert's writings show him to be particularly fascinated with Euclid, Arabic numerals, and the concept of zero.

When Toledo fell to Christian armies in 1085, its libraries became available to the larger Christian world. Muslims had translated most of the philosophy of Aristotle into Arabic in addition to writing extensive original works that engaged with the thought of Aristotle and Plato. Once these books were in Christian hands, Raymond, archbishop of Toledo (r. 1125 – 1152), set up translation teams. People who spoke Arabic and the Romance languages of Spain would first translate these books into Spanish, and these books would then be translated into Latin, which would thus make Aristotle and Ptolemy (as well as the works of Arabic philosophers) available to educated people throughout Western Europe. The availability of texts that had been largely known only by reputation to the thinkers of Western Europe spurred an intellectual revolution, as the Christian thinkers sought to understand how to reconcile an understanding of the world based on Christianity with the approach of the non-Christian ancient Greeks.



Figure **17.12.15.1**: Latin Manuscript of Aristotle's Physics (Public Domain; Jean-Christophe Benoist via Wikimedia Commons)

Such translations on the Christian/Muslim frontier continued through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Christendom thus had access to the writings of Muslim philosophers. Western Europeans read natural philosophy, such as al-Haytham's writings on optics and the Aristotelian commentaries of Ibn Rushd (whose name they pronounced as Averroës). This movement saw the translation not only of philosophy, but also of medicine—indeed, in the Muslim world, philosophers often served as physicians—so the medical works of philosophers and physicians such as Ibn Sina (whose name Western Europeans pronounced as Avicenna) were read avidly by Christians in Western Europe.

Philosophy and medicine were not the only fields of study to receive new interest. Western Europeans were also showing a renewed interest in law. Although the kingdoms that had grown up in Western Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire had incorporated some elements of Roman Law as well as the oral law of the Germanic peoples into their legal systems, law codes were for the most part unsystematic. Starting from the eleventh century, scholars, particularly those based in the schools of Bologna, began subjecting The Justinian Code (see Chapter Seven) to intense study, using logical analysis to create a body of systematic writing on the interpretation of law. These men who studied Roman Law would often go to work for kings and emperors, with the result that much European law would often draw its inspiration from Justinian.

Most schools were still attached to cathedral churches—indeed, these schools in which medicine, law, and philosophy flourished as disciplines of study might be compared to the madrassas of the Muslim world—so the chief field of study in these schools was theology, that is, the interpretation of the Bible. And theologians increasingly drew on logical analysis and philosophy of language to understand what they believed was God's revelation to humanity.

Eventually, many of these cathedral schools gained the right to organize as self-governing institutions. We call these institutions **universities**. By the end of the twelfth century, the universities of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford had become self-governing institutions and would serve as the foundation of the university system of the Western world that exists to the present day.

17.12.15.1: Endnotes

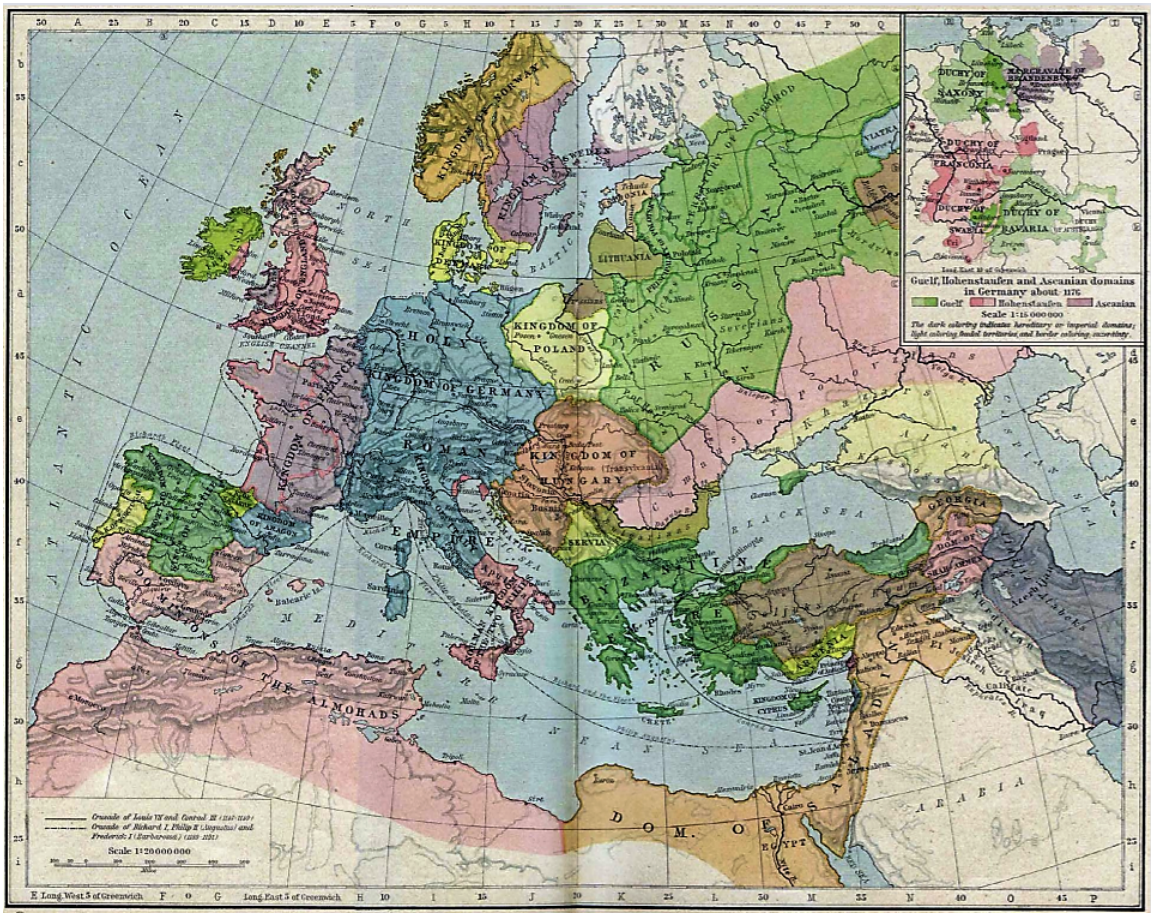
2 Between the sixth and eleventh centuries, a practice emerged whereby the pope would adopt a distinct name from the name he was born with upon ascension to the papacy. The practice continues to the present day.

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17.12.16: The Third Crusade

The Crusader States had endured from 1099 to 1187 because the Muslim Middle East was politically fragmented. Once Saladin had overthrown Egypt's Fatimid Caliphate and united Egypt to Muslim-controlled Syria and northern Iraq (see Chapter Eight), he was able to turn his resources to destroying the Crusader States. Eventually, at the 1187 Battle of Hattin, his forces met the combined forces of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The result was a complete victory for Saladin. With the manpower of most of the Kingdom of Jerusalem killed or captured—knights and noble prisoners would be held for a hefty ransom, while lower-ranked soldiers would go to slave markets—he was easily able to capture most of the castles and cities that made up the kingdom, to include the city of Jerusalem itself.



Map **17.12.16.1**: Europe and the Mediterranean in the Third Crusade (Public Domain; User "Roke" via Wikimedia Commons)

The result shocked the Christian world, and Pope Gregory VIII quickly issued the **bull** (that is, an official papal pronouncement) *Audita tremendi*, which called on the Christian world to retake Jerusalem. The kings of England and France, Richard I (known as Lionheart, r. 1189 – 1199) and Philip Augustus (r. 1180 – 1223), respectively, took vows to launch a crusade, as did Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. (As usual, the Christians of Iberia took little part in crusades in the Levant, as their efforts focused on the *Reconquista*.)

Although Frederick Barbarossa died en route (he drowned in a stream in the mountains of Anatolia), both Richard I and Philip Augustus eventually arrived in the Levant by sea. Although Philip soon returned to France, King Richard battled Saladin over the course of two years, to results that were mostly inconclusive. The crusading army seized most of the castles and cities on the coast, and these became the center for a restored, but smaller Kingdom of Jerusalem, but the Crusaders ultimately failed to take Jerusalem itself. The Crusade finally ended in a truce in which both parties ratified this state of affairs, with Christian pilgrims allowed to visit the city of Jerusalem, even though it remained under Muslim rule.

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17.12.17: The Fourth Crusade

While Jerusalem remained under Muslim control, the papacy's goal was to retake it, especially as, in 1198, the man elected pope was one of the most ambitious men to wear the papal crown of the Middle Ages: Pope Innocent III (r. 1198 – 1216). Innocent's goals were to morally reform society and to launch a crusade for retaking the holy city of Jerusalem. In the year of his election, he issued a call to crusade that ended up as a disaster.

Between 1185 and 1204, the Byzantine Empire had drastically weakened. After the death of Manuel Komnenos with his heir still a child, the Empire faced a string of catastrophes. The child-emperor was murdered, his successor was eventually overthrown, and the next emperor after that was likewise overthrown. During this political infighting, the Empire's peripheral territories of Serbia, Cyprus, and Cilicia all seceded. Closer to the center, the Bulgars rose in rebellion in 1186 and re-established an independent Bulgaria within only a few days' march of Constantinople itself. In addition, the chain of emperors, regents, and usurpers reigning between 1185 and 1204 had allowed the Byzantine navy to gradually disintegrate.

In 1202, a group of crusaders (with kings notably absent) contracted with the government of Venice to transport them to fight in Egypt, now ruled by Saladin's heirs. When these crusaders proved unable to pay, the Venetian government requested their military assistance. The son of the deposed emperor (whose eyes had been gouged out) approached the crusaders and Venetians. He offered the crusaders military and financial assistance and for Venice to gain trading privileges in the Empire if crusaders and Venetians would help him regain his throne. The end result was that, in 1204, after a series of misadventures, a crusader army stormed the walls of Constantinople and put the city to a brutal sack; then, the crusaders parceled out much of the territory of the Byzantine Empire amongst themselves. The most advantageous ports went to Venice, which would use them as the basis of a Mediterranean trading empire that would endure for centuries. The Crusades, which had begun as a result of an appeal for help by the Byzantine Empire, ultimately resulted in its destruction.

Although the Byzantine Empire had been broken up, three states survived that claimed to be legitimate heirs to the Byzantine State. One was established in Western Anatolia with its capital in Nicaea, another, in Epirus, in what is today the country of Albania, while the third was based on the city of Trebizond, on the northern coast of Anatolia. The Nicene Empire would eventually retake Constantinople in 1261, although the restored state would never be the regional power that the Empire had been under the Komnenoi.



Map **17.12.17.1**: The Latin Empire in 1212 CE | The Latin Empire of Constantinople (the state established by crusaders after 1204) and Byzantine successor states (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

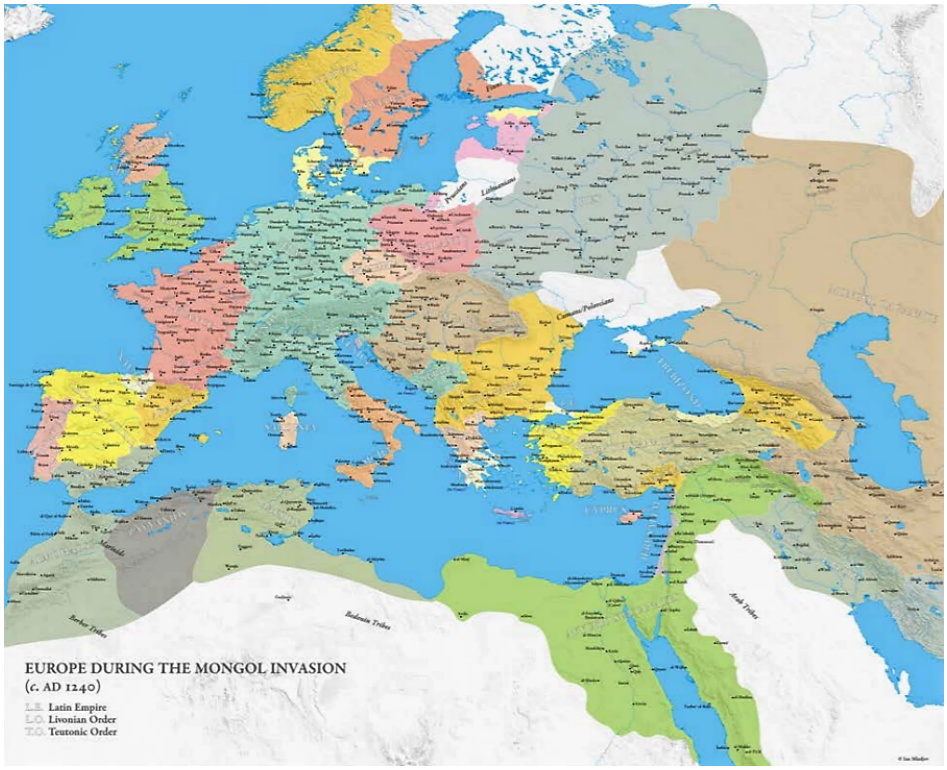
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17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe

17.12.18.1: Eastern Europe

The thirteenth century would prove catastrophic for both Hungary and the Kievan Rus, for the same Mongols who laid waste to much of Asia would eventually arrive from the steppes of Asia and into the plains of Eastern Europe (see Chapter Eleven). In 1240, the Mongols shattered the Kievan Rus, destroyed the city of Kiev, and left the plains around the city littered with dead bodies stretching out to the horizon. The Ruses would remain Mongol vassals for the rest of the Middle Ages. The Mongol advance continued. In 1241, at the Battle of Mohi, a Hungarian army was annihilated, and the Mongols subsequently slew half the kingdom's population before Batu Khan, the Mongol commander, returned to Mongolia for the election of a new Great Khan.



Map **17.12.18.1**: Europe in 1240 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

17.12.18.2: The Holy Roman Empire: Failure of Frederick II

The Holy Roman Empire remained Europe's dominant power in the first half of the thirteenth century in spite of Barbarossa's incomplete success. The Empire would, however, be fatally undermined by the struggles between Emperor Frederick II (r. 1215 – 1250) and a series of mostly forceful and able popes. The dispute was the same as that which had occupied his grandfather, Frederick Barbarossa. Unlike Barbarossa, the base of Frederick II's power was in Sicily, for his father, Henry VI (r. 1190 – 1197), had married Constance, queen of Sicily, thus making Frederick II ruler of both the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Sicily. Like his grandfather, he sought to create an empire that ruled both Italy and central Europe. And for the same reason that the popes had opposed Barbarossa, they, together with the cities of northern Italy, opposed Frederick II. In the end, when Frederick died, the Holy Roman Empire collapsed as a unitary state. For nearly twenty years, it had no emperor, as the papacy's allies hunted down and brutally slaughtered Frederick's heirs, and then, by the time an emperor was elected from the Austrian nobles of the Hapsburg family in 1273, the Empire was more a loose collection of states than a centralized empire.

17.12.18.3: Expansion of Christendom on the Frontiers

To the northeast, Christendom continued to expand. In the forests and bogs around the Baltic Sea, German-speaking crusaders (as well as Danes) conquered the heathen[3] peoples, converting them to Christianity and settling the territory with Germans and Danes. These efforts were recognized by the popes as crusades. By the end of the thirteenth century, all of Europe except for Lithuania was

Christian. The kingdom of Lithuania would remain resolutely heathen and militarily resist German Crusaders until 1385, at which time the Lithuanian kings finally converted to Christianity when their kingdom was combined with Poland.

thirteenth-century Spain, the most significant accomplishment of the Christian monarchs was that, on 16 July 1212, at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the combined armies of Castile, Aragon, Portugal, and Navarre met those of the Almohad Caliphate and won a victory so crushing that the power of the Almohads was forever broken. In the decades that followed, Aragon, Portugal, and Castile conquered all of Muslim Iberia, save for Granada.

17.12.18.4: France and England

Perhaps the most successful thirteenth-century monarchs were the Capetian kings of France. In the years between 1203 and 1214, King Philip Augustus managed to dispossess the English king of almost all of his territory held in France. He was also increasingly successful in using a set of recognized laws to enhance his legitimacy. So he made sure that he had a strong legal case drawn up by expert lawyers before he dispossessed England's King John. Likewise, he created a royal court that was a court of final appeal—and that meant that, even in parts of the kingdom where great lords exercised their own justice, the king had increasing authority. In 1208, Pope Innocent III had called a crusade against the semi-independent territories of southern France because of the presence there of a group of heretics known as the Cathars. In the resulting crusade (called the **Albigensian Crusade** because much of the fighting happened around the town of Albi), crusaders from the north crushed the power of the great nobles of southern France. King Louis VIII (r. 1223 – 1226) then extended the direct rule of the French crown into areas where, for centuries, the French kings had ruled only indirectly.



Figure 17.12.18.1: A Knight in Thirteenth-Century Armor (Public Domain; British Library via Wikimedia Commons)

France's King Louis IX (r. 1226 – 1270) was perhaps its most effective Capetian king. He continued the process of establishing the royal courts as supreme in the kingdom. It was in Louis IX's reign that we can see the beginnings of a sophisticated and accurate royal budget.

When England's King John (r. 1199 – 1216) lost to Philip Augustus, his outraged nobles rebelled, resulting in a civil war from 1215 to 1217. One temporary treaty of this civil war, a treaty known as **Magna Carta** (signed in 1215), would have a much further-reaching impact than anyone who had drafted it could have foreseen. One particular provision of Magna Carta was that if the king wanted to raise new taxes on the people of England, then he needed to get the consent of the community of the realm by convening a council. The convening of such councils, known as **parliaments**, would come to be systematized over the course of the thirteenth century, until, by the reign of Edward I (r. 1272 – 1307), they would have representatives from most regions of England and would vote on whether to grant taxes to the king.



Figure **17.12.18.2**: France's King Louis IX (Public Domain; Guillaume de Saint-Pathus via Wikimedia Commons)

Parliaments were not unique to England, however. Most Spanish kings would consult with a body known as a **cortes**, with representatives of both Spain's towns and nobility, and the Scandinavian kings had assemblies called **things**. Indeed, by 1356, the Holy Roman Emperor would be elected by an assembly of the Holy Roman Empire's greatest nobles, known as electors. England's parliaments, however, would gradually evolve from assemblies convoked when a king wanted to raise taxes to a regular assembly that gave representative voice to the people of England.

As stated earlier, of thirteenth-century Europe's monarchs, France's Capetian kings were some of the most successful. Indeed, King Louis IX's French state was well-administered enough that he was able to manage the logistics of a military campaign fought at the opposite end of the Mediterranean: the war that modern historians often call the Seventh Crusade.

17.12.18.5: Endnote

3 Generally, we refer to the followers of the Greco-Roman religion that prevailed before Christianity as pagans and the followers of the northern European religion that prevailed before Christianity as heathens.

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17.12.19: Later Crusades and Crusading's Ultimate Failure

After the Third Crusade, the re-established Crusader States managed to survive and even expand in power for the next several decades. Syria and Egypt were split between Saladin's heirs, and the crusader kingdoms often enjoyed good relations with Ayyubid Egypt: indeed, a truce worked out between Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and the Egyptian sultan al-Kamil in 1229 resulted in the city of Jerusalem itself returning to Christian rule.



Map 17.12.19.1: The Crusader States in 1243 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

In the 1240s, however, forces far from the Levant brought down the Kingdom of Jerusalem. As the Mongols gradually conquered Central Asia (see Chapter Eleven), the Khwarazmian Turks were driven from their realm in the steppes into Syria and northern Iraq. They ended up allying with Ayyubid Egypt against the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, and, in 1244, the combined armies of Damascus and Jerusalem were defeated by an Egyptian/Khwarazmian army. Jerusalem fell under Muslim rule, under which it would remain until 1917.

In response to the fall of Jerusalem, Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243 – 1254) called a crusade that would be led by King Louis IX. While it had contingents from other Western European kingdoms, this effort was primarily an effort of the French crown. Although King Louis IX was able to manage the impressive logistical feat of organizing and equipping an army that seized the northern Egyptian port of Damietta, the effort to take all of Egypt was ultimately unsuccessful. Over the course of 1250, the French army was surrounded in the swamps of the Nile Delta outside of Cairo and forced to surrender, with Louis himself captured. The only lasting result in the Middle East was that, during the fighting, the Ayyubid sultan's Mamluks launched a coup d'état and seized power in Egypt, thereby creating in Egypt a military power that would dominate the Levant for nearly three centuries (see Chapter Eight).

Indeed, in the four decades after Louis's failure in the Nile Delta, the Mamluk sultans of Egypt would eventually conquer all of the Crusader States, with the last crusader stronghold in the Levant, the city of Acre, falling in 1291. Although Popes would still call crusades for military efforts against Muslim forces (and indeed, still make calls to retake the city of Jerusalem), crusading had failed. One reason for crusading's ultimate failure was that, as Western European kings consolidated their power, they often had priorities other than crusading. England's Edward I, for example, spent a few months fighting in the Levant in 1271; however, he spent most of his reign fighting to subdue England's neighboring kingdoms of Wales and Scotland.

In the end, the Crusades failed, and their greatest long-term impacts were the destruction of the Byzantine Empire and the growth of the sea power of Genoa and Venice, whose ships and sailors had transported people and supplies between Europe and the Crusader States.

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17.12.20: Scholasticism

As more and more works of ancient Greek and Muslim philosophy became available to Western European Christians, the question of how to understand the world acquired more urgency. The philosophers of the ancient Greek and Muslim worlds were known to have produced much useful knowledge. But they had not been Christians. How, asked many thinkers, were Christians to understand the world: through divine revelation, as it appeared in the Bible, or through the human reason of philosophers? Indeed, this question was reminiscent of similar questions taking place in the Islamic world, when thinkers such as al-Ghazali questioned how useful the tools of logic and philosophy were in understanding the Quran (see Chapter Eight).

This controversy had raged since at least the twelfth century, when certain devout monks had said, "Whoever seeks to make Aristotle a Christian makes himself a heretic." Out of this controversy, medieval Europe produced its greatest thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274). St. Thomas was a Dominican **friar**. Friars were those churchmen who, like monks, took vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Instead of living in isolated monasteries, though, friars spent much of their time preaching to laypeople in Europe's growing towns and cities. These friars, whose two major groups were the Franciscans and Dominicans, had schools in most major universities of Western Europe by the early thirteenth century. Aquinas, a philosopher in the Dominican school of the University of Paris, had argued that human reason and divine revelation were in perfect harmony. He did so based on the techniques of the disputed question. He would raise a point, raise its objection, then provide an answer, and this answer would always be based on a logical argument. Aquinas was only part of a larger movement in the universities of Western Europe. We generally call the movement to reconcile Christian theology with human reason through the use of logic **scholasticism**.



Figure 17.12.20.1: St. Thomas Aquinas | Note that the artist shows him defeating the non-Christian Aristotelian philosophy of Ibn Rushd. (Public Domain; Benozzo Gozzoli via Wikimedia Commons)

Aquinas and the scholastics can be compared to Zhu Xi and the neo-Confucians of Song China. Just as Zhu Xi had sought to integrate Confucian thought with Buddhist and Daoist philosophy, so also Aquinas sought to integrate both Aristotelian logic and Christian theology.

The period not only saw successes in the field of speculative philosophy and theology, but also in the practical application of science. The master masons who designed Western Europe's castles and cathedral churches built hundreds of soaring cathedrals that would be the tallest buildings in Europe until the nineteenth century. We call these cathedrals' architecture **Gothic**. Gothic cathedrals were well known for their use of pointed arches (which may have been copied from Middle Eastern styles) that allowed taller buildings and for stained-glass windows that admitted a dazzling array of light. These cathedrals were in many ways made possible by the prosperity of Europe's towns, whose governing councils often financed the construction of these magnificent churches.

Thirteenth-century Europe showed other developments in technology as well. In 1269, Pierre of Harincourt first came to understand the principles of magnetic poles based on an analysis of the magnetic compass (in use since the twelfth century). At the same time, between 1286 and 1306, based on the pre-existing technology of lens-grinding (much of which had come from the Muslim world), Western Europeans invented eyeglasses. Water clocks had been known throughout the world since ancient times, but, in the years between 1271 and 1300, Western Europeans invented the mechanical clock.



Figure 17.12.20.1: Lincoln Cathedral in England, built in the Gothic style in the thirteenth century | Note the pointed arches and the stained glass. The seats in the church were added in modern times: medieval worshipers stood. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Andrew Reeves via Original Work)

In the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, Western Europeans gradually adapted the art of alchemy, the art of changing (or attempting to change) one element into another, from the Muslim world. Eventually, alchemists (and natural philosophers who studied alchemy) would find new techniques of refining and compounding chemicals, although their ultimate goal, the ability to turn base metals into gold, would never succeed.

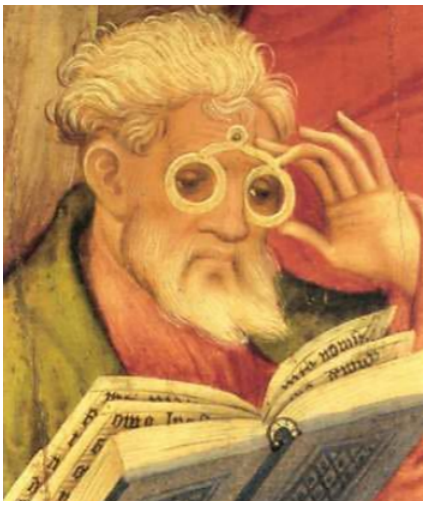


Figure **17.12.20.2**: Late medieval eyeglasses (Public Domain ; Conrad von Soest via Wikimedia Commons)

In addition to these technologies invented or improved in medieval Europe, the Mongol Empire's opening of trade routes had allowed the importation of East Asian technologies such as gunpowder.

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17.12.21: Daily Life at the Medieval Zenith

Even at the height of medieval Europe's prosperity, most people were peasant farmers, living like their ancestors in the Carolingian or Byzantine Empires. They often lived in villages in one- or two-room houses with separate space for livestock. Only the richest of peasants—and some free peasants did prosper—could afford a bed. Most people slept in straw. The most furniture in a peasant household might be a table and stool. The peasant diet was mainly grain, both bread and porridge, and peasants got their protein from both legumes and eggs. The occasional meat came from chickens, those sheep that were too old for shearing, and sometimes pigs. Beef was reserved for nobles.



Figure **17.12.21.1**: Peasants Keeping Pigs (Public Domain; User "Pannage" via Wikimedia Commons)

Nobles often lived in large rural houses. They were sometimes attached to castles, but many castles were unoccupied in times of peace. The noble diet was heavy in meat; indeed, nobles often suffered from gout, a painful swelling of the joints from too much meat in the diet. Meat dishes were lavishly cooked in spices, like cardamom, cinnamon, cumin, pepper, and saffron (chilies were unknown in the Eastern Hemisphere in pre-modern times).

Peasant recreation might include ball games, wrestling, and, of course, drinking. Beer was northern Europe's commonest drink, while, in southern Europe, people drank wine. The best quality wines were a luxury, with nobles throughout Europe drinking the wines of Italy and southern France.

Noble recreation included chess (introduced from the Muslim world around the eleventh century), hunting (usually forbidden to peasants), and the **tournament**, in which knights would form into teams and fight each other, sometimes with blunted weapons, but sometimes with regular weapons, relying on their armor to protect them. Accidental fatalities in hunting and tournaments were common.



Figure 17.12.21.2: Thirteenth-Century Knights Fighting in a Tournament (Public Domain; Unknown via Wikimedia Commons)

Europe's growing cities had narrow, unpaved streets with pools of waste, through which pigs, dogs, and other animals would wander. Paris, whose streets King Philip Augustus had ordered paved and lined with ditches to carry away waste water, was the exception rather than the rule. Likewise, although London had a network of pipes to carry water from springs by 1236, the inhabitants of most cities got water from wells, and these were often contaminated. Indeed, the disease from parasites and contaminated water meant that cities were **population sinks**, with more people dying than were born. Their population increased largely because of people migrating from the countryside, since by the twelfth century, most towns of Western Europe recognized a runaway serf as legally free if he or she had resided within the walls of a town for a year and a day.

Medieval Europe remained a patriarchal culture. The division of labor in peasant, middleclass, and noble households, however, meant that women played an active part in economic life. Women peasants would often labor alongside men in the fields, and women often ran taverns. Likewise, among nobles, women usually managed the household and might direct the economic activity of the great agricultural estates.

But women remained subordinate. Although they could be nuns, women could not be ordained as clergy. Legally, a woman was subordinate to her husband. And even though nobles increasingly read love poetry that placed women in a position of honor and devotion (and this poetry may originally have been modeled on the Arabic love poetry common in al-Andalus), this very devotion emphasized the woman as a prize to be sought after rather than as a partner.

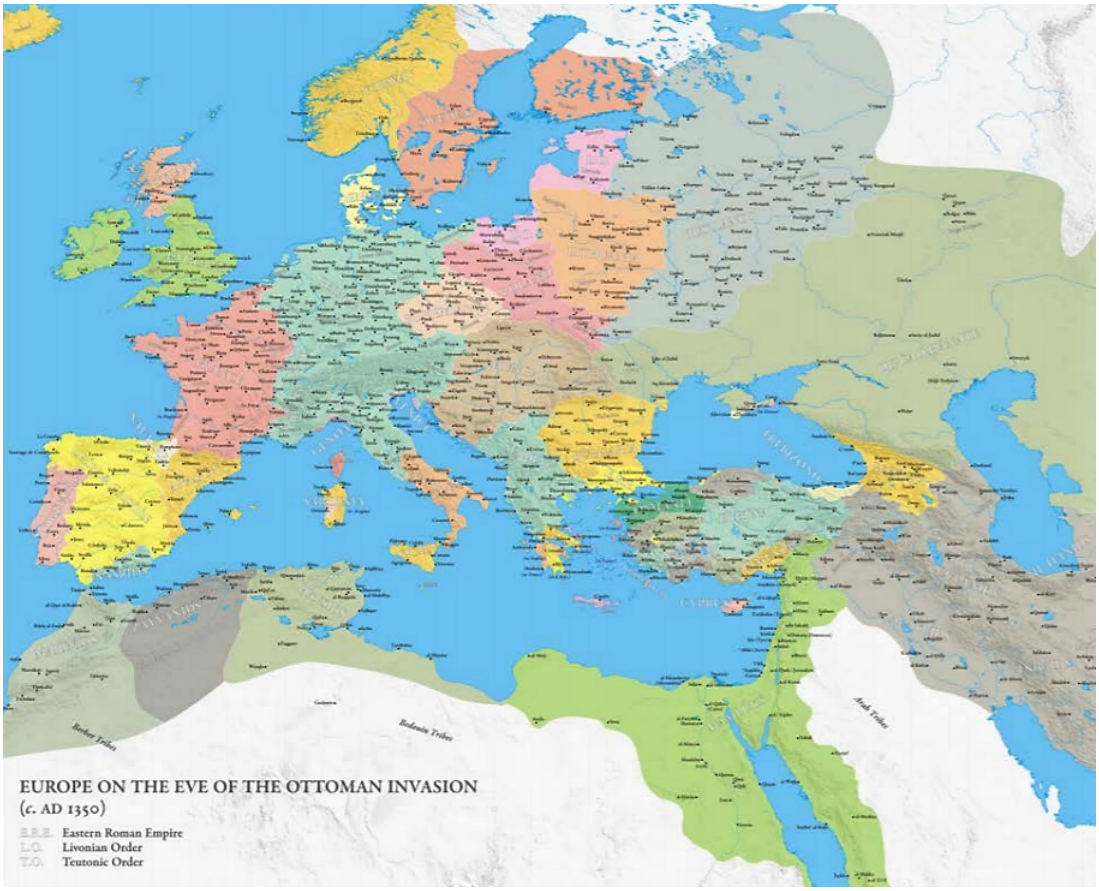
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17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises

As the thirteenth century drew to a close, Europe began to run into its **Malthusian limits**, i.e., how many people a land's resources can support before food starts to run short. At the same time, the previously-warm climate began to cool, making conditions less suitable for agriculture. Famine returned to Europe.

Between 1315 and 1322, a set of extremely rainy, wet summers—accounts written at the time speak of castle walls being washed away in flood waters—caused crops to fail, resulting in massive famines and starvation. At the same time, livestock throughout western Europe died in droves from outbreaks of Rinderpest, Anthrax, and other diseases.



Map **17.12.22.1**: Europe in 1350 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

Many peasants starved. Many more suffered from malnutrition. Contemporary accounts refer to hungry peasants resorting to cannibalism. Like all other crops, cash crops also failed, so that those who did survive were poorer.

Scarcely a generation had passed after the Great Famine when Europe was hit by a global pandemic: the Black Death. The Black Death was almost certainly an outbreak of Bubonic Plague, caused by the bacterium *Yersina pestis*. This disease has an extremely high mortality rate—certain varieties can have a mortality rate of over ninety-nine percent, and even the more survivable varieties usually kill the majority of the infected. The Plague acts in three ways: the variety called Bubonic Plague results in painful, swollen lumps around the armpits, crotch, and neck (locations associated with the lymph nodes); when they burst, a foul-smelling pus emerges. The septicemic variety results in skin turning black and dying all over the body, and the pneumonic variety—almost always fatal—shows no visible symptoms, but affects the lungs, and can cause a victim to go from healthy to dead in the space of twenty-four hours.



Figure **17.12.22.1**: | **Victims of the Black Death** | Note that above, we can see St. Sebastian in heaven praying to God on behalf of the Plague's victims. He was known for having been executed by arrows during the reign of Diocletian, and so Christian art usually pictured him as being covered in arrows. (CC0; Jose Lieferinxe via The Walters Art Museum)

The pandemic began in the Yuan Empire (see Chapter Eleven). Unfortunately for the rest of the world, the trade routes opened by the Mongols meant that not only could ideas and technology travel, but that disease could as well. The Plague began in the East and Central Asia, but it quickly spread to the Middle East and North Africa, to the Swahili Coast, and eventually to Western Europe.

Its impacts were calamitous. A little over half of Europe's population died. After the first outbreak of the Plague, between 1347 and 1351, less virulent outbreaks continued to strike Europe nearly every year until 1782. Europe's population began a long decline; it did not start recovering until the fifteenth century. It did not return to its pre-Plague levels until the seventeenth (and in some regions, the eighteenth) century. Casualty rates among clergy were as high as sixty percent, with some monastic houses having casualty rates as high as ninety-nine percent, as monks living in communal environments were more likely to spread disease.

In the aftermath of the Plague, however, living conditions for those peasants who survived improved in many ways. Because there were fewer people, those who survived had access to more lands and resources. In addition, the need to find peasants to work the lands of the nobility meant that nobles often offered better wages and living conditions to those who would settle on their lands. As a result, peasant wages rose and serfdom in Western Europe gradually vanished. Although in some kingdoms, monarchs and their assemblies attempted to create legislation to reinforce the social status of the peasantry, these efforts were often unsuccessful. This failure to maintain pre-existing status distinctions stood in contrast to Mamluk Egypt, where, in the aftermath of the Plague, Egypt's ruling class of largely Turkic Mamluks managed to keep the peasantry in a firmly subordinate role and prevent the rise of peasant wages.

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17.12.23: War

Famine and disease were not the only disasters to strike late medieval Europe. The fourteenth century also saw an increase in both civil wars and wars between states. The Holy Roman Empire saw nearly a decade of civil war (1314 – 1326) between rival emperors and, because of the close relations of their kings, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway experienced frequent combinations of civil and interstate war until the 1397 Union of Kalmar brought the three together under one crown.



Figure **17.12.23.1**: England's King Edward III Surveying the Dead after the Battle of Crécy | Note that by the fourteenth century, a knight's armor was a combination of chain mail and metal plates. (Public Domain; Jean Froissart via Wikimedia Commons)

The longest-running of these wars was between England and France, the so-called Hundred Years' War (1337 – 1453). In 1328, the French king Charles IV died without a direct heir. England's king, Edward III (r. 1327 – 1377), related to the French royal family, claimed to be rightful heir to the crown of France. The resulting war would last over a century, although it was broken by frequent, lengthy truces. Although France had many more people than England, the kingdom of England was often able to defeat it. The main reason was that the English kings made increasing use of trained, disciplined infantry armies. Horses are effective in battle against raiders or other horsemen. A horse, however, is less effective when an infantry formation is able to present a solid front against the horses and use missile weapons on those horses before they can close with their enemy. Using a combination of archers and infantry, the English were able to inflict severe defeats on the French at both Crécy (26 August 1346) and Poitiers (19 September 1356).

The war was particularly hard on the civilians of the French countryside: the method of waging war of a pre-modern army often involved invading enemy territory and burning crops, looting villages, and murdering civilians. French peasants, who had suffered first from the Plague and then from war, rose in rebellion in 1358, but this rebellion was ruthlessly crushed, with the peasants slaughtered and leaders brutally executed.

The Hundred Years' War would spill over into Spain, which itself was suffering from a vicious war between Castile and Aragon that eventually caused a Castilian civil war, with both French and English intervening.

The wars of the fourteenth and especially fifteenth century saw not only an increasing use of trained, professional armies, but also the employment of gunpowder weapons, invented in Song China and first seen in Europe in the early 1300s. At first, firearms were limited to heavy, cumbersome artillery pieces that were deployed from fixed points. Their use on the battlefield and in sieges was limited, although by the fifteenth century, cannons could blast open the gates of most existing fortifications. By the mid-1400s, the harquebus, a man-transportable firearm, appeared on the battlefield in Spain, bringing gunpowder to the individual infantryman.

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17.12.24: Southeastern Europe in the Late Middle Ages

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, the restored Byzantine Empire was unable to fully re-establish itself even as a regional power in the Aegean. The warring Italian city-states of Genoa and Venice controlled many of the best ports of the Aegean and Black Sea, and a new Turkic power, that of the Ottomans, was rising in Central Anatolia in the aftermath of the Mongol destruction of the Saljuq sultanate. Emperor Andronikos II (r. 1282 – 1328) hired a company of mercenaries from the region of Spain called Catalonia, but this Catalan Company, although it won some victories against the Turks, eventually turned on its employer and established a state in Athens that would last for seventy years. With the failure of the Catalan Company to shore up Byzantine defenses in Anatolia, by 1331, nearly all Byzantine territory in Asia Minor had fallen under Turkish rule; shortly thereafter, the nascent Ottoman Empire began expanding into southeastern Europe.



Figure **17.12.24.1**: Late Medieval Serbian Monastery (CC BY-SA 3.0; Petar Milosevic via Wikimedia Commons)

The disintegration of the Byzantine state did allow for the fourteenth-century flourishing of Serbian and Bulgarian Empires, whose cultures emerged as a melding of both Greek and Slavic elements to create a unique synthesis of cultures and institutions. In the end, though, these Empires would eventually be overwhelmed by the Turks, with the Ottomans conquering Serbia between 1389 and 1459 and Bulgaria in 1396. But even as the Byzantine state crumbled, intellectual activity flourished in the Orthodox Church. Greek intellectuals of the fourteenth century sought to engage with the thought of Aquinas and experiment with new forms of prayer and meditation.

In the end, Ottoman power swept away all resistance, Bulgar, Serbian, and Byzantine, and in 1453, the Turkish army conquered Constantinople. After two thousand years, the last remnant of the Roman Empire was gone. In the meantime, though, the fall of the Byzantine Empire would also be one factor eventually contributing to Europe's Renaissance.

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17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy

In 1250, the papacy looked like it was at its high point. After nearly two centuries of struggle, the popes had definitively broken the power of the Holy Roman Empire. Within less than a century, however, the power and prestige of the papacy would be heavily damaged.

The first major blow came when Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294 – 1303) clashed with King Philip IV (r. 1285 – 1314) of France. When King Philip attempted to tax French clergy, Pope Boniface resisted strongly, claiming not only that a king had no right to tax any clergy, but also that all earthly authority was subordinate to the authority of the popes, who were rightful lords of the earth. This conflict ended when King Philip had a gang of mercenaries kidnap and abuse the pope. Even though Boniface himself escaped, he died of the shock shortly thereafter.



Figure **17.12.25.1**: The Kidnapping of Pope Boniface VIII (Public Domain; Giovanni Villani via Wikimedia Commons)

In order to avoid further antagonizing the French crown, the College of Cardinals (those churchmen in Rome who elect the pope) elected Clement V (r. 1305 – 1314), a Frenchman, to succeed him. Clement, however, never took up residence in Rome. In 1309, he settled the papal court in Avignon, a city owned by the papacy which sat just across the border of the Kingdom of France. To many observers at the time, it looked as though the papacy had been relocated to France under the thumb of the French monarchy.

The Italian poet Petrarch referred to the period when the papacy resided at Avignon as the **Babylonian Captivity of the Church**. He was referring metaphorically to the account in the Old Testament (also referred to as the Hebrew Bible) in which the people of Judaea had been held captive in the city of Babylon. Petrarch was insinuating that God's community was now held captive in a foreign land rather than occupying Rome, the city of St. Peter and thirteen subsequent centuries of popes.



Figure **17.12.25.2**: The Papal Palace at Avignon (© Jean-Marc Rosier. Used with permission.; Jean-Marc Rosier via Original Work)

The crisis would only grow worse. In 1377, Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370 – 1378) moved the papal court back to Rome. At his death, the cardinals, pressured by an angry Roman mob, elected Urban VI, an Italian. Urban, however, soon proved to be erratic and abusive, so many cardinals fled Rome to Avignon, where they elected another pope. The result was that the Catholic Christian world now had two popes, each one claiming to be the rightful representative of Jesus Christ on earth. This period, lasting from 1378 to 1417, is known as the **Great Schism**; it resulted in a divided church, with different bishops following different popes. A 1409 council convened to depose both popes and appoint a single pope instead resulted in three popes, as neither Rome nor the Avignon papacy recognized this new pope.

In the end, although the conflict was resolved with the **Council of Constance** (1415 – 1417) deposing all three popes and selecting a new one, the prestige of the papacy had been tarnished. The popes spent much of the later fifteenth century attempting to rebuild the Church's authority and prestige, although whether they would fully succeed remained to be seen.

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17.12.26: The European Renaissance

No intellectual movement can be traced to a single cause. An idea has many parents and even more children. But if we look to the Mediterranean world of the fourteenth century, we can find at least a few causes of an intellectual and cultural movement historians generally call the **Italian Renaissance**. Renaissance comes from the French word for rebirth. It was an intellectual movement whose ideals were to return to the art, literature, and culture of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Northern Italy was well-suited to allow for the emergence of the Renaissance. Thanks to Mediterranean trade, it was one of the wealthiest and most urbanized regions of Western Europe. It was also politically fragmented so that the princes of its many courts all offered sponsorship to artists and intellectuals. Moreover Italy's education system had focused more on the literature of Ancient Rome than the rest of Europe, whose scholastic curriculum often focused on logic and philosophy.



Figure 17.12.26.1: Manuel Chrysoloras (Public Domain; Paolo Uccellp via Wikimedia Commons)

In this environment, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch's (1307 – 1374) writings prompted a greater interest in the literature of Ancient Rome. This focus on studying literature rather than philosophy and theology is often known as **humanism**, since poetry and literature were called humanistic studies in medieval schools. Another key element of the humanistic movement was that its proponents believed in studying the ancient texts themselves rather than the centuries of commentaries that had grown up around these texts. These values of returning to the original texts shorn of their commentaries also led to an increase in the study of how the writers of ancient Rome had used the Latin language and even of how Latin style had altered during different times in the Roman Empire's history.



Figure 17.12.26.2: Santa Maria del Fiore (Public Domain; User "Enne" via Wikimedia Commons)

Originally, humanistic scholars had focused on the study of Latin. But other circumstances soon brought about a greater emphasis on the study of Greek. As the Byzantine Empire crumbled before the Ottoman Turks, many Greek-speaking refugees fleeing the Aegean area settled in Italy, particularly in the city-state of Florence. These refugees brought Greek books with them and founded schools for the study of Greek. In Western Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the study of Greek had declined As a result, most readers had known of the literature of Ancient Greece, but they had usually only known it in Latin summaries. By the twelfth century, Western Europeans had read the philosophy of Aristotle and the science of Ptolemy, but usually they knew these philosophers only in translations—which had often been translated from Greek to Arabic to Latin.

So a return to the study of Greek meant that scholars were now reading Greek literature in its original language. Manuel Chrysoloras (c. 1350 – 1415) established a school for the study of Greek in Florence. Western Europeans now had direct access to most of the writings of Plato and Homer for the first time in centuries.

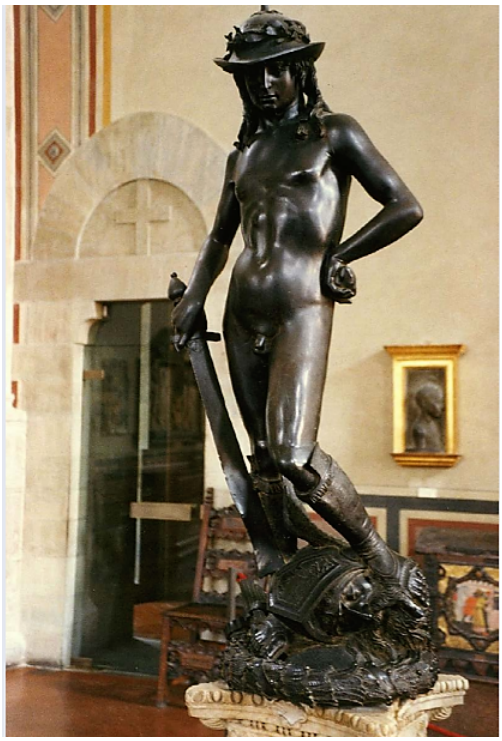


Figure **17.12.26.3**: Donatello's David (Public Domain; Donatello via Wikimedia Commons)

This interest in the culture of the ancient world also led to an interest in the art and architecture of Greece and Rome. Churches, such as Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (built between 1420 and 1436), sprang up in imitation of the domed temples (and churches) of ancient Rome, while sculptors such as Donatello (1386 – 1466) produced naturalistic sculptures the like of which had not been seen in more than a thousand years.



Figure **17.12.26.4**: Niccolò Machiavelli (Public Domain; Santi di Tito via Wikimedia Commons)

This intellectual movement was not simply an affair of scholars and artists. Indeed, its impacts would be far-reaching throughout Western Europe. The children of princes and wealthy merchants gradually came to be educated along humanistic lines, and the fashion for a humanistic education would eventually spread from Italy to the elites of all Western Europe.

Humanism's political impacts would be broad ranging as well. Since the eighth century, the popes had relied on the text of the Donation of Constantine in their struggles with the Holy Roman Empire and to demonstrate their right to rule as earthly princes as well as to spiritually direct the Church. In 1440, the humanist scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407 – 1457) analyzed the Donation of Constantine—and showed definitively that it was a forgery. Its Latin writing style was most certainly *not* the Latin of fourth-century Rome. Valla had shown that one of the foundational documents by which the papacy claimed legitimacy as an earthly power was a fraud.



Figure **17.12.26.5**: Desiderius Erasmus (Public Domain; Holbein via Wikimedia Commons)

Even the ideals of how a ruler should govern came under the influence of Renaissance humanism. In his analysis of the historical writings of Ancient Rome, the humanist Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 – 1527) argued that the circumstances of history show that a

prince should not necessarily attempt to rule virtuously, but instead should ruthlessly set aside ethics and morality in order to accomplish the goals of the state. One should note that in many ways rulers already behaved this way, but Machiavelli gave an intellectual justification for doing so.

And, of course, an intense study of the language of ancient texts would lead to an intense study of the ancient text that was most important for Western Europe of the later Middle Ages: the Bible. Humanists such as the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1469 – 1536) used the tools of linguistic investigation to analyze the Greek text of the New Testament. Other scholars also began looking at the Bible not with the intellectual tools of logic and philosophy, but with linguistic analysis. They began to look at such a text as it had been written, and not at the intervening fourteen centuries of commentary. The results of such reading were explosive.

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17.12.27: States in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance

As Europe transitioned into the fifteenth century, two of Europe's most organized states remained locked in destructive warfare. England's king Henry V (r. 1413 – 1422) came close to conquering all of France, aided largely by the fact that France itself was riven by a civil war between two powerful houses of nobles, the Armagnacs and Burgundians. Eventually, however, when France's rival houses ended their differences, the unified nation was able to expel English troops, using trained and disciplined infantry funded by a centralized apparatus of taxation. The Hundred Years' War thus ended in 1453. England's loss in France was followed by a civil war (usually known as the Wars of the Roses because the rival factions used a red and a white rose, respectively, as their emblems) that lasted from 1455 to 1485.

In Northern Italy, at the same time as the brilliant artistic achievements of the Italian Renaissance, the city-states of Italy were locked in near-continual warfare until the 1454 Treaty of Lodi brought almost half a century of peace to the Italian peninsula. That peace would come to an end, however, in 1494, when King Charles VIII of France (r. 1483 – 1498) turned the power of the newly consolidated French state to an invasion of Italy. In the wars that followed, the cannons used by the French army were able to effortlessly batter down the Italian cities' and castles' medieval walls. A new era of warfare was beginning.

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17.12.28: Iberia and the Atlantic- New Worlds

To the southwest of Europe, events in Iberia would eventually bring about several changes that would usher in the end of Europe's Middle Ages and the beginnings of modern times.

Portugal, Castile, and Aragon were steeped in the traditions of the *Reconquista*, of expanding the dominion of the Christian world by force of arms. The *Reconquista* had established a habit in the Iberian kingdoms of conquering Muslims lands and reducing their Muslim and Jewish inhabitants to subordinate status (or in some cases to outright slavery). By the fifteenth century, these kingdoms had nearly completed the *Reconquista*. As stated earlier, only Granada remained under Muslim rule.

Meanwhile, over the fourteenth century, both Venice and the Ottoman Empire had forced the Italian city-state of Genoa out of the Eastern Mediterranean, so its sailors and ship owners turned their focus to the western half of the Mediterranean Sea. Constantly on the lookout for new markets, Genoese merchants already knew from trade with the Islamic Maghreb that West Africa was a source of gold. In 1324, Mansa Musa's *hajj* to Mecca (see Chapter Nine) had put so much gold into circulation that the price of gold fell by twenty-five percent in the Mediterranean market. If the Muslim rulers of Morocco controlled the overland routes by which gold traveled from Mali to the Mediterranean, then perhaps certain sailors could bypass the overland route by sailing into the Atlantic and around the Sahara and arrive at the source of Africa's gold.



Map **17.12.28.1**: Iberia in 1462 CE (© Ian Mladjov. Used with permission; Ian Mladjov via Original Work)

By 1300, the combination of the compass, a map called the **portolan** (a map that could accurately represent coastlines), and ships that by operating on sails rather than oars needed fewer people meant that European navigators could begin venturing into open waters of the Atlantic that the Arabs and Ancient Romans had largely avoided.

Genoese merchants began tentatively sailing into the Atlantic. In the early 1300s, they were regularly visiting the Canary Islands. These merchants (and others from Western Europe) increasingly served in the employ of Iberian kings. In 1404, King Henry III of Castile (r. 1390 – 1406) began Spanish efforts to conquer the Canaries and convert their indigenous peoples to Christianity. Over the next century, the Spanish would conquer and settle the islands, driven by the *Reconquista* ideal of the military spread of the

Christian faith. In the mid-fifteenth century, the kingdom of Portugal began the conquest and colonization of the Azores, nearly 700 miles to the southwest of Iberia in the Atlantic.

Genoese merchants established sugar plantations on these chains of islands, and those plantations were worked by slave labor. Earlier, in the thirteenth century, Venetian merchants had begun to grow sugar (long cultivated in the Muslim world) in their island colonies in the Mediterranean, and labor for these colonies came from the Mediterranean slave trade. Genoese merchants copied this economic model first in Sicily and then, when they began to operate in the Atlantic, in the Canaries and Azores. Often they would purchase the slaves for these plantations from Africans on the continent's Atlantic coast. Thus began a slave trade that would be as lucrative for its operators as it was brutal for its victims.



Map **17.12.28.2**: **A Portolan Map of Europe and Africa from 1375 CE** | Note the depiction of Mansa Musa holding a gold nugget on the bottom of the map and the Azores and Canaries on the bottom left (Public Domain; Cresques Abraham via Wikimedia Commons)

The lure of African gold drew mariners serving Iberian monarchs south and west. By 1482, the Portuguese had established the fort and trading post of São Jorge da Mina on the coast of Guinea. And in the Iberian peninsula, in 1479, Isabella, the Queen of Castile, married King Ferdinand II of Aragon, creating a united Spanish kingdom. In 1492, these monarchs, devout Catholics both, completed the *Reconquista*, conquering Granada, the last Muslim territory in Spain. All of Spain was now under Christian rule, and the king and queen were eager to continue spreading the Catholic religion.

They sponsored a voyage by the Genoese sailor Christopher Columbus. Columbus had miscalculated the size of the world, so he believed that it would be possible to sail to Asia by traveling west across the Atlantic Ocean. European mariners knew the world was a sphere but believed that it was impossible to carry adequate supplies to sail around the world due to the sheer distance between Europe and Asia. When Columbus made landfall in 1492, it was not in East Asia (for he had in fact been wrong, drastically underestimating the size of the world), but rather in a set of lands previously unknown to the peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere. The world was about to be forever changed.

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17.12.29: Conclusion

Over the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a rise in agricultural production led to an increase in Western Europe's wealth and population. The chaos of the tenth and eleventh centuries had brought about the origin of a feudal system dominated by knights. Feudal Europe was thus able to respond to the Byzantine Empire's requests for help when its field army was annihilated by Saljuq Turks, resulting in the First Crusade and establishment of a set of Crusader States in the Eastern Mediterranean, but these Crusader states were gradually conquered by Muslim powers over the next two centuries. An army of Crusaders would eventually defeat and break up the Byzantine Empire, and although that empire would be re-established, it was never strong enough to resist the pressure of the Ottoman Turks, who finally conquered it in 1453.

As Western Europe grew in population and urbanized, the urban cathedral schools became the center of an increase in intellectual activity over the twelfth century known as the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. Thinkers of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance used the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks and Arabs to understand the world, and in the thirteenth century the intellectual movement known as scholasticism would seek to reconcile Christianity with Arabic and Ancient Greek Philosophy. By the end of the Middle Ages, Europe's intellectuals would seek to study the writings of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, and not the commentators of the previous thousand years. This movement was known as Renaissance humanism.

Europe's states—with the notable exception of the Holy Roman Empire—gradually consolidated, but the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw increasing interstate warfare. The states that emerged out of this endemic war, however, were more militarily powerful and more centralized. At the same time, sailors in the service of Spain and Portugal were exploring the Atlantic and West Africa until the close of the fifteenth century, when Western Europeans discovered the existence of the continents of the Western Hemisphere.

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17.12.31: Links to Primary Sources

Fordham University's Internet Medieval Sourcebook contains a wide variety of primary source documents from the Middle Ages (that is, 500 to 1500) hosted by Fordham University. From the main page one can find links based on period and category.

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook:

> legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook.asp

Georgetown University's The Labyrinth likewise contains a large selection of links to both primary sources and art and art historical materials. Some of the pages have succumbed to "link rot" due to the relative age of the site, but it remains one of the best collections of primary source material available online for free.

The Labyrinth:

> https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/labyrinth

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Index

A

Abu Bakr
17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
Aeneid (Virgil)
17.6.7: Sources and Problems
African diaspora
17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
Ahmad ibn Tulun
17.8.10: The 'Abbasid Caliphate
Akkadian Empire
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
Aksum
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
Albigensian Crusade
17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe
Alcuin of York
17.7.11: Global Context
Alexios Komnenos
17.8.12: The Crusades
Amarna Period
17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
amsar
17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
ansar
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
Ara Pacis
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
Archidamian War
17.5.10: The Classical Period
Arians
17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire
Assyrian Empire
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
Athens
17.5.5: Geography and Topography
Ayyubid Sultanate
17.8.12: The Crusades
Aztecs
17.10.7: The Aztec

B

Börte Üjin
17.11.7: The Mongol Era
Babylonian Captivity of the Church
17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy
Babylonian Empire
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
Bantu Migration
17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe
Basil I
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors
Battle of Ajnadayn
17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
Battle of Badr
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
Battle of Chaeronea
17.5.10: The Classical Period
Battle of Hattin
17.8.12: The Crusades
Battle of Leuctra
17.5.10: The Classical Period
Battle of Manzikert
17.8.12: The Crusades
Battle of Qadisiya
17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
Battle of Talas River
17.11.6: Islam
Battle of the Trench
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
Battle of Thermopylae
17.5.5: Geography and Topography
Bay of Bengal
4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia
Baybars
17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate
Black Death
17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises
bourgeoisie
17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade
Brahmanism
17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)
bull
17.12.16: The Third Crusade
Byzantine Empire
17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian
Byzantium
17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian

C

Cao Cao
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
capitularies
17.7.11: Global Context
Carolingian Renaissance
17.7.11: Global Context
Carolingians
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
Carthage
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
caste
17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
Caste System
17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
Catalan Atlas
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
cataract
17.2.13: Ancient Egypt
cathedral
17.7.11: Global Context
Chagatai Khanate
17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai
chain mail
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe
Charlemagne
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
Charles Martel
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
Chavín cult
17.10.8: Early Andes
Chiapas
17.10.5: Mesoamerica
Chigi Vase
17.5.9: Archaic Greece
Chimú
17.10.8: Early Andes
Chola Kingdom
17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300
civilization
17.2.2: Introduction - Defining Civilization
Cleopatra VII
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
commune
17.12.6: Growth of Towns and Trade
Concordat of Worms
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century
Confucianism
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
Confucius
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
Constantinople
17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian
Council of Constance
17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy
covenant
17.2.10: Early Israelites
Crassus
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
Crusader States
17.12.12: The Crusades
Cup of Nestor
17.5.2: Introduction
cursus honorum
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
Cyclical Theory of History
17.8.2: Introduction
Cynic philosophers
17.5.11: Hellenistic Period
Cyrillic
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors

D

Daoism
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
Delian League
17.5.10: The Classical Period
dependent farmers
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors
diaspora
17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel
Donation of Constantine
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
Duarte Barbosa
17.9.2: Introduction

E

East Francia
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe

Eastern Han
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

Eastern Orthodox
17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery

Epic of Gilgamesh
17.5.8: From Mythology to History

Euphrates River
17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia

exarch
17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery

Exodus
17.2.10: Early Israelites

F

Fatimid Caliphate
17.8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate

fertile crescent
17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution

feudalism
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe

fiefs
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe

Filioque Controversy
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century

First Peloponnesian War
17.5.10: The Classical Period

Frederick Barbarossa
17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse
17.12.16: The Third Crusade

friar
17.12.20: Scholasticism

G

Gaykhatu Khan
17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)

geld
17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors

Genghis Khan
17.11.7: The Mongol Era

Ghana
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States

Ghaznavid Empire
17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300

Golden Horde
17.11.10: Timur

gothic
17.12.20: Scholasticism

Great Hunt
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations

Great Mosque in Djenne
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States

Great Schism
17.12.25: The Late Medieval Papacy

Great Zimbabwe
17.9.8: The Spread of Agriculture and Great Zimbabwe

Gupta Empire
17.3.2: Introduction - A Political Overview
17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)

H

Hülegü Khan
17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)

Hadith
17.8.6: Rise of Islam

Hagia Sophia
17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian

Hammurabi
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires

Han Dynasty
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

harappan civilization
17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)

Hellenistic Period
17.5.11: Hellenistic Period

hieroglyphics
17.2.13: Ancient Egypt

Hijaz
17.8.6: Rise of Islam

hinduism
17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)

holocene
17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory

Holy War
17.12.12: The Crusades

homer
17.5.8: From Mythology to History

Homer’s Iliad
17.5.2: Introduction

hominids
17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa

Homo habilis
17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa

Huari
17.10.8: Early Andes

humanism
17.12.26: The European Renaissance

Hundred Years’ War
17.12.23: War

I

Ibn Khaldun
17.8.2: Introduction

Iconoclast Controversy
17.7.9: Byzantium - Crisis and Recovery

Imperial Confucianism
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

Indian feudalism
17.3.11: India's Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600-1300

Indus River
4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia

Indus Valley Civilization
17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)

Inju
17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai

Investiture Controversy
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century

iqtas
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe

Islam
17.8.6: Rise of Islam

Israel
17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel

J

Jericho
17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution

Josephus
17.6.7: Sources and Problems

Julius Caesar
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic

Just War
17.12.12: The Crusades

Justinian Code
17.7.6: Byzantium - The Age of Justinian

K

Ka‘ba
17.8.6: Rise of Islam

Kalidasa
17.3.10: The Gupta Empire and India's Classical Age (300-600CE)

Kebra Nagast
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia

khagan
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations

Kievan Rus
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors

Kingdom of Da’amat
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia

Kingdom of Israel
17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel

Komnenoi
17.12.14: Empires- Recovery and Collapse

Kublai Khan
17.11.7: The Mongol Era

L

Legalism
17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China

legate
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century

Levant
17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel

Liu Bang
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

Livy
17.6.7: Sources and Problems

Lower Mesopotamia
17.2.6: Sumerian City-States

M

Macedonian dynasty
17.7.11: Global Context

Macedonian renaissance
17.7.11: Global Context

Magadha
17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
Magna Carta
17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe
Mahayana Buddhism
17.3.9: Regional States, Trade, and Devotional Religion- India 200 BCE-300 CE
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
Mahmud Ghazan
17.11.9: The Khanate of the Ilkhans (1265-1335)
maize
17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas
Major Domo
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
Mali Empire
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
Malthusian limits
17.12.22: Fourteenth Century Crises
Mandate of Heaven
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
Mansa Musa
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
Marius
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
Mask of Agamemnon
17.5.8: From Mythology to History
Maya
17.10.6: The Maya
Mayan Writing System
17.10.6: The Maya
Mehrgarh
17.3.5: India's First Major Civilization - The Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE)
17.3.6: The Long Vedic Age (1700-600 BCE)
Meroë
17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush
Merovingians
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
mesoamerica
17.10.5: Mesoamerica
Mesopotamia
17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia
Middle Kingdom
17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
Moche
17.10.8: Early Andes
Mongol Horse
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations
monotheism
17.2.9: The Israelites and Ancient Israel
monsoon winds
17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
muhajirun
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate
17.8.14: Conclusion
17.8.15: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.8.16: Links to Primary Sources
mythology
17.5.8: From Mythology to History

N

Natufian Adaptation
17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution
Nebuchadnezzar II
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
Neolithic Revolution
17.1.6: Agriculture and the Neolithic Revolution
New Kingdom
17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
Nile river
17.2.13: Ancient Egypt
Noks
17.9.5: Writing the History of Ancient and Medieval Africa
Norte Chico
17.10.8: Early Andes
Northern Dynasty (China)
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
Nubia
17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush
17.2.16: Summary

O

Old Kingdom
17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
olmec
17.10.5: Mesoamerica
Optimates
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
17.6.10: The Early Empire
17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
oracle bones
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
Origins (Cato the Elder)
17.6.7: Sources and Problems
Orkhon Steppe
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations
Ostrogoths
17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire

P

paleolithic
17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory
Papal States
17.7.10: Western Europe - The Rise of the Franks
parliaments
17.12.18: The States of Thirteenth-Century Europe
Pataliputra
17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
paterfamilias
17.6.10: The Early Empire
patriarchs
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century
pax deorum
17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
Pax Romana
17.6.10: The Early Empire
Peace of Nicias
17.5.10: The Classical Period
People of the Book
17.8.6: Rise of Islam
Pleistocene
17.1.2: Introduction to Prehistory
17.1.5: Human Beginnings in Africa
Plutarch
17.6.7: Sources and Problems
polis
17.5.5: Geography and Topography
Polybius
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
Pope Urban II
17.8.12: The Crusades
Populares
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
17.6.10: The Early Empire
17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
portolan
17.12.28: Iberia and the Atlantic- New Worlds
Pyrrhus
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic

Q

Qin Dynasty
17.4.7: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China
Queen Mekeda
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
Quran
17.8.6: Rise of Islam
Qutayba ibn Muslim
17.11.6: Islam
Qutuz
17.8.13: The Mamluk Sultanate

R

Rajagriha
17.3.7: Transition to Empire - States, Cities, and New Religions (600 to 321 BCE)
Ramadan
17.8.6: Rise of Islam
Rashidun Caliphs
17.8.8: The Rashidun Caliphs
Remus
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
Renaissance
17.12.26: The European Renaissance
Romance languages
17.7.11: Global Context
Romulus
17.6.8: Early and Middle Republic
ruralization
17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire
Rus
17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse

S

Saladin
17.8.12: The Crusades
Samanids
17.11.6: Islam

Sargon of Akkad
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
sarissa
17.5.10: The Classical Period
sawm
17.8.6: Rise of Islam
scholasticism
17.12.20: Scholasticism
scriptoria
17.7.11: Global Context
secondary state formation
17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation
Shang dynasty
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
Sharia law
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
Sicilian Expedition
17.5.10: The Classical Period
Silk Roads
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE
Silla Dynasty
17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia
simony
17.12.11: Church Reform in the Eleventh Century
skepticism
17.5.11: Hellenistic Period
Song dynasty
17.4.11: The Song Dynasty
17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty
17.4.13: Conclusion
17.4.14: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources
Songhai Empire
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
Southern Dynasty (China)
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
Sparta
17.5.5: Geography and Topography
stele
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
Stele of Hammurabi
17.2.7: Mesopotamian Empires
Stoicism
17.5.11: Hellenistic Period
Sufism
17.11.6: Islam
Sumer
17.2.6: Sumerian City-States
Sunna
17.8.6: Rise of Islam
Syncretism
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States

T

Tacitus
17.6.7: Sources and Problems
Tagmata
17.7.15: Byzantine Apogee - The Macedonian Emperors
Tang dynasty
17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia
Taoism
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)
Temujin
17.11.7: The Mongol Era
Ten Commandments
17.2.10: Early Israelites
Tenochtitlan
17.10.2: Introduction to The Americas
17.10.7: The Aztec
Teotihuacan
17.10.6: The Maya
Terracotta Soldiers
17.4.2: Introduction to China and East Asia to the Ming Dynasty
The Crusades
17.12.12: The Crusades
The Palette of Narmer
17.2.13: Ancient Egypt
The Queen of Sheba
17.9.6: Aksum and Ethiopia
The Sahel
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
Theban Hegemony
17.5.10: The Classical Period
Theban Sacred Band
17.5.10: The Classical Period
third crusade
17.12.16: The Third Crusade
three field system
17.12.7: Growth in Agriculture
Three Kingdoms
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE
Tiberius Claudius Nero
17.6.10: The Early Empire
Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus
17.6.9: Fall of the Roman Republic
17.6.10: The Early Empire
17.6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity
Tigris River
17.2.5: Ancient Mesopotamia
Timbuktu
17.9.7: The Western Sudanic States
Timur
17.11.10: Timur
Tokhtamysh
17.11.10: Timur
Toltec
17.10.6: The Maya
tournament
17.12.21: Daily Life at the Medieval Zenith
Trading Post Empire
17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
Transoxiana
17.11.6: Islam
Treaty of Hudaybiyyah
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam
trojan war
17.5.2: Introduction
17.5.8: From Mythology to History
Turkification
17.11.8: The Khanate of Chagatai

U

Umayyad Caliphate
17.8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate
umma
17.8.7: The Expansion of Islam

V

Vandals
17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire
vassal state
17.12.9: The Holy Roman Empire's Peripheries - Secondary State Formation
Vikings
17.7.13: Carolingian Collapse
Visigoths
17.7.5: Successor Kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire

W

West Francia
17.12.5: The Emergence of a Feudal Order in Western Europe
Western Han
17.4.8: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE-220 CE

X

Xia Dynasty
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
Xiongnu
17.11.5: Turkic Migrations

Y

Yangshao culture
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
Yayoi Period
17.4.10: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia
Yellow River
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
Yellow Turbans
17.4.9: The Period of Division, 220-589CE

Z

Zanj Rebellion
17.9.9: The Swahili City-States (East Africa)
Zhao Kuangyin
17.4.11: The Song Dynasty
17.4.12: The Yuan Dynasty
17.4.13: Conclusion
17.4.14: Works Consulted and Further Reading
17.4.15: Links to Primary Sources
Zhou Dynasty
17.4.5: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom
17.4.6: The Long Zhou Dynasty (1046- 256 BCE)

Ziggurat

17.2.6: Sumerian City-States
17.2.10: Early Israelites
17.2.11: The United Kingdom of Israel
17.2.12: The Importance of the Israelites and Ancient Israel
17.2.14: Dynastic Egypt
17.2.15: Nubia- The Kingdoms of Kerma and Kush
17.2.16: Summary

Glossary

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

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    - 1.3: Table of Contents - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 1.4: Licensing - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 1.5: Introduction- Understanding the Past - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.2: Developing a Global Perspective - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.3: Primary Sources - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.4: Causation and Interpretation in History - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.5: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.6: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.7: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
      - 1.5.9: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
  - 2: Early Civilizations and Urban Societies - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.2: Early Civilizations - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.3: Ancient Mesopotamia - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.4: Ancient Egypt - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.5: The Indus Valley Civilization - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.6: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.7: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.8: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.9: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 2.10: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
  - 3: The Near East - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.2: From Old Babylon to the Medes - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.3: Egypt's New Kingdom - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.4: The Persian Empire - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.5: The Hebrews - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.6: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.7: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.8: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.9: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 3.10: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
  - 4: Asia in Ancient Times - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.2: Geography of East Asia - *Undeclared*
    - 4.3: Ancient China - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.4: The Steppes - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.5: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.6: What is India? The Geography of South Asia - *CC BY-SA 1.0*
    - 4.7: Vedic India to the Fall of the Maurya Empire - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.8: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.9: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
    - 4.10: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

- 4.11: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 4.12: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

5: Mediterranean Peoples - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

- 5.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.2: Early Mediterranean Peoples - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.3: Ancient Greece - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.4: The Hellenistic Era - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.5: The Roman Republic - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.6: The Age of Augustus - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.7: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.8: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.9: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.10: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 5.11: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

6: Africa in Ancient Times - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

- 6.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.2: Africa's Geography and Climate - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.3: The Emergence of Farming and the Bantu Migrations - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.4: The Kingdom of Kush - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.5: North Africa's Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Connections - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.6: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.7: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.8: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.9: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 6.10: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

7: The Americas in Ancient Times - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

- 7.1: Introduction - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.2: Populating and Settling the Americas - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.3: Early Cultures and Civilizations in the Americas - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.4: The Age of Empires in the Americas - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.5: Key Terms - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.6: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.7: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.8: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 7.9: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

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- 8.9: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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- 10.6: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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- 11.7: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 11.8: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 11.9: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 11.10: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

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- 12.7: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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- 13.6: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 13.7: Review Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 13.8: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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- 15.8: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 15.9: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

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- 16.1: Appendix A- Glossary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 16.2: Appendix B- Maps and Timelines - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 16.3: Appendix C- World Maps - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
- 16.4: Appendix D- Recommended Resources for the Study of World History - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*

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  - 17.10.12: Links to Primary Sources - *CC BY-SA 1.0*
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  - 17.11.2: Introduction to Central Asia - *CC BY-SA 1.0*
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  - 17.12.2: Introduction to Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000-1500 CE - *CC BY-SA 1.0*
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      - 1.5.6: Section Summary - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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      - 1.5.8: Check Your Understanding Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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    - 2.10: Application and Reflection Questions - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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- 16.3: Appendix C- World Maps - *CC BY-NC-SA 1.0*
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